



At Backbone State Park, brother and sister Sam Hoff, age 5 and Zadio age 3 explore with snowshoes far from their Des Moines home. **RIGHT:** Elliot Donovan, 2, and sister Greta, 5, of Des Moines prepare for fun in the snow. Sam and Greta make a snowfigure.

Cabin Fever

In Iowa's oldest state park, old man winter won't slow you down—he's just part of the scenery.



“Exploding egg cake!” announces Mike Donovan, pulling his wife Emily’s recipe for Swedish *umspunkaka* from the rental cabin’s oven. The smell of coffee is in the air on a winter weekend getaway for this Des Moines family. Soon the kids, Greta and Elliot, will set aside their puzzles and descend upon the simple kitchen table set with lingonberry jam and maple syrup.

At Backbone State Park, on a winter weekend, you’ll need something like this fluffy egg pancake dish to fortify your corpus before leaving the warm shelter of the park’s small cabins. Take your pick of winter activities: snowshoeing; snowmobiling; sledding the raucous hills; fishing for trout in burbling rivers and streams.

Really, there’s no reason to feel cooped up on this plot of northeast Iowa, 55 miles east of Waterloo. It’s like a self-contained entertainment unit, with a lake, woods, streams, the Maquoketa River and 21 miles of trails.

“You know what I like about a place like this?” says Mike, looking out a window as fat snowflakes fall. “Aside from a few snowmobilers and cross-country skiers, we’ve got the whole place to ourselves.”

THAT TRAIL

Mike is right. Iowans tend to pull down the shades once the weather turns chill, but those willing to venture out during January and February will experience parks that feel like private playgrounds. Kids can run free in open spaces and wooded places. If you’ve ever spent winter indoors with little ones, you know just how important that is.

Dave Sunne knows. He’s Backbone’s park ranger, and

his brood romps through all 2,000 acres in every season.

“The park is beautiful this time of year. It just takes on a whole new look when it’s covered in snow,” Sunne says, hands interlaced across the chest of his coveralls as he kicks back in a maintenance building. Sunne (pronounced “sunny”) looks like a high school basketball coach, blondish little moustache and all.

His is Iowa’s oldest state park, traditional in feel, with forested winding roads, and much of it nestled in a deep, woody ravine.

The park is divided into two units—north and south—with a very high, narrow hogback ridge jutting out over a bend in the river. It’s called the Devil’s Backbone, which, if you’re hiking it, inspires serious awe that conservative Iowa didn’t fence this baby in. One misstep, and you could fall a deadly distance on either side of the “spine.”

It’s exhilarating, really.

“I just can’t believe this trail,” says Emily Donovan, balancing across the path covered in snow. “It’s amazing.”

In winter, against a white backdrop, the wildlife watching is vivid. Bald eagles hunt the open water, and deer are herded up. Coyotes yip throughout mating season. Finches, cardinals, jays, nuthatches and chickadees flit around on bright mornings. You may glimpse an otter, wild turkey or any number of hawks. Do a little ice fishing on Backbone Lake, and you might find trout or native crappie on your line.

“You can go to sleep to the sound of owls hooting,” says Sunne. “I do every night.”

He says each winter visitor has a different agenda. Some hike and reflect. Some tote a stack of books to their cabin and don’t emerge for days. Others bring cross-country skis

Lost In Iowa



DNR park ranger Dave Sunne and writer Jen Wilson prepare for a snowmobile tour.

SNOWMOBILE ETIQUETTE

- Stay on the trail.
Straying tears up vegetation, increasing erosion, especially on steep slopes.
- Report trail issues to the ranger (*downed trees, maintenance needs, irresponsible drivers*).
- Yield to living creatures, including humans.
- Stay to the right on the trail.
- Take it slow when passing.
- Close all gates behind you.
- Carry out what you carry in.



One of 16 cabins at Backbone State Park, the two-bedroom Eagle View boasts an outdoor fire ring perfect for a winter warm up.



Jen Wilson and daughter Zadie ascend the sledding hill.

or snowshoes. Photographers can't get enough of the place. "Then there are the people who just want a break from everybody else," he says.

