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Travel SPECIAL SKI SECTION

Hunter and Windham Mountains, just four hours away, deliver stunning skiing for all, homey lodging and dining.

CATSKILLS' COMFY THRILLS



The four-star Kaatskill Mountain Club, on the mountain in Hunter, N.Y.

By Irwin Curtin
FOR THE INQUIRER

It was 4 p.m. on an early January Sunday at New York's Hunter Mountain. As the chairlifts shut down for the day, a noisy crowd filled one of the base-lodge bars, all eyes fixed on a large flat-screen TV mounted high on a wall. Many of the gathered skiers and snowboarders now wore "Manning," "Jacobs," "Simms," and "Taylor" football jerseys. They moaned and groaned or screamed in delight as their New York Giants played the Atlanta Falcons in an NFL wild-card playoff game. They were as un-self-conscious and raucous as if they were watching at home in a den on Long Island, or in Brooklyn, the Bronx, or Hoboken, N.J. As I used my sharp elbows on my fellow Noo Yawkers, trying to carve

out a clear view of my Giants, it occurred to me that we all were so comfortably at home in the Catskill Mountains. In the ancient Catskills, a four-hour drive from Philadelphia, the peaks reach 3,000 to 4,000 feet, the forest hides many valleys and hardscrabble towns, and Hunter and Windham Mountains provide experiences different enough to sate anyone's snow-sliding jones. As a native New Yorker, and a resident of northern New Jersey for the last 25 years, I've skied Hunter and Windham on dozens of day trips. In fact, my very first day on skis, when I was in high school in the early 1970s, was at Hunter, wearing cotton long johns, rolled-up blue jeans, multiple sweatshirts, and a baseball cap. The resorts, only 10 miles



See **CATSKILLS** on N5

Hunter and Windham have the same 1,600-ft. vertical drop.
Hunter Mountain

Where the snow is probably prime



Snowbird Ski Resort in Utah, among six superior-snow resorts.

By Anne Z. Cooke
and Steve Hagerty
FOR THE INQUIRER

SNOWMASS, Colo. — 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 restaurants, trail maps, maybe even the chairlifts. But 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. See **RESORTS** on N4

INSIDE

Latest fashions for the slopes. **N2**

Paris in winter: Much to see and dazzle. **N3**



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Now Larimar Punta Cana	3 Nts	\$1149*
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Riu Palace Punta Cana	4 Nts	\$1199*
GOLDEN Plus	Mon, Feb 11, 18, Mar 4-18	
Riu Bambu	7 Nts	\$1299*
★★★★★	Fri, Feb 15, Mar 1-15; Mon, Feb 11-Mar 18	
IBEROSTAR Punta Cana	7 Nts	\$1399*
GOLDEN	Mon, Jan 21-28; Fri, Jan 18	
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checkin

Top 10 List

Looking for the best ski destinations around the world? U.S. News & World Report offers this list on its website <http://travel.usnews.com>.

10. Munich, Germany
9. Lake Tahoe, Calif.
8. Calgary, Canada
7. Vancouver, Canada
6. Telluride, Colo.
5. Zurich, Switzerland
4. Vail, Colo.
3. Aspen, Colo.
2. Banff, Canada
1. Innsbruck, Austria

Geoquiz

Question: The Bighorn Mountains straddle the line between Montana and which other state?

— *Chicago Tribune*

(Answer below)

Gadget Guru



Bigger, brighter view

Zelco pioneered the little book book and moved on to battery-powered lighted magnifying glasses, both travel winners. Now comes the Lumifier Illuminastand 5X, a bright, illuminated magnifying lens that works hands-free — a blessing when you need both hands for your hardback book or for repairing small items (such as eyeglasses). The lightweight 8-inch-long Handstand has a spacious 2.4-inch-diameter 5X optical lens assisted by two bright push-button LEDs, powered by 3 AAA batteries (not included). A slim metal kickstand flips out from the base. The magnifier's rubber housing is flexible at the neck, letting you adjust viewing angles, a useful feature.

Zelco Lumifier Handstand 5X is \$40 at www.zelco.com.

Web Buzz

Beyond hotel rooms

WelcomeBeyond.com highlights off-the-radar lodging. Its options in the United States are few, but there are plenty overseas.

Say no to brand-name hotel chains and resorts. Say yes to handpicked vacation accommodations with a sense of adventure.

