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A skier's dream in Whistler-Blackcomb in British Columbia: two mountains and 8,000 acres of snow.

Folks who know share when and where it'll blow.

ANNE Z. COOKE AND STEVE HAGGERTY SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

SNOWMASS, Colo. — As the hours pass and the grape begins to flow, the talk turns to snow, a skier's only essential element. We can manage without the usual resort conveniences: on-mountain restaurants, trail mans, maybe even the chair lifts. But without snow

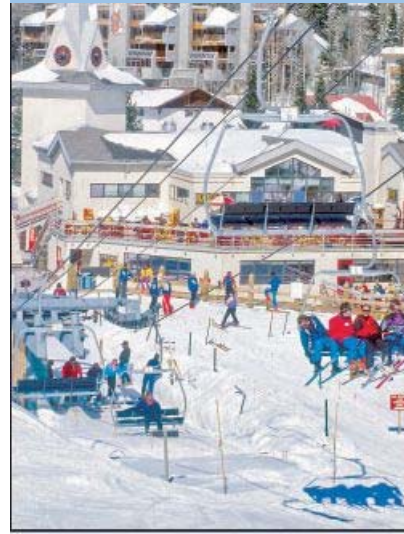


low humidity tend to preserve powder especially at the higher elevations. Good grooming keeps it smooth until the end of March, when sunny afternoons finally turn the lower slopes to slush.

We try to make reservations for the first week of March, statistically the best month for total snowfall. With thousands of slope-side condominiums in climate features like lakes, parallel ranges and deserts. As spring approaches, night temperatures and storm patterns also come into play. Get to know the skinny, then plan ahead so the snow is there when you are. Or choose one of these six resorts known for predictably fine snow.

**SNOWMASS RESORT, central Colorado** — For fresh powder and deep coverage from February through March, we like Snowmass Ski Resort, 20 minutes from the town of Aspen. From December on, a combination of early-season snowmaking and scattered snowstorms keeps Snowmass' 11,000-to-12,000-foot mountains mostly white and skiable. But Snowmass' heaviest snowfall comes in late February and March, accumulating an average of 300 inches of snow on the trails, a thick base that lasts until the resort closes, usually in mid-April. Freezing temperatures at night and the region's famously

**The Village of Taos Ski Valley has accommodations and restaurants for every taste and budget. believe is the best powder snow in the West at Utah's Snowbird Ski Resort.**



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## Snow

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Snowmass Village, space is rarely a problem. See more at [aspensnowmass.com](http://aspensnowmass.com).

**WHISTLER-BLACK-COMB, British Columbia** — This mammoth pair of Canadian resorts, with 8,171 acres on two adjacent mountains north of Vancouver, is farther north than any continental U.S. ski area. Whistler's first snows typically fall in November and by December you can ski most of the slopes. Total annual snowfall here reaches more than 400 inches, an impressive 33 feet.

But the low elevation (between 2,000-7,400 feet) and the coast range location can be a problem. Together they can create rain at the base village and pea-soup fog on the lower slopes. Visibility shrinks to zero, a disconcerting experience. But you can finesse the problem by boarding the gondola or nearest chair lift and riding up through the mist into clear air.

Snow falls throughout the winter and on into May, adding to great ski conditions especially on the top terrain. Unless it's windy, conditions are generally better up high, with some north-facing slopes skiable into June or later. Most Whistler fans recommend February and March for the best snow coverage and clearest visibility. You take your pick of dates. Accommodations are ample, ranging from budget rooms to luxury lodges. See more at [whistlerblackcomb.com](http://whistlerblackcomb.com).

**HEAVENLY RESORT, South Lake Tahoe, Calif.** — With a reputation for some of the West's most unpredictable winters, when the snow finally does come to Heavenly Resort, at the south end of Lake Tahoe, it comes in a big way. In a good year, the snow piles up in huge dumps, sticking to the ground and sidewalks and blocking chair lift platforms. By January, most of the mountain's trails — which straddle the California-Nevada border — will be open. In a record-breaking year, the heaviest snowfalls sneak in during February or later.

Heavenly's 10,000-foot elevation supports trees to the summit, a condition that seems to slow down late season melting. But with Lake Tahoe at the base, creating the "lake effect" condition, late season snow may be wet and sticky, deserving the nickname "Sierra cement." Colorado skiers poke fun at



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A skier heads home to Steamboat Resort at the end of the day.

the "cement," but Californians and Nevadans, who treasure their lake, ski it with aplomb.

If the winter looks like a blockbuster, you'll know by January, in time to find space for a ski trip during nonholiday weeks from early February to early March. For more, see [heavenlyresort.com](http://heavenlyresort.com).