Don't forget the snowmobile crowd. Truth be told, it's just flat-out fun to see all that pretty scenery whooshing past at 40-some miles per hour. The park's Westlake Trail is a real rollercoaster ride, with just enough serious drama to make you whoop with utter joy or sheer terror.

The trail shows the Maquoketa River at its prettiest. Sunne claims the whole park is a postcard, and that's largely thanks to the water, flanked by tall spindly trees like legs of adolescent boys—native white pines, oak, shagbark, elms.

ACTION, ADVENTURE AND DRAMA

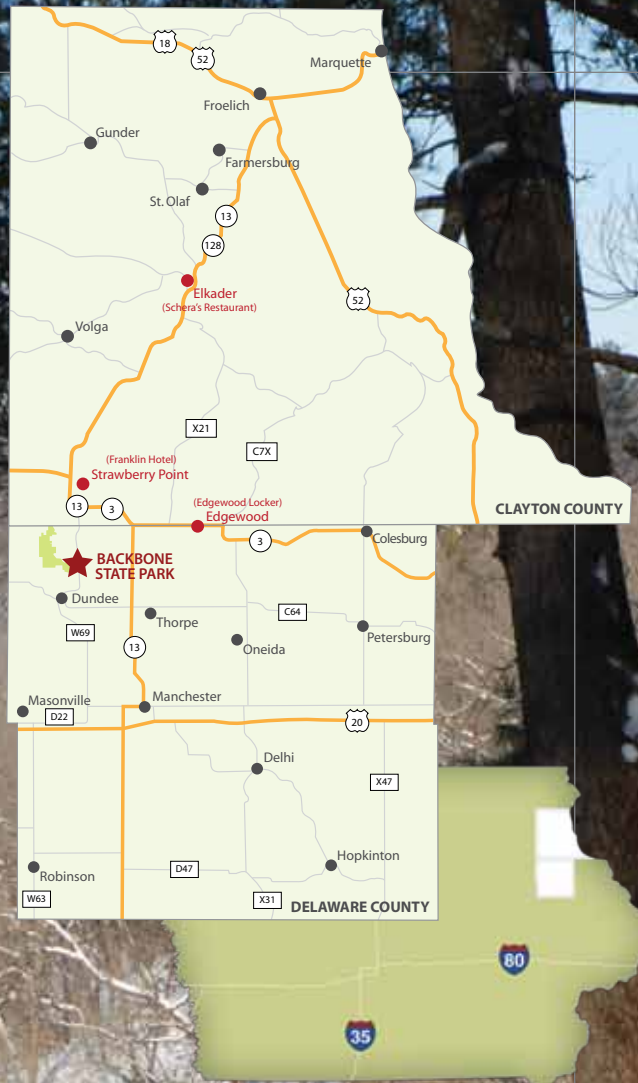
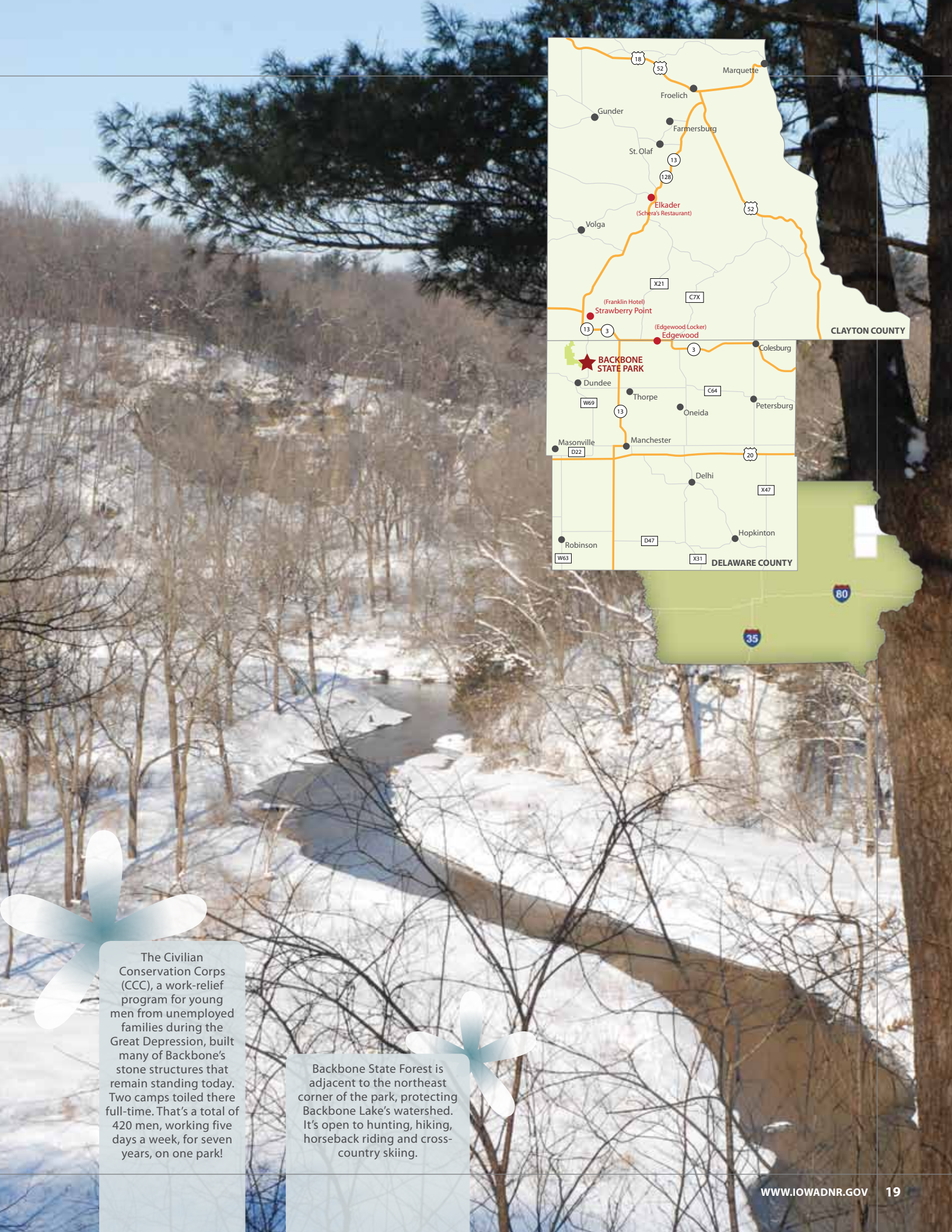
Emily suits up to take the kids snowshoeing, first

