

COMMUNITY LIFE

Milestones, C2
Travel, C3-7
Puzzles, C6

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When skiing is sheer bliss

By Anne Z. Cooke
Tribune News Service

BASALT, Colo. — Winter was still in charge when we spotted them, raggedy brown patches staining the snow at Snowmass Ski Resort, in central Colorado's Pitkin County. In any other year we might have been greeted by mounds of powder on the Cirque, with a generous swath under Sheer Bliss, our favorite chairlift. The basics, indeed, for a last-of-the-season caper.

"All we need is a couple of days skiing the summit," moaned Dillon, the teenager, who'd skipped a school day to make the trip. "Is that too much to ask?"

Spoiled by annual trips to Park City Mountain Resort, in Utah, where a decade of February snowfalls have been as predictable as a ham sandwich, he stumped away toward Fanny Hill to "inspect the snowmelt."

But as the sun glared down, the growing puddles of water and dripping icicles confirmed the worst: Spring had invaded overnight.

Then shortly before midnight I heard muffled whooping outside and opened the door to find the skiers from the adjacent condo celebrating the unexpected: an icy wind whirling a cloud of snowflakes over the mountain.

See **Skiing** / C6

TRAVEL Q&A

A primer on driving overseas

The Washington Post

The Washington Post's travel writers and editors discuss your travel stories, questions, gripes and more. Here are some edited excerpts from a recent discussion:

Q. My wife and I are going to Germany and Austria soon and are considering renting a car there. My question is, do I need an International Driving Permit? From what I have gathered it is not needed in Germany but may be in Austria.

A. You won't need it for Germany, but the Austrian tourist office says an IDP is required. The rental company or authorities might never ask for it, but it's better to be safe and have one on hand. You can order the permit through AAA for \$20.

— Andrea Sachs

Q. I am going to Disney in mid-October and hope to visit a beach. I presume the Gulf is still warm enough to swim, but is the Atlantic still warm enough to swim? Any favorite beaches?

A. Still warm enough, yes. My favorites are Canaveral National Seashore and a the unique experience of driving on the sands of Daytona.

— Christopher Elliott

Blue Ridge Parkway: America's favorite country road

• Some tips on what to do, and what not to do, along these 469 miles in Virginia and North Carolina

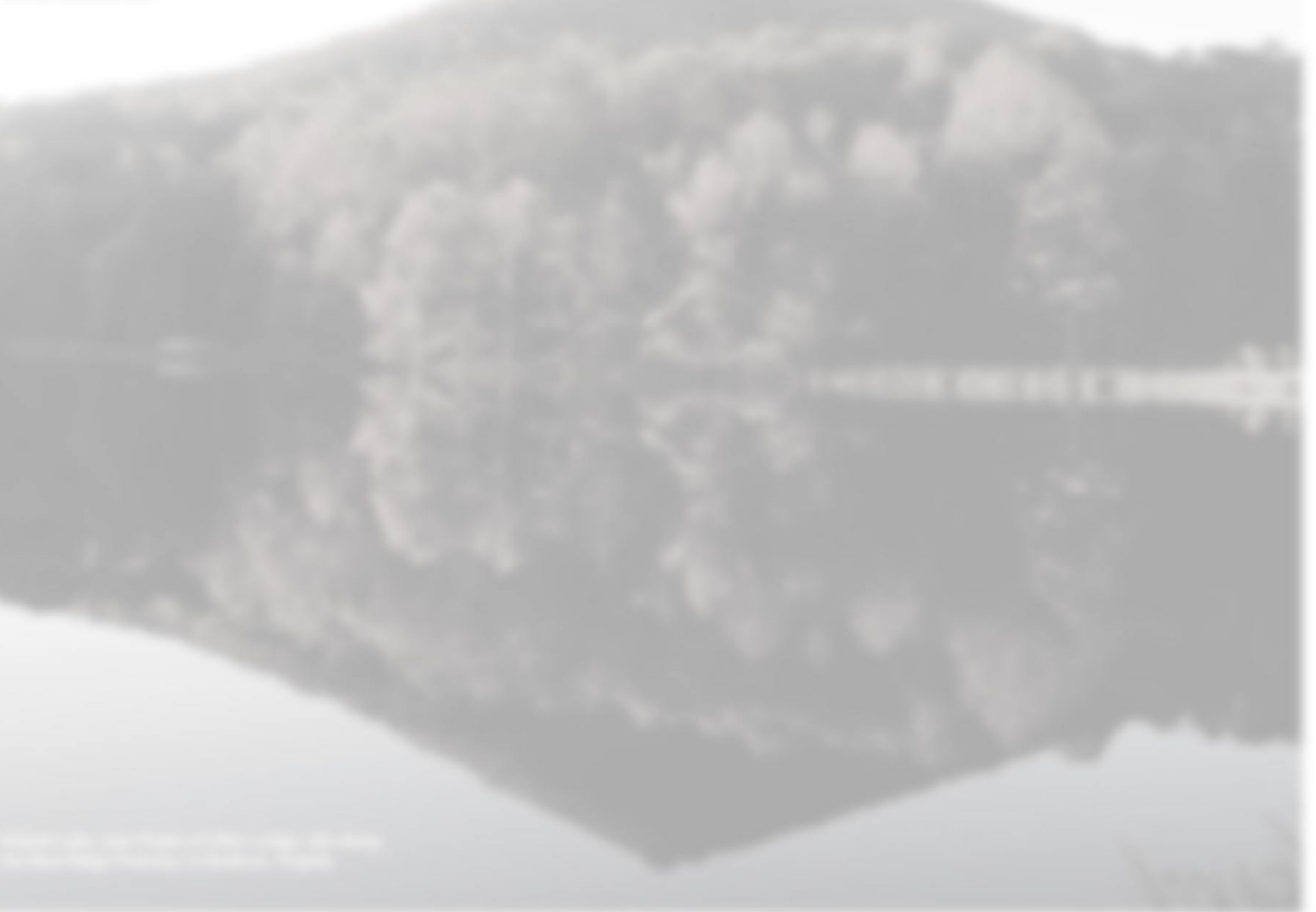
By [Name] [Date]

