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DOWNHILL SKIING

## Colorado resorts: as varied as snowflakes



BY ANNE Z. COOKE AND STEVE HAGGERTY  
 SPECIAL TO THE MIAMI HERALD

IDAHO SPRINGS, Colo. -- The garden has withered, the nights are cold and the last few leaves are fluttering in the wind. It's time to think about skiing, this year in the Colorado Rockies. World famous for blue skies, sunny days and more deep, dry powder snow than you'll ever find in the Alps, each of Colorado's 36 (or maybe it's 37) ski resorts has its own personality. Here are a few of our favorites:

• **Steamboat Resort: Five-star ski school for kids.** If you want your kids to love skiing, ski at Steamboat Resort, in central Colorado. Not only

does the resort run one of the country's top-rated children's ski programs, but it offers the best kids-ski-free packages anywhere. Geared to families, it's a staple at Steamboat, one that's built a loyal following with generations of families who want skiing to be a family tradition.

For every adult who buys a lift pass for five days or more, one child 12 and under — sharing a room with an adult — gets a free ski pass and ski rentals, no taxes, tips or fees tacked on. Weekend skiers won't benefit from this one. But for an extended family with kids, or a family of four, or any group of adults and children, half will ski free.

Then spend the money you'll save on lessons. Private lessons are always an option, and recommended for adults. But for kids, it's the all-day group lessons that rock. Grouped by age, ability and interest and led by energetic young instructors, the kids learn fast. It doesn't take long before they're skiing all over the mountain's 2,965 acres, whizzing through glades and over bumps and throwing snowballs at each other.

Once they're hooked on that famously trademarked "champagne powder" snow, it's all over. End of story. Fly to Denver and on to the Yampa Valley Airport; 877-783-2628; www.steamboat.com.

• **Winter Park Resort: In Denver's backyard.** Used up your vacation days? If you can't let another winter go by without skiing, squeeze in a long weekend at Winter Park. Not only does this three-peak, 3,060-acre ski area have some of the Rockies' biggest slopes plus trails for all ski levels, but it's only 67 miles west of Denver's bright lights. Fly into Denver the night before or book an early morning flight to arrive in Denver before noon. Hop on one of the ski shuttles that wait near the baggage claim lobby and you'll be hucking Parsenn Bowl's fresh powder by 2 p.m.

To streamline the process, try our way: We reserve rental skis in advance at the ski shack on the base area — usually demos, for better performance — so they'll be waiting with our names on them. We also book lodging at the Base Village, a room or studio condo, so we'll be good to go in the morning. And we buy our lift tickets in advance on Winter Park's website, for pickup at the base area ticket window.

The shuttles get busy, so reserve a seat your seat ahead of time. Check out Home James Transportation (800-359-7503, www.homejamestransportation.com) or Big Sky Shuttle (877-336-8267 or 303-300-2626). For a better way to enjoy Winter Park's lively après-ski scene, rent wheels and drive; www.winterparkresort.com; 866-239-3994.

• **Snowmass Resort: First for families.** Does ski-in ski-out lodging make a good ski vacation great? If you're skiing with the rug rats, it will. There's nothing better than stepping out of the door, clicking into your bindings and herding the group down to the nearest chair lift. And at Snowmass Resort, on-slope

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lodging is easy to come by at one of the ski area's 2,500 rental units, all clustered around the ski resort's two base areas.

Hotels, cozy inns, condominiums, log lodges — Snowmass has them all. Two on a budget can find a room in a base area inn. Families, friends on holiday, reunion groups and wedding parties can snare — and share — one, two, three or four-bedroom condos or luxury lodges. Stay on or near the snow and be there when the lifts open, ready to carve "first tracks" on one of Snowmass's four big mountains.

Everything you'd need, in fact, for a stress-free family vacation is on site at the newly expanded and redesigned Snowmass Village. The top-rated ski school is a short walk across the snow, offering group lessons for toddlers to teenagers and classes and clinics for adults. A couple of ski rental shops are also right there, as are the overnight ski check and a half-dozen restaurants, gift shops and skiwear stores. Even groceries are close, at a nearby mini-mall market.

But the most glittering improvement is the addition of the five-star Viceroy Hotel, at the base of Fanny Hill. With a star-studded clientele, an atmospheric après-ski bar and a restaurant with a chef-styled menu, the hotel adds much needed pizzazz. 877-682-7736; [www.aspensnowmass.com](http://www.aspensnowmass.com).

• **Arapahoe Basin: High and mighty.** Looking for deep powder glades, 55-degree steeps and no crowds? Ski at Arapahoe Basin, six miles from Keystone Resort. Sporting North America's highest marked ski trails (the summit is at 13,050 feet) 63-year-old A-Basin belongs to the locals and powder hounds, skiers who live by the creed that the ultimate high is pushing the limits.

A-Basin, straddling the Continental Divide, has just 900 acres and seven lifts. Half of the resort is above timberline with much of the terrain in open bowls. But off-piste thrills aren't the only reason the resort has a devoted following, says snowboarder Craig Bannister, a spokesman for Colorado Ski Country. It's the ski area's ten-month ski season, with T-shirt skiing stretching into mid-summer.

"A-Basin is the first to open and the last to close," said Bannister. "People who buy a season pass get their money's worth. People high-five their friends in the cafeteria and people are generally laid back. The locals probably won't show you where to find those hidden stashes (never-skied fresh powder snow), but the guys who work there will."