Name: WelcomeBeyond.com.

What it does: Showcases unusual and one-of-a-kind lodgings around the world. To book a stay, you make your first inquiry through the website, then make reservations directly with the property owner or manager.

What's hot: You can find off-the-radar lodgings, such as a yurt in England, a breathtaking beach house in Kenya, or an igloo in the Swiss Alps. You can search by using Map View or by selecting from a list of thematic interests, such as skiing and snowboarding or children and family.

What's not: There are only two lodgings in the United States, so your vacation will be farther afield. There are properties in Europe as well as in South America, Asia, Australia, and Africa.

— *Jen Leo*
Los Angeles Times

Geo Quiz Answer: Wyoming. The mountains stretch from Wyoming's Great Basin area to south-central Montana and include some of the most scenic drives in the country.

Where the snow is superior

SPECIAL SKI SECTION

RESORTS from N1

at Snowmass Resort, in central Colorado. He brushes away the crumbs with a flourish. "I guess I'm just lucky."

George, it seems, has developed a sense of snow. As he should. 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 recreational skier, limited to a week or a couple of weekends, doesn't have that luxury. But with forecasters predicting another dry winter in the West, there are ways to improve the odds.

Snow conditions and storm patterns depend on a variety of factors, from latitude, elevation, and sun exposure to features likely to create a microclimate: lakes, deserts, and nearby ranges. Get to know the skinny, then plan ahead so the snow is there when you are. Or choose one of these six resorts or their predictably fine flakes.

Snowmass Resort Central Colorado

For deep, fresh powder from February through March, we like Snowmass Ski Resort, near the town of Aspen. From December on, a combination of early season snowmaking and scattered snowstorms keeps Snowmass' 11,000- to 12,000-foot mountains mostly white and skiable. But Snowmass' heaviest snowfall comes in late February and March, accumulating an average of 300 inches of snow 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 tends 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.

We try to make reservations for the first week of March, statistically the best month for total snowfall. With thousands of slope-side condominiums in Snowmass Village, space is rarely a problem.

www.aspensnowmass.com.

Whistler-Blackcomb British Columbia

This mammoth pair of Canadian resorts has 8,171 acres on two adjacent mountains north of Vancouver. Whistler's first snows typically fall in November and by December you can ski most of the slopes. Total annual snowfall here reaches more than 400 inches, an impressive 33 feet.

But the low elevation (between 2,000 and 7,400 feet) and the coast range location can be a problem. Together they can create rain at the base village and pea-soup fog on the lower slopes. Visibility shrinks to zero, a disconcerting experience. But you can finesse the problem by boarding the gondola or nearest chairlift and riding up through the mist into clear air.

Snow falls throughout the winter and on 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 visibility. You take your pick of dates. Accommodations are ample, ranging from budget rooms to luxury lodges.

www.whistlerblackcomb.com.

Heavenly Resort South Lake Tahoe, Calif.

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, sticking to the ground and sidewalks and blocking chairlift platforms. By January, most of the mountain's trails — which straddle the California-Nevada border — will be open. In record-breaking years, the heaviest snowfalls come in February or later.

Heavenly's 10,000-foot elevation supports trees to the summit, a condition that seems to slow down late-season melting. But with Lake Tahoe at the base, creating the "lake effect," late-season snow may be wet and sticky, deserving the nick-



Whistler-Blackcomb in British Columbia have, between them, more than 8,000 acres on two adjacent mountains. Snowfall is heavy, but low elevation can pose problems. *Steve Haggerty Photography / Colorworld*



Heavenly Resort, whose trails straddle the California-Nevada line, has unpredictable winters and feels the "lake effect" from Tahoe.

How to Choose a Date

Do you want to ski in December or January? Low-elevation resorts in high latitudes — Alaska, British Columbia, and Montana — are likely to get good early-season snow. High-elevation resorts in more southerly latitudes will get a smattering of early-season snow too, but usually on north-facing slopes and in high-snow areas, as in Idaho, parts of Utah, and along the Continental Divide in northern Colorado.

Do you prefer late February or March, when the days are sunnier and milder? Resorts in central and southern Colorado, northern New Mexico, Utah's Park City, and California's Lake Tahoe get most of their snow from February on.

