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No such thing as bad snow

ANNE Z COOKE and STEVE HAGGERTY, MCT, The West Australian
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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.

The average skier, however, has to pick a date and take his or her chances. If you have just a few days to ski or are coming from overseas, 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, night time 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.

===Snowmass, central Colorado, US===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 (3352-3657m) mountains mostly white and skiable.

Snowmass' heaviest snowfall comes in late February and March, accumulating an average of 7m 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. Details: www.aspensnowmass.com

Whistler-Blackcomb, British Columbia, Canada

This mammoth pair of Canadian resorts 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 10m.

The low elevation (between 2609m and 2255m) 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.

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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. Details: www.whistlerblackcomb.com

Heavenly Resort, South Lake Tahoe, US

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 (3048m) 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 from early February to early March.

Details: www.heavenlyresort.com

Taos Ski Valley, northern New Mexico, US

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 (3602m), then climb 40 minutes more to the top of Kachina Peak, at 12,481 feet (3804m), 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 7.6m, Taos' rugged, north-facing slopes stay covered, with few bare spots or rocks to grab your skis.

Details: www.skitaos.org

Steamboat, northern Colorado, US

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

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 (2103 to 3200m). There are no above-timberline bowls at this altitude, but heavy snowfall and trees to the summit offer challenging glade skiing.

Details: www.steamboat.com

Snowbird Ski Resort, Alta, Utah, US

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 2438 and 3352m), very dry air because it is 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 12m - that Snowbird opens in mid-November and stays open until Memorial Day (late May).

Though skiers like to hype Snowbird's vertical powder steeps and glades, recreational skiers shouldn't be warned off. Just 35 per cent 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 neighbour.

Details: www.snowbird.com

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