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Where the snow is probably prime

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



GALLERY: Where the snow is probably prime

Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Hagerty, For The Inquirer

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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 comices 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 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 known for 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.

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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

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 nickname "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 steepes, 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.ski-taos.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 micro-climate 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, Steamboat'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 11,176-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

Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Hagerty

For The Inquirer



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