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Colorado's great ski resorts

Snow is starting to fall and winter lovers thoughts are turning to the slopes

November 04, 2012

By **Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty**

McClatchy-Tribune News Service

FRASER, Colo. — The trees are bare, the snow is falling, it's time to ski. But where?

Colorado, naturally, world famous for sunny days and intermittent dumps of deep dry powder.

Which one of the following Colorado ski areas works for you? Read on:

STEAMBOAT RESORT, Steamboat Springs; www.steamboat.com. 877-237-2628.

How about a ski-free family vacation at Steamboat Resort, in Steamboat Springs? You're not eligible, but your kids might be. For every adult who buys a multiday lift pass, one child under 13 gets the same pass free. And they can stay free, too, as long as they're bunking with you. Steamboat's offer is a tremendous deal, the best in the West, one that means a family of four can ski for the price of two.

Invite another adult — dad or your brother — and three kids can ski for free. It's a one-to-one offer good for every run on Steamboat's 2,965 acres. Then spend the money you've saved on lessons at the resort's top-rated Kids' Ski School. While the kids learn to carve turns, you can be skiing that trademarked "champagne powder" snow yourself. Fly to Denver and on to the Yampa Valley Airport. Or drive 2.5 to three hours west of Denver.

ARAPAHOE BASIN, near Dillon. www.arapahoebasin.com. 888-272-7246.

Looking for wild and woolly slopes, those deep powder glades and 55-degree steep? Go for it 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, powder hounds who'll tell you that skiing isn't a sport; it's all about being out there, getting spiritual in the elements, pushing your limits.

A-Basin is surprisingly small — 900 skiable acres straddling the Continental Divide — but size doesn't matter to real ski mavericks. Neither does the fact that there are only two places to eat. Lunch on this mountain is just an intermission between downhill runs.

As the website boasts, "there's no lodges, no condos and no hotels" at this ski area's base. Most people stay at Keystone Resort; most, in fact, ski both resorts on the same trip. Fly to Denver and take a ski shuttle or drive 95 minutes to Arapahoe.

ASPEN, at Aspen. www.aspensnowmass.com. 800-525-6200.

Tempted by bright lights and good eats? How about jazz clubs, celebrity bars and inspired cuisine? If après-ski nightlife puts the wax on your skis, chill out at Aspen, where ski vacations are multi-dimensional.

The West's most iconic ski area, Aspen is more than a 673-acre mountain where half the trails are rated for experts and half for intermediates. Aspen is where on-mountain dining caters to the rich and famous, and the top-of-the-gondola concierge serves hot cider.

The town, too, is a cultural Mecca with art galleries, one-off fashion salons, antique shops, classical music venues and hotels such as the five-star Little Nell, at the base of the Silver Queen Gondola.

Hoping to spot a famous face? Dine at Montagna in the Little Nell, where Chef Ryan Hardy makes magic with organic, home-grown ingredients. Or order Japanese fusion entrees at Nobu Matsuhisa's restaurant. Touted for this season is Buenos Aires Fusion, serving grilled meats and seafood. Fly direct to Aspen's small airport (in bad weather, planes are rerouted to Montrose). Or through Denver to Eagle, 90 minutes from Aspen.

Crested Butte, in Crested Butte; www.skicb.com. 800-841-2481.

If you're looking for a natural-born high, ski at Crested Butte, 9,375 feet elevation at the base and 12,162 feet at the

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IF YOU GO

Most Colorado ski resorts start to make snow as soon as nighttime temperatures drop below freezing. The resorts open by mid-to-late November. Prices for single-day tickets are set when the resort opens. Multi-day lift ticket prices are listed by September.

Lodging packages and discounts are priced lower if purchased before the resort opens. It pays to call early.

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summit. Historically, this 1,167-acre ski area has been a weekend destination, crowded on Saturdays and Sundays and wide open on weekdays. With big views, uncrowded trails and Colorado's funkiest old-time ranch town at the base, die-hard skiers feel like pigs in clover.

One caveat is worth noting: this resort is very high. Even the town, where most lodging is located, is at or above 8800 feet. If you don't do well in high places, Crested Butte may not be your best choice.

Fly nonstop to Gunnison/Crested Butte airport from Dallas/Fort Worth, Chicago, Atlanta and Salt Lake City, or through Denver. Or drive four hours from Denver or Colorado Springs.

VAIL, at Vail; www.vail.snow.com; 800-404-3535. 970-845-5745.

Do you shrink from crowded ski slopes and long lift lines? Cut loose and fly 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 actually encompass three distinct areas, the Front Side, the Back Bowls and Blue Sky Basin.

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. Even here, the lift lines and many trails are rarely crowded.

Even so, good skiers — and some confident but not so skilled skiers — make a bee-line for the Back Bowls and Blue Sky Basin, where on a busy day, each acre averages only four skiers.

In these secluded back-country valleys, most trails are rated more or most difficult, with an occasional intermediate trail offered as a sort of lifeline.

If the weather's good and some runs are groomed, test your mettle on these slopes. Skiing here reminds you that the best skiing isn't really a social activity but the meeting of elemental forces: you and your skis in the mountains in winter.

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