Highways are the arteries of a country, and the Blue Ridge Parkway is no exception. It's a scenic route that winds through the mountains of Virginia and North Carolina, offering breathtaking views and a sense of adventure. The road is known for its stunning scenery, including waterfalls, lakes, and mountains. It's a perfect spot for a family vacation or a solo road trip. The road is also known for its historic significance, as it was built during the New Deal era. The road is a testament to the beauty of the Appalachian region and the dedication of the people who built it.



A scenic view of the Blue Ridge Parkway winding through a mountainous landscape with a lake in the foreground.

The Blue Ridge Parkway is a 469-mile-long scenic road that winds through the mountains of Virginia and North Carolina. It's a perfect spot for a family vacation or a solo road trip. The road is known for its stunning scenery, including waterfalls, lakes, and mountains. It's a perfect spot for a family vacation or a solo road trip. The road is known for its stunning scenery, including waterfalls, lakes, and mountains. It's a perfect spot for a family vacation or a solo road trip.



Mystery letter inspires paying it forward to homeless

A mysterious letter found in a mailbox in a homeless shelter inspired a group of people to start a "pay it forward" campaign. The letter, which was addressed to "Dear Sir," contained a simple message of kindness and encouragement. The people who found the letter decided to use the money from the letter to help other homeless people in need. They bought food, clothing, and other necessities for the shelter. The campaign has since spread to other shelters and communities, inspiring people to help those in need.



Steve Haggerty / Tribune News Service

Flying high can be sheer joy for freestyle skiers at Keystone Resort, Keystone, Colorado.

Skiing

Continued from C1

And what a difference a day makes. By 6 a.m. we were up and dressed and by 6:30 I was online, blogging the news on the Huffington Post, to wit:

“The blizzard that began late Tuesday night, on March 23rd, was sheer bliss for skiers at Snowmass and Aspen ski resorts who awoke to the best of all possible worlds: feathery-soft powder snow blanketing mountain peaks, valley trails, forest glades and ski lifts. ...

“Today’s snowfall promises to be a winner for once-a-year skiers — families with kids — who come during the annual spring break holiday and for whom good snow can make or break a vacation.”

So much for blogging. If you lived in Connecticut or Florida, you could read it and weep. I, however, was lucky enough to catch a brief reprieve in a succession of fickle years at some of my favorite ski mountains.

