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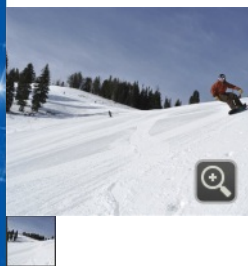
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The white zone is for snow play: When skiing isn't enough

By Anne Z. Cooke
McClatchy Newspapers
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Images



PARK CITY, Utah — The Porter clan, 14 strong, were assembled at Park City Ski Resort for the last ski run of the family's annual winter reunion. But Nick, 14, and Andrew, 12, oldest of the cousins, had other ideas.

"Aw, Mom, this is our last chance to do the Alpine Coaster," begged Nick, putting on a woeful face. "We'll meet you later, I promise."

"Yeah, Mom," echoed Andrew.

If you listened to the boys — or looked at ski resort numbers, flat over the last couple of years — you might wonder if skiing was in trouble. That would be a mistake. Die-hard alpine skiers and snowboarders will always be the core mission. But with more families traveling with kids, even the smallest ski hills are rebranding themselves as family-style playgrounds.

If the Porter kids are like mine, they'll grow up to be skiers. Right now, though, the Alpine Coaster, a high-speed bobsled ride on a roller-coaster track, delivers much bigger kicks. And as ski resorts have discovered, the newest high-speed chair lifts have changed the way you can plan your day.

"You used to spend more time riding uphill than you did skiing down," said Jeff Hanle, at Snowmass Resort, in Colorado. "Now you can ski more and quit earlier, leaving plenty of time for something else. Ice skating, the tubing hill, or dog sledding."

You can expect to find the usual: snowshoeing, ice skating, snow bikes, cross country skiing and tubing. But how about fly fishing, ice climbing, paragliding, snowmobiling, hot springs, Olympic-style bobsledding and extreme winter driving classes? You have only to ask.

—PARK CITY RESORT, Park City, Utah; (435) 649-8111; www.parkcityresort.com.

Park City Ski Resort's 3,300 skiable acres boasts some of Utah's friendliest, best designed ski trails. It's almost impossible to blunder onto an expert-only trail or to miss the signs that name the trails to the next chairlift. And yes, the Alpine Coaster is a hoot, but so are the Gorgoza tubing park, dog mushing, snowmobiling and sleigh-ride dinners.

But it's the restored mining town itself, at the resort's base that gets my vote as North America's most authentic ski village. You'll never find a more inviting place to shop, dine well, sample local brews or people-watch.

As for my favorite thrill, it's the real bobsled rides on the official bobsled track built for the 2002 Olympic Winter Games. With an experienced pilot at the helm, you screw up your courage, climb into one of these tin cans-on-steroids and hold your breath. The thing goes at speeds up to 80 miles per hour, reaches 5 Gs acceleration and drops the equivalent of a 40-story fall in one minute. Holy Moly, Superman!

—TELLURIDE SKI RESORT, Colorado: (800) 778-8581; www.tellurideskiresort.com.

Here at this remote mountain hideaway, in southwestern Colorado, it doesn't get any better. And scenic snow-capped peaks, 2,000 acres of dry powder, groomed cruising runs and plenty of expert-only glade skiing is just the beginning.

But for an out-of-the-box experience, drive to neighboring Ouray and the natural hot springs that made this mining town such a hit with 19th century fortune hunters. The 150-degree water flows into three pools where it cools to 106, 96 and 82 degrees, for intensive heat therapy, luxury soaking or swimming. Pick a grey, snowy day to come, and wallow while the flakes drift down and the steam rises. It's an out-of-body experience. Changing rooms, lockers and showers are available; the pools are open daily from noon to 9 p.m.

Alternately, sign up — and layer up — for the guided half-day snowmobile tour to the ghost town and historic mining sites in Alta Lakes, in the Alta and Turkey Creek basin. After you've explored the deserted lanes and seen the skewed timbers in what remains of these drafty cabins, that cozy condo with the fireplace you've rented will look twice as nice.

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—BIG WHITE RESORT, Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada; (800) 663-2772; www.bigwhite.com.

