

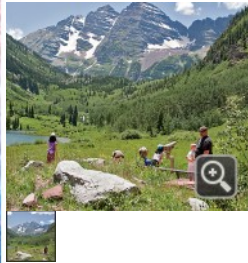
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# Think again, ski resorts aren't just for winter anymore

By Anne Z. Cooke  
McClatchy Newspapers  
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Images



SNOWMASS VILLAGE, Colo. — "River rafting? Horseback riding? At Snowmass?" said Larry behind the counter at the Ski Chalet, in Los Angeles.

For most people, just hearing a ski resort name — Snowmass, Steamboat, Copper Mountain, Winter Park, Vail, Taos — is a vacation turn-off. Winter winds, cold feet, blistering snow storms? No way.

"Snowmass? That's for skiers," he told me. "Not where I want to be on my summer vacation."

I'm a skier, so snow is what comes to my mind, too. But after last summer, I'll never think of Snowmass the same way.

We floated the idea of a two-family vacation in March, but procrastinated until June. We were about to give up when somebody mentioned Snowmass, the resort and the village.

As it happens, most ski resort lodging stands empty in summer. As vacancies grow, so do discounts. And sure enough, prices had dropped as much as 50 percent during some off-season weeks.

Summer fun in Colorado is a natural. Why? Because ski resorts aren't in ugly, flat places. Those slopes are located in magnificent mountain settings where there's more to do in any season than most other places. River rafting, fly fishing, hiking, music festivals, zip lining, paragliding, jeep trips and golf. And that's just for starters.

At Snowmass, the slopes were transformed, grown into grassy, flower-filled meadows. Switzerland, I thought, without the cowbells.

The Fanny Hill ski run, a giant bunny slope at the resort base village, was half-empty until Saturday's music festival, a weekly event drawing huge crowds. The musicians — rock, country and pop bands — performed on a raised stage; food and drink tents were set up along the perimeter, and everyone sat on blankets until the stars came out.

On Thursday night, we went to Snowmass Village's local rodeo, an amateur event, well-attended and pleasingly abbreviated. Held weekly, it attracts bronc riders, ranch cowboys handy at calf-roping, and barrel racers (on horseback) from towns throughout the county.

## 'Don't miss ...'

Snowmass is one of my favorites. But it isn't the only ski resort in Colorado or in the Rocky Mountain states trying to fill empty rooms in summer.

Did I mention horseback riding, chuckwagon dinners, lake canoeing, river kayaking, rock climbing, campfire sings, square dancing and overnight trail rides? And when a ski village gets into the act, the list grows longer: art shows, mountain man rendezvous, black powder festivals, Arabian horse shows, Celtic festivals, arts and crafts markets.

My "don't miss" suggestions: Guided fly fishing lessons for the kids, and a half-day river trip. The fishing was supposed to be just fun. But our guide Roger Morse, an expert, revealed his secrets. "Watch and I'll demonstrate, and then you can try it," he said.

Morse cast out the line, set the hook down on a quiet pool next to rushing water (for the fish, more oxygen and less effort expended, he explained), and told us to watch the line until it jiggled (which it did in seconds) — at which point the demonstration turned real. Morse jerked the line to set the hook, then reeled the fish in. "Easy," he said. By noon, 12-year-old Dillon landed three good-sized trout (catch and release) and I lost three hooks, snagged on underwater tree trunks.

## White-knuckle thrills

Then came our eight-mile raft trip down the Roaring Fork River. I expected a lazy float with seven other tourists. Instead, the three-hour paddle on the highest water levels in a decade went from a few splashes, to white-knuckle thrills, to scenic pools, and back to the splashes. During slow moments, our guide's clever comedy routine kept us chuckling. A caveat: the kind of ride you'll get depends on the water level.

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You'll need to buy a ticket to ride the Elk Camp Gondola; rodeo tickets are \$2. A resort concession rents mountain bikes, and a Kids' Day Camp charges a daily fee.

But the free scent of pines, mountain scenery and red-gold sunsets are part of the best vacation you'll ever have.

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