

TRAVEL

SMART



SKIING 2014

Whatever the weather, these tips will help you make the most of your time on the slopes.

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FOR THE INQUIRER

WHISTLER, British Columbia — Never averse to a tip from an expert, I like to think of it as the law of inverse timing, one of those light-bulb moments that can make your day.

“In the early season start skiing late, and the late season, start early,” said John, the mountain host and our guide for the morning, as we assembled at the base chairlift at

Whistler Ski Resort. “You’ll ski better and feel better if you set your clock to match the calendar.”

What he means is that if you’re skiing in December or January, when the days are shortest and coldest, stay in bed longer, hit the slopes after the sun has softened the icy patches, and ski until the ski lifts close. But if you’re skiing in spring, say mid- to late-March and into April, rise early and be the first one riding the chairlift. When the sun turns the snow to slush, find the best restaurant on the mountain

and linger over a late lunch.

That’s good advice if, as John does, you live in a ski town such as Whistler in Canada, or near Colorado’s Snowmass, Stowe in Vermont, or New Mexico’s Taos. Any place, in fact, where the slopes are within an hour’s drive and you’re skiing on a locals-only, bargain-priced lift pass. When dark clouds roll overhead, you can stay home or run errands.

But show me a typical recreational skier, somebody who lives hun-
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Read the map: Most ski resorts can’t groom every slope every night, so check out the daily grooming map at ticket windows or at on-slope information kiosks to see where the snowcat drivers have been working.

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dreds of miles from a mountain and has just spent three hours on an airplane, and I’ll show you a go-getter determined to cram a year’s worth of skiing into a single week, no matter what the sky looks like. When time is short, smart skiers maximize every day.

Read the grooming map. Most ski resorts can’t groom every slope every night. With most resorts continuing to add more skiable acreage, there’s often just too much terrain to cover. So the snowcat drivers groom selectively, often leaving baby-bumps runs to develop giant moguls before they plow them flat again.

To find out which runs are freshly groomed (or not, if you’re crazy for thrills), get a copy of the daily grooming map, usually a list available by early morning at ticket windows or at on-slope information kiosks. If you’re an intermediate, ski the groomed runs in the morning and try the bump runs later, after the snow has softened up.

Don’t quit if it snows. OK, quit if you want to. Skip the blizzard, head back to the lodge, and relax with a cup of cocoa. But if you refuse to miss a single minute of skiing, swap those poster-boy fashions — lightweight bomber jackets, rad sunglasses, baseball caps — for warmer clothes. Layering with fleece, adding a neck gaiter with a pull-up face mask, and ditching sunglasses for goggles will make you as impervious as a snowman in a storm. Most experts like amber lenses not just because they keep the snow out of your eyes, but because they work in a whiteout, sharpening the shadows.

In cold, follow the sun. Most ski slopes in North America face north, northeast, northwest or a combination thereof. And for a reason. These are the slopes where

the sun shines the least and where the snow piles up and lasts longest. If it’s a warm day, ski the shadiest slopes, staying ahead of the sun. Sometimes, though, in spots where the sun never shines, the snow turns to ice. If it’s very cold out, follow the sun as it moves across the resort, skiing each run as the sun hits it, then moving on to the next. Do it right and you’ll catch peak conditions.

On warm days, ski the top. When spring breezes blow and crocuses push up next to the gondola, head for the clouds, where temperatures stay low and the snow lasts longest. Back in the day, resorts put the easy runs on the lower slopes and the double-black-diamond mind-benders above timberline. Never-ever skiers took lessons on the bunny slopes beside the lodge and the hot shots pumped air off the cornice. But all that has changed. To accommodate today’s recreational skiers, resorts are offering easy-to-navigate intermediate runs (marked with blue lines) that begin at the summit and track all the way back down to the base area. And what a treat they are.

Be ready to mix it up. Though you can’t change the weather, you can change your plans. Skiing isn’t the only winter sport offered at today’s ski resorts, most of them weather-proof. Tubing hills, snowmobile tours, snowshoe treks, cross-country skiing, alpine slides, the Alpine Coaster (an over-snow roller coaster, such as the one installed at Utah’s Park City Resort), ice skating, bobsledding, sleigh rides, and dog sledding are among the more popular possibilities. Others range from fly fishing and ice fishing to historic walking tours and horseback rides (yes, even in the snow).

Seek your fun indoors. Unable to ski and at your wits’ end? Ride up the lifts and eat at the summit. Find a sports bar and watch a ball game. Shop on main street. Tour the local microbrewery. Visit the history museum. Go to a movie. And wait for the sun to shine.

Don’t quit if it snows: Layer with fleece, add a neck gaiter with a pull-up face mask, and ditch the sunglasses for goggles — use amber lenses, because they work in a whiteout, sharpening the shadows. STEVE HAGGERTY / TNS