Bad was when mild breezes turned the snow at Santa Fe Ski Resort to slush; weird was when a succession of storms at Breckenridge, near Dillon, dropped 100 or more inches; and frustration was the result when scarce snow in some of California’s Sierra Nevada resorts mountains, including Heavenly in South Lake Tahoe and Squaw Valley-Alpine Meadows (now merged) on the north shore, spoiled the skiing altogether.

By early March, the winter season seemed to be over. Until late March, when a series of blizzards dumped record-setting snowfalls up and down the West Coast, at 12 resorts in California, seven in Washington and five in Oregon. And in Colorado? Only Winter Park and Steamboat got the love.

For now, weather extremes are the new norm. But they don’t have to torpedo your ski vacations. Instead of booking lodging and lift tickets months in advance and hoping you’ve guessed right, you can find everything you want, updated daily, weekly and monthly, on ski resort and snow report websites.

Once resort managers realized they could engage skiers in the moment and on the internet, pricing and advertising changed overnight. No longer are lift ticket prices, multiresort lift passes

The nitty-gritty

These websites may help in planning the next ski vacation:

Snowmass Ski Resort (Colo.): www.snowmass.com, or at www.aspensnowmass.com

Park City Mountain Resort (Utah): www.parkcitymountain.com

Keystone Resort (Colo.): www.keystoneresort.com

Breckenridge Ski Resort (Colo.): www.breckenridge.com

Heavenly Resort (Calif.): www.skiheavenly.com and at www.skilaketahoe.com

Squaw Valley & Alpine Meadows (Calif.): www.squawalpine.com

For snow forecasts and reports, go to www.opensnow.com and www.onthesnow.com.

and preseason promotions set in stone. Once posted, they’re easy to change or to modify as needed, or to include in discounts and ski-and-stay packages.

If skier numbers are down, resort managers can offer new promotions or discounts and add kids-ski-free programs. If skier numbers are trending up, the resorts can stay ahead of the rush by hiring additional staff, booking more ski-related events and planning a longer season.

Skiers, too, have benefited. Resort websites post far more detail than we used to get. Skip around and you’ll find trail maps, daily snow levels, numbers of lifts and runs, peak elevations, incredible videos of high-risk skiers flying off the summit, and actual views of the slopes via webcams. You can shop around, compare one resort with another or look for the best combination of prices, lodging options and airfares.

Curiously, what few anticipated was that instant internet access would inspire some bigger ski resorts to expand their mission to offer a bounty of nonski entertainment: Valentine’s Day weekends and beer festivals led to rock concerts, hot-air ballooning, professional and amateur downhill races, first-class dining at better restaurants, and a virtual cornucopia of other winter sports. In a word, a theme park.

“Oh, no, I don’t ski,” said fellow journalist Barbara Beckley when I asked about her winter trip to Breckenridge, in Summit County, Colorado. “I went to see what it was all about, and I wound up having a wonderful trip. I snowshoed through the most beautiful snowy woods, and I had a lovely spa treatment, and I tried dog mushing and nordic skiing. I went ice skating

— they rent skates, of course, and tubing, and really, it was the best getaway.”

Keystone, in particular, has embraced the theme park concept, offering or arranging most of the above, plus snow machine tours, trout fishing, horseback riding and parasailing. Many of these don’t depend on good snow, or even on any snow, an asset for a big family reunion.

As for snow forecasts, some resort websites provide limited details, mostly offering past snowfalls as a guide to the future. For current, informed snow forecasts, it’s best to go elsewhere.

“Take a look at www.opensnow.com,” suggested former Olympic snowboarder Erica Mueller, at Crested Butte ski resort, 26 miles north of Gunnison, Colorado. “Joel Gratz, a meteorologist and a skier created it a couple of years ago. That’s where we go to look ahead. I think most resorts use it.”

According to Gratz, a Boulder, Colorado, resident, his search for the best powder snow began as a hobby, then evolved into a website, and eventually took off. “After testing it for a year, we went online in November 2011; so far it’s a success,” he says.

Gratz’s team of four full-time and three part-time meteorologists crunch all kinds of publicly available data, including some from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, in Boulder. But they create their own graphics, maps and reports.

“What separates us from other sites is that we know what powder skiers like,” he says. “We don’t report on regional storms, but instead focus on which resorts are likely to get the next powder storm.”

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