You've never heard of Big White? It's a 2,000-acre ski resort, in the southeast corner of British Columbia, specifically designed for multi-generational recreation. When the resort's family-friendly ski trails pale, there's dog-sledding, a tubing hill and an ice skating rink to try. For kids, the apres-ski starts with bonfires and marshmallows and ends with fireworks. For adults, there's a choice of pubs. But the newest thrill here is a bonafide extreme sport.

Test your mettle — and bone up for that "Survivors" tryout — on the Ice Tower, a 60-foot ice climbing feature created from cross-braced telephone poles encased in a three-foot thick layer of blue ice.

The Tower, ice-clad in such a way as to create routes designed for beginning, intermediate and expert climbers, is managed and operated by ice climbers who are also members of the American Mountain Guides Association. You'll be outfitted with special boots, crampons and safety gear, and will learn how to use ice climbing's specialized gripping tools. It's fun, safe and a hoot.

—STRATTON MOUNTAIN, Stratton, Vermont; (800) STRATTON. www.stratton.com.

Skiing has always headlined winter at Stratton Mountain, in Vermont. One of the East's larger ski areas, the resort has 2,500 skiable acres and 600 acres of marked trails, plus another 1,500 acres (the golf course) where they've laid down groomed tracks for cross country skiers. But for more than a few visitors, at least some of the attraction is actually indoors: the Sport Center's two indoor tennis courts, 25-yard swimming pool, basketball court and a steam room.

If a snow storm keeps you off the mountain, check out the Land Rover Driving School's "off-road winter driving class," an offer unique to this resort. Their slogan, "the worse the weather the better," says it all.

My favorite was the guided snowshoe trek which meets at the top of the Gondola. From here the trail winds across the summit to the far side and the site of a fire-lookout tower. On a blue-sky day, climb to the top for an aerial view of four mountain ranges: the Green Mountains stretching away beneath your feet, and in the distance, the White Mountains, Adirondacks and Alleghenies.

—KEYSTONE RESORT, Dillon, Colorado; (800) 468-5004; www.keystoneresort.com.

Your spouse, it seems, would rather paint the peaks than ski on them. No problem, I get that. So while he or she is capturing Keystone's silver shadows and snow-flecked pines in watercolors, head outdoors with snowshoes, or take the kids to the lakeside ice skating rink or the tubing hill, at Adventure Point.

But a more interesting option is fishing for trout in the Elk River, as good in winter as it is in summer. Hire a guide; they provide rods, reels and waders, and will provide the required out-of-state license. Most important, they know just where to find those special trout pools and riffles. Afterwards, pamper yourself at Keystone Lodge's Rock Resorts Spa, a 10,000 square-foot full-service facility, with massage rooms, relaxation therapy, an indoor swimming pool, a sauna and hot tubs. Powered entirely by solar and wind-turbines, and partially lit by natural light, this officially "green" spa uses only natural products.

—ASPEN MOUNTAIN, Aspen, Colorado; (800) 525-6200. www.aspensnowmass.com.

Aspen is the sort of ski town where people come for the mountain and stay for the lifestyle. By day three you'll notice that the gung-ho skiers that rode up with you on the Silver Queen Gondola to the summit of Ajax are now sunbathing in rows of deck chairs facing the mighty snow-capped peaks of the Maroon Bells.

Or start your ski day by joining one of the residents who don shorts for the daily (grueling) hike from the resort base to the summit; they wear hiking boots and walk on the edge of a groomed run.

At the top, join a naturalist-led snowshoe hike, scheduled twice a day. Or explore the valley below on a guided snowmobile tour; check starting times with local outfitters. Once again, layer up for a two-man paraglide launch off the top of Ajax; the pilot controls the glide — you are the passenger.

Window shopping is a must in this town, at least if you expect to say you've been here. At sunset, find a tapas bar then stay for dinner.

IF YOU GO:


Ski resorts offer some non-ski activities on site. Others, like horse-drawn sleigh rides, log cabin dinners, snowmobiling and fly fishing, may be provided by local outfitters or concessionaires. Advance reservations are advised and fees are separate.


Remember to dress warmly. Skiers stay warm because they're always moving. But snowmobilers, parasailors, fishermen and sleigh riders need a lot more layering. All ski resort websites list additional on and off-the-snow activities with details and contact information. Convention & Visitors' Bureaus also keep lists of recreation, entertainment, lodging and restaurants.


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