**TAOS SKI VALLEY, northern New Mexico** — When the snow's good at Taos Ski Valley, a three-hour scenic drive north of Albuquerque, it's very very good, and as light and feathery as talcum powder. When it's marginal — as in one of New Mexico's occasional drought years — you may have to search for it. If you ride to the top of the highest lift, at elevation 11,819 feet, then climb 40 minutes more to the top of Kachina Peak, at 12,481 feet, you'll find it. For some skiers, that's too much effort.

Happily, the high elevation, thin air and naturally arid climate here at the tail end of the Rockies make for super powder snow, especially in March, when most of the heavy storms settle over the range. In an average weather year, when the snowfall measures 305 inches, Taos' rugged, north-facing slopes stay covered, with few bare spots or rocks to grab your skis.

Despite its reputation for heart-stopping expert steeps, Taos has bunny slopes, at the base, and intermediate runs at midmountain. Because lodging in this most charismatic of America's ski villages is limited, book space as soon as winter weather forecasts look promising. Visit [skitaos.org](http://skitaos.org).

**STEAMBOAT RESORT, northern Colorado** — For

whisper-light snowfall, with multiple feet on the ground by January and storms through March, point your skis toward Steamboat. The micro-climate here in the northern Rockies, on Interstate 40 west of the Continental Divide, puts Steamboat in the path of two storm patterns that blow through at intervals, ensuring regular dumps of Steamboat's legendary (and copyrighted) "champagne powder."

The resulting ski conditions more than compensate for the resort's lower elevation (6,900-10,500 feet) and for some south-facing slopes, about 23 percent of the total. There are no above-timberline bowls at this elevation, but heavy snowfall and trees to the summit offer challenging glade skiing.

Rarely as crowded as the ski areas closer to Denver, along Colorado's I-70 corridor, Steamboat's ski school and an active family orientation make this a popular destination resort. A history of varied children's programs and the ever-generous Kids Ski Free packages, along with base area condominiums in all price ranges, make Steamboat a top choice. See more at [steamboat.com](http://steamboat.com).

**SNOWBIRD SKI RESORT, Utah** — Of the 10 or so ski areas in Utah's Wasatch Mountains, Snowbird is among the most unusual, blending three features that create what some call the West's best powder snow.

The high elevation, between 8,000 and 11,000 feet; plus very dry air, due to the location in the arid Great Basin; and the moisture from the "lake effect" (the Great Salt Lake is nearby) create

monster winter storms. So much snow falls — an annual average of 500 inches — that Snowbird opens in mid-November and stays open until Memorial Day.

Though skiers like to hype Snowbird's vertical powder steeps and glades, recreational skiers shouldn't be warned off. Only 35 percent of Snowbird's 2,500 skiable acres are rated for experts; the rest is divided between beautiful beginner and intermediate runs. If you need more elbow room, ski over to sister resort Alta Ski Area, which shares lift ticket privileges and ski slopes with its neighbor.

Snowbird, privately owned and noncorporate, has kept its small-town charm. This is evident in the local accommodations, with rooms in four lodges operated by the Little Cottonwood Canyon Resort. Restaurants and ski rentals are also on site. The resort is about 14 miles from downtown Salt Lake. See more at [snowbird.com](http://snowbird.com).

*Choosing a date: Do you want to ski in December or January? Low-elevation resorts in high latitudes — Alaska, British Columbia and Montana — are likely to get good early season snow. High-elevation resorts in more southerly latitudes will get a scattering of early season snow too, but usually on north-facing slopes and in high-snow areas, as in Idaho, parts of Utah and along the Continental Divide in northern Colorado.*

*Do you prefer late February or March, when the days are sunnier and milder? Resorts in central and southern Colorado, northern New Mexico, Utah's Park City and California's Lake Tahoe get most of their snow from February on.*

*Once it falls, will the white stuff last? That depends on Mother Nature's moods, the jet stream, warming oceans, midwinter heat waves and spring freezes. Go figure.*

*Fact finding: Check out the resort websites first, noting the "mountain facts." Then go to a couple of independent ski and snow sports sites that collect and assemble resort data. These include [bestsnow.net](http://bestsnow.net), [onthesnow.com](http://onthesnow.com), [skireport.com](http://skireport.com) and [sportsamerica.com](http://sportsamerica.com), whose information, by and large, is accurate.*

*The most useful site is [bestsnow.net](http://bestsnow.net). Authored by lifelong skier Tony Crocker, a former statistician, the site compiles facts you won't find elsewhere. The reports cover percentages of skiable powder days, the deviation from the average total snowfall, directional sun exposure as a percentage, and, most valuable, Crocker's personal observations.*