removing the toys inserted in her boots during what was supposed to be naptime.

"You get cabin fever at home. It's somehow easier to get cabin fever somewhere else," she laughs. "We'd never strap on snowshoes at home—but you almost have to when the snow is deep and the trails are this pretty."

Not far away, the sand dances under the water at the head of Richmond Springs. For thousands of years, this very spot has pumped about 2,000 gallons per minute of 42-degree water from the dolomite limestone, making the surrounding streams cozy for trout.

Mike is stealing a little grown-up time here, casting his line and hoping for the best. A good day this time of year is maybe one or two fish. Mike doesn't seem to mind.



The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), a work-relief program for young men from unemployed families during the Great Depression, built many of Backbone's stone structures that remain standing today. Two camps toiled there full-time. That's a total of 420 men, working five days a week, for seven years, on one park!

Backbone State Forest is adjacent to the northeast corner of the park, protecting Backbone Lake's watershed. It's open to hunting, hiking, horseback riding and cross-country skiing.

Lost In Iowa



Mike Donovan of Des Moines casts for winter hold over trout—the big, wary ones that feed year round in spring-fed open waters. Winter anglers prefer spinner baits and fly-anglers prefer using nymphs and wet flies. Winter is an often overlooked time for trout fishing.



In 2006, hunters donated about 6,500 deer to the DNR's Help Us Stop Hunger (HUSH) program, which distributes venison to Iowa's needy. The full-service Edgewood Locker, 11 miles northeast of Backbone, processed 3,450 of them. (Their bacon ain't bad, either.)

