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Fine snow's always in the forecast for these ski resorts

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MY YAHOO!

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By ANNE Z. COOKE and STEVE HAGGERTY / Special Contributors to The Dallas Morning News

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 dining, trail maps, maybe even the chairlifts. Without snow, preferably fresh powder, we'd be nowhere.

George, our waiter tonight and a ski bum by day, cocks an ear. There's no such thing as bad snow, he tells our table. If it's on the slopes, he's there, skiing everything from packed powder and crusty glades to windy cornices and icy snow bowls.

"Never had a bad day in 25 years, and I've skied just about every place you can name," he says, clearing the plates at the Lynn Britt Cabin, on the slopes at Snowmass Resort in central Colorado. "I guess I'm just lucky."

If George has been cruising America's many ski trails for 25 years, he probably has developed an intuitive sense of snow. When you work at a ski mountain from November through early April, patrolling the snow by day or grooming the slopes by moonlight, reading the signs becomes second nature.

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STEVE HAGGERTY/Special Contributor
Taos Ski Valley in New Mexico gets about 25 feet of snowfall in an average year.

The average recreational skier, however, has to pick a date and take his or her chances. If you have just a few days to ski, why not choose a resort most likely to have first-rate snow?

Snow conditions depend on a variety of factors: the latitude, elevation, sun exposure and microclimate features, such as lakes, parallel ranges and deserts. As spring approaches, nighttime temperatures and storm patterns also come into play.

Get to know the details, then plan ahead so the snow is there when you are. Or choose one of these six resorts known for predictably fine snow.

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Snowmass, central Colorado

For fresh powder and deep coverage in 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.

Snowmass' heaviest snowfall comes in late February and March, accumulating an average of 25 feet 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 low humidity tend to preserve powder conditions, 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.

Contact: www.aspensnowmass.com

Whistler-Blackcomb, British Columbia

This mammoth pair of Canadian resorts, with 8,171 acres on two adjacent mountains north of Vancouver, is farther north than any Lower 48 ski area. Whistler's first snows typically fall in November, and by December you can ski most of the slopes. Total annual snowfall reaches an impressive 33 feet.

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



Snow falls throughout the winter and 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.

By December, you can ski most of Whistler-Blackcomb's slopes. The first snows usually come in November.

Contact: www.whistlerblackcomb.com

Heavenly Resort, South Lake Tahoe

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, blocking chairlift platforms. By January, most of the mountain trails, which straddle the California-Nevada border, will be open. In record-breaking years, the heaviest snowfalls occur in February or later.

Heavenly's 10,000-foot elevation supports trees to the summit, a condition that seems to slow late-season melting. However, 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 it, 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 plan a ski trip during nonholiday weeks from early February to early March.

Contact: www.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 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 at the tail end of the Rockies makes 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 25 feet, Taos' rugged, north-facing slopes stay covered, with few bare spots or rocks to grab your skis.

Contact: www.skitaos.org

Steamboat, northern Colorado

For whisper-light snowfall, with multiple feet on the ground by January and storms through March, point your skis toward Steamboat.



Steamboat Resort skiers take a break at the Four Points Hut on Storm Peak amid the region's legendary powder.

The climate 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 "champagne powder."

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

Contact: www.steamboat.com

Snowbird Ski Resort, Alta, Utah

Of the 10 or so ski areas in Utah's Wasatch Mountains, Snowbird is 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), very dry air due to the location in the arid Great Basin and moisture from the lake effect (the Great Salt Lake is nearby) create monster winter storms.

So much snow falls – an annual average of 41 feet – 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. Just 35 percent of Snowbird's 2,500 skiable acres is 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.

Contact: www.snowbird.com

Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty are freelance writers in California.

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 snow last?** That depends on Mother Nature's moods, the jet stream, warming oceans, midwinter heat waves and spring freezes. Go figure. Know before you go

- Check 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, Onthesnow.com, Skireport.com and Sportsamerica.com.

- The most useful site is 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, and sun exposure. Most valuable are Crocker's personal observations.



Snowbird Ski and Summer Resort
The high elevation, dry air and the lake effect from Great Salt Lake add up to monster winter storms that dump an average of 41 feet of snow at Snowbird in Alta, Utah.