After you decide, check out the resort websites, noting the "mountain facts." Then, go to a couple of independent ski and snow sports sites that collect and assemble resort data. These include bestsnow.net, onthesnow.com, skireport.com, and sportsamerica.com.

Once the snow falls, will it last? That depends on Mother Nature's moods, the jet stream, warming oceans, midwinter heat waves, and spring freezes. Go figure.

— *Anne Z. Cooke*

name "Sierra cement." Colorado skiers poke fun at the "cement," 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 find space for a ski trip during non-holiday weeks from early February to early March.

www.heavenlyresort.com.

Taos Ski Valley Northern New Mexico

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 and feathery 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 11,819 feet, then climb 40 minutes more to the top of Kachina Peak, at 12,481 feet, you'll find it. For some skiers, that's too much effort.

Happily, the high elevation, thin air, and naturally arid climate here 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 305 inches, Taos' rugged, north-facing slopes stay covered, with few bare spots or rocks to grab

your skis.

Despite its reputation for heart-stopping expert steeps, Taos has both bunny slopes, at the base, and intermediate runs at mid-mountain. Because lodging in this most charismatic of America's ski villages is limited, book space as soon as winter weather forecasts look promising.

www.skitaos.org.

Steamboat Resort Northern Colorado

For whisper-light snowfall, with multiple feet on the ground by January and storms through March, point your skis toward Steamboat. The microclimate here in the northern Rockies, on I-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 (and copyrighted) "champagne powder."

The resulting ski conditions more than compensate for the resort's lower elevation (6,900 to 10,500 feet) and for some south-facing slopes, about 23 percent of the total. There are no above-timberline bowls at this altitude, but heavy snowfall and trees to the summit offer challenging glade skiing.

Rarely as crowded as the ski areas closer to Denver, along Colorado's I-70 corridor, Steam-

boat's ski school and an active family orientation make this a popular destination resort. A history of varied children's programs and the ever-generous Kids Ski Free packages, along with base area condominiums in all price ranges, make Steamboat a top choice.

www.steamboat.com.

Snowbird Ski Resort Utah

Of the dozen ski areas in Utah's Wasatch Mountains, Snowbird ranks highest for what they call the West's best powder snow.

A high elevation, between 8,000 and 11,000 feet; dry air from its location in the arid Great Basin; and the "lake effect" moisture from the nearby Great Salt Lake create monster storms. So much snow falls — on average, 500 inches annually — that Snowbird opens in mid-November and stays open until Memorial Day.

Though skiers like to hype Snowbird's vertical powder steeps and glades, recreational skiers shouldn't be warned off. Only 35 percent of Snowbird's 2,500 skiable acres are rated for experts; the rest is divided between comfortable beginner and intermediate runs. And you can double the skiable terrain by skiing at sister resort Alta Ski Area, which shares lift ticket privileges and slopes with its neighbor.

Snowbird, privately owned and noncorporate, has kept its small-town charm, evident in the local accommodations, with rooms in four lodges operated by the Little Cottonwood Canyon Resort. Restaurants and ski rentals are also on site. The resort is about 14 miles from downtown Salt Lake.

www.snowbird.com.

Big Sky Resort South-Central Montana

Out back and beyond is how most skiers feel on their first day at Big Sky Resort, on the wide-open, snowy slopes of 11,766-foot Lone Pine Peak. Where are the crowds, the lift lines, the trampled-to-mush trails? It may take you a little longer to fly into Bozeman and drive an hour to Big Sky, but the pleasure of skiing unspoiled wilderness, as it was when skiing was in its infancy, will make all other ski areas look shoddy.

Since early winter snows aren't guaranteed, even here in the nation's higher altitudes, wait until December to pick your ski date. After that, the location of the mountains and winter's predictably howling blizzards tend to create first-rate ski conditions from January on, with regular top-ups lasting through April.

Log onto the website, but don't be fooled by the array of scenic photos and hot doggers negotiating vertical couloirs. Big Sky's terrain is planned for skiers of all levels, including kids and beginners.

In 2003, when Moonlight Basin Ski Resort opened on Lone Peak's other (north) side, the skiable terrain doubled to 5,512 acres, especially after Moonlight installed the now-famous Tram to the top, opening official access to killer terrain in the legendary Headwaters Bowl. Fly into Bozeman and rent a car.

www.bigsky.com.