Lost In Iowa



With concern, Elliot Donovan, 2, of Des Moines watches dad descend a sledding hill.



Frederique Boudouani and Brian Bruening of Schera's Restaurant

“This is a little refuge that has so many qualities you don’t typically see in Iowa topography,” he says, tilting back his head to soak up the winter rays. “Everywhere here is secluded and serene—all plunked down in the middle of some farm fields.”

The quiet is later interrupted when the whole Donovan crew joins Ranger Sunne’s family on a sledding hill near their house. At Backbone, the sledding is righteous. And it’s not very serene.

Mike saddles up a saucer, and barrels away. His son Elliot, who is almost 3, watches in awe.

“Whoa! There goes Dad! Yay, Dad! Hey, wait! Dad? You okay, Dad? Dad? Dad?!”

Mike has wiped out, and Elliot starts down the hill on little snow-suited legs. It’s not a particularly big wipeout in sledding terms, unless you’re two and you’ve never seen one before.

“Dad! Oh, no! Dad!”

Mike sits up, spits out a mouthful of snow and gives Elliot the thumbs-up.

All is well again in kid world.

The hill is one continuous eruption of laughter and whoops. Kids and grownups race to the bottom, eyes wide and mouths agape.

This is winter’s best side—not the hibernating crabbiness or holiday hubbub. It’s open-mouthed belly laughs, runny-nosed exertion, and rare moments of adventure in a landscape that appears on the surface to shut down for the season.

Mike snowboards down the hill a few feet—Elliot watching, concerned—then bites it. Mike giggles—giggles!—and yells to his son: “That’s about as good as it gets!”

And in Iowa, in winter, it really is. 🐾

SIDETRIP TO MOROCCO

Backbone State Park cabins don't have fireplaces, which is disappointing. So if eating next to a roaring flame is your favorite winter activity, head 20 miles to the antique beauty of Elkader, specifically to Schera's Restaurant, perched on the edge of the Turkey River overlooking a stone arch bridge—courtesy of the same masons who built Elkader's lovely stone Catholic church.

Schera's, named for the heroine in 1001 Arabian Nights, draws from North African, Algerian and Mediterranean cuisine to fill its menu, thanks to co-owner Frederique Boudouani, who is of French-Algerian descent.

"When we first moved to Iowa, the dining choices were meat and potatoes or more meat and potatoes," says Boudouani. "We wanted to break that mold."

A colorful Moroccan décor—and a decent fireplace—make the restaurant a great side trip.

Boudouani and his partner, Brian Bruening, met at MIT in Boston then moved to Iowa, where Bruening grew up. They ultimately settled in Elkader, because of its namesake, 1800s Muslim war hero Emir Abd El Kader.

El Kader's international claim to fame is this: While in exile in Damascus (for the war hero stuff) he saved the lives of 12,000 Christians and Jews from mobs incited by the local Turkish governor. El Kader's benevolence was recognized around the world—a Muslim helping thousands of Christians and Jews was big news. Abe Lincoln even sent him a pair of dueling pistols.