You can buy lunch at three on-mountain lodges, mainly staples like hot dogs, chili, cheeseburgers and pizza. You can rent skis, get your edges sharpened or buy a pair of gloves at the base area ski shop, but as the website reminds readers, the resort has "no lodges, no condos and no hotels." Stay at Keystone Resort instead and ski both resorts on the same trip.

Near Dillon, on Highway 6; 888-272-7246; [www.arapahoebasin.com](http://www.arapahoebasin.com).

• **Keystone Resort: Snow sports galore.** Don't give Keystone Resort a pass because Mom, Junior and Uncle Albert don't ski. During winter's snowy months, Keystone sheds its summer camouflage to become a winter sports and activities center, with entertainment for all ages. With 3,148 acres to play on, there's something for everyone, from back country skiers and hot doggers to teenage snowboarder and Grandpa with arthritis, who'd rather look at the window and admire the snow falling on cedars outside.

For downhillers who've discovered Nordic skiing, Keystone maintains miles of groomed cross-country trails as well as marked, off-piste (ungroomed) trails for snowshoers. Both Nordic skis and snowshoes are available for rent at the resort base. Ice skating and rentals are available at the Lakeside Rink. The famous Tubing Park, sculpted on the back side of a precipitous slope, is one of the fastest, steepest, scariest, most satisfying thrills available, an eight on a scale of ten.

Other recreation includes snow bike rentals; snow cat rides into the back country; fly fishing (trout bite in winter); scenic sleigh rides; snowmobile tours, GPS Geo-Cache Adventures and Nastar family races; indoor pleasures run from spa treatments at the Keystone Lodge, to yoga classes and scenic rides uphill on the River Run Gondola. 877-625-1556; [www.keystoneresort.com](http://www.keystoneresort.com).

• **Crested Butte: Wild and woolly.** If you're looking for a natural-born high, ski at funky Crested Butte, where the base area is at 9,375 feet elevation and the summit rises to 12,162 feet. In the past, this historic, 1,167-acre ski area has been a weekend destination, crowded on Saturdays and Sundays but wide open during the week. With big views, uncrowded runs and a genuine, old-time rustic ranch town at the base, devoted skiers have felt like pigs in clover.

But a change in the resort's ownership has brought improvements and jobs. With upgraded trails, faster chair lifts, terrain parks, more restaurants and base area hotels now on site, the number of destination skiers is growing. The innovations haven't spoiled the feel of the mountain or of this historic community, but some residents oppose the changes. Still, most agree that up-to-date ski services and first-class lodging are the best way to keep the ski resort alive and the community afloat. As our lift operator said, "Colorado already has enough ghost towns."

Meanwhile, skiers ought to visit Crested Butte at least once, to see what Colorado's friendly home-town hills are all about. 800-810-7669; [www.skicb.com](http://www.skicb.com).

• **Vail Resort: Wide-open spaces.** Do you shrink from crowded ski slopes and long lift lines? Leave them behind at Vail, the behemoth, the big daddy, the largest of Colorado's ski areas. Spread over seven miles of mountains, Vail's 5,289 skiable acres could be overwhelming, except that the resort is actually organized into three distinct areas, the Front Side, the Back Bowls, and Blue Sky Basin. When you study the trail map, think small, exploring one area at a time.

Most recreational skiers stay on the Front Side, where beginner and intermediate trails predominate and skier services and on-mountain restaurants are located at regular intervals. But even here, lift lines are short and crowds are few, even on holidays.

Advanced and more aggressive skiers who know the area often head straight for the Back Bowls and Blue Sky Basin. According to Vail, each acre of skiable snow averages only four skiers at any one time. And after a snowstorm, fresh, untracked powder is almost guaranteed at Vail; 800-503-8748 or 800-805-2457; [www.vail.com](http://www.vail.com).

• **Aspen Mountain: Bright lights, good eats.** If ski town nightlife puts the wax on your skis, feel the buzz at Aspen, where ski vacations are many-splendored. For trend-conscious skiers and sophisticated slope-sliders, this former mining town's winter lifestyle is as sizzling as any downhill thrill. With its fine cuisines and jazz clubs, its art galleries, classical concerts, antique stores, celebrity bars and five-star hotels, Aspen, the town, is half the attraction.

Though most slopes on Ajax — as the ski mountain is known — are rated for expert skiers, there are a half-dozen swooping intermediate runs off the summit. Almost always groomed, they curve gradually down, dip steeply for a few feet, then end at a mid-mountain chairlift. To reach the summit, take the Silver Queen Gondola up, and as you exit, stop at the on-the-snow kiosk where a concierge serves hot cider by the cup.

Be sure to stop at the energy-friendly Sundeck Restaurant, the newest version of the original 50-year-old warming hut. Reborn, the Sundeck's gourmet menu is popular with visitors and residents.

You can ski to the base area or ride the gondola back down. Either way, save time to enjoy the town. A cultural mecca, Aspen's narrow streets and restored, turn-of-the-century brick buildings relive the high-flying excitement of the town's early days. No wonder that so many skiers list Aspen among their top ten favorites. 800-525-6200; [www.aspensnowmass.com](http://www.aspensnowmass.com).



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