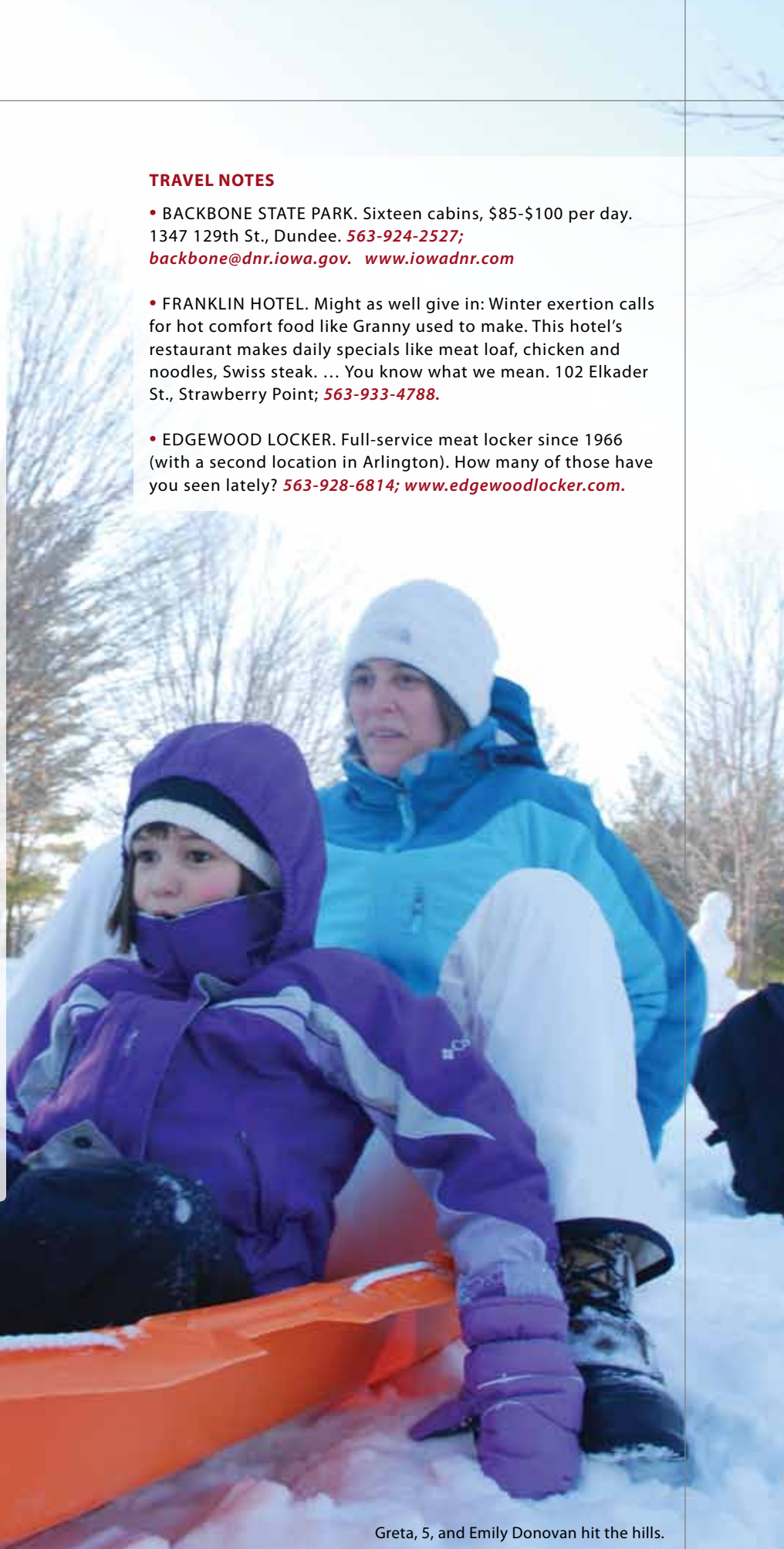
"The kicker is that in the 1800s, the most precious thing to the leaders of this town was to name it after someone from another part of the world," says Boudouani.

Another part of the world that also brings us a nice Couscous Royale—veggies and sauce over couscous and skewers—and a fine hummus-like appetizer called Cade, served with a basket of bread and harissa, a Tunisian hot sauce.

Schera's Restaurant. 107 S. Main St., PO Box 726, Elkader. 563/245-1992; www.scheras.com

TRAVEL NOTES

- **BACKBONE STATE PARK.** Sixteen cabins, \$85-\$100 per day. 1347 129th St., Dundee. **563-924-2527; backbone@dnr.iowa.gov. www.iowadnr.com**
- **FRANKLIN HOTEL.** Might as well give in: Winter exertion calls for hot comfort food like Granny used to make. This hotel's restaurant makes daily specials like meat loaf, chicken and noodles, Swiss steak. ... You know what we mean. 102 Elkader St., Strawberry Point; **563-933-4788.**
- **EDGEWOOD LOCKER.** Full-service meat locker since 1966 (with a second location in Arlington). How many of those have you seen lately? **563-928-6814; www.edgewoodlocker.com.**



Greta, 5, and Emily Donovan hit the hills.