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## WHITE-ON-WHITE: A SKIER'S PARADISE

*Story by Anne Z. Cooke; photography by Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld*

Winter was still on the calendar when we spotted them, muddy patches of earth poking through melting snow. In former years Snowmass Ski Resort had welcomed us with greeted us with mounds of powder, white-on-white from the Cirque at the summit to the slopes under Sheer Bliss. Where were those 36 inches now, when it mattered?

"All we need is a couple of days skiing the summit," griped 15-year-old Dillon, who'd skipped a couple of school days to make the trip. "Is that too much to ask?"

Spoiled by regular visits to Park City Mountain Resort, in Utah, where a decade of powder stashes were as predictable as ham on rye, he grabbed his snowboard and stumped away toward Fanny Hill "to inspect the snow melt." But as the sun glared down, puddles of water and dripping icicles confirmed the worst. Spring had invaded overnight.

Then shortly before midnight I heard shouting outside and opened the door to find the skiers in the next condo dancing around the parking lot, celebrating an icy wind and whirling cloud of snowflakes.

What a difference 12 hours makes. By 6:30 a.m. I was drinking coffee and logging on, blogging the news with the following:

"The blizzard that began late Tuesday night 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.

The storm, which blew in just before midnight, was still swirling over Snowmass Village at dawn, laying down a foot of new snow on the base area runs before noon and more on Snowmass's upper slopes.

"This is paradise," reported Glenn Parker, from Denver, who said he'd spent the earlier part of the week skiing on hard-packed trails, 'groomed at night ...but mushy by late afternoon.' Joining another group of other early risers who'd seen the snow and jumped into their gear, he snapped on his skis and followed them down to the lifts, hoping to 'ski first tracks off the top.'

Today's snowfall promises to be a winner for once-a-year skiers and boarders – mostly 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 news blogged out to the world. Skiers in far-away places would read the news and weep, but not us. We were fortunate to be on hand to enjoy a brief reprieve from a half-dozen fickle winters at most of my favorite ski mountains.

Up and down the West Coast, from California to Washington, some ski resorts got plenty of snow, but not until late February. In Colorado, December and January blizzards brought too much snow, only to be followed by two months of dry weather.

For now, say climate scientists, extremes may be the new norm. But chancy weather isn't the disaster it used to be, spoiling a long-planned ski vacation. Instead of booking lodging and lift tickets months in advance and hoping you've guessed right, wait for winter to arrive then check the internet for snow levels and expected storms. Once resort managers realized they could reach boarders and skiers instantly, posting lift ticket prices and packages online, everything changed.



*The mountain tour begins, dwarfed by a steep under-the-lift bumps run, at Taos Ski Resort, New Mexico.*



*Riding Fanny Hill lift over Snowmass Village for day's first run, at Snowmass Resort, Colorado.*

When visitor numbers are down, new package deals, super discounts and late-season programs can be designed virtually overnight. If late snows keep the slopes in shape and skier numbers are trending up, resorts can extend the season. And they can stay ahead of an expected rush by hiring additional staff, booking more on-snow events and adding spring specials.

Skiers and boarders also benefit. The amount of resort information now available online dwarfs the little bit once printed in magazines, guidebooks and advertising. Plant your poles on any page in any resort's website and you'll find printable trail maps, detailed information on classes and clinics, special events and race dates, terrain park photos and on-mountain restaurant menus.

The week's snow reports, numbers of lifts and runs, peak elevations and "go-pro" videos of skiers flying off vertical headwalls and through thick glade will make you feel as if you were there, too. As for lodging, most of the sites link to on-slope lodging and shopping options.

Not surprisingly, instant access online gave birth to a new concept, the idea that a ski resort can be an all-around theme park, offering an endless variety of non-ski winter recreation. The first tentative Valentine's Day weekends and beer festivals led to rock concerts, hot-air ballooning, chili cook-offs, wine festivals, chuck wagon dinners, horse-drawn sleigh rides and art shows.

When I talked to friends who planned a family reunion at Keystone Resort, in Colorado's Summit County, I realized that a successful winter getaway doesn't have to depend on good snow, or even on *any* snow.

"Oh, no, I don't ski," said my friend, Barbara Beckley when I asked about her winter trip to Breckinridge, also in Summit County. "I went to see what it was all about, and I wound up having a great trip. I snowshoed through the most beautiful snowy woods, and I had a lovely spa treatment, and I tried dog mushing and Nordic skiing. It was the best getaway!"

Though ski resort websites post current snow conditions, they don't always provide future weather forecasts, handy if you're planning two or three weeks out. For that you need a trained meteorologist, says Erica Mueller, at Crested Butte Resort, near Gunnison, Colorado.

"Take a look at [www.opensnow.com](http://www.opensnow.com)," suggests Mueller, a former Olympic snowboarder whose career depends on powder. "Joel Gratz – he's a meteorologist and a skier – created the site a couple of years ago. That's where we go to look ahead. Most resorts use it."

Gratz, based in Boulder, says that his search for the best powder snow began as a hobby, then evolved into a website and full-time occupation. "After testing it for a year, we went online in November 2011. So far it's a success. 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."

Most of OpenSnow's reports are available at no charge. For the special reports, pay a modest fee and become a member. I also like OnTheSnow ([www.onthesnow.com](http://www.onthesnow.com)), a general information website that brings you a wide range of ski news.

#### TRIP NOTES:

Best Websites:

My favorite resort sites:

Snowmass Ski Resort at [www.snowmass.com](http://www.snowmass.com), or at [www.aspensnowmass.com](http://www.aspensnowmass.com).

Park City Mountain Resort at [www.parkcitymountain.com](http://www.parkcitymountain.com) (<http://www.parkcitymountain.com>).

Keystone Resort at [www.keystonerestort.com](http://www.keystonerestort.com) (<http://www.keystonerestort.com>).

Breckinridge Ski Resort at [www.breckinridge.com](http://www.breckinridge.com) (<http://www.breckinridge.com>).

Heavenly Resort at [www.skiheavenly.com](http://www.skiheavenly.com) (<http://www.skiheavenly.com>) and at [www.skilaketahoe.com](http://www.skilaketahoe.com) (<http://www.skilaketahoe.com>).

Squaw Valley & Alpine Meadows at [www.squawalpine.com](http://www.squawalpine.com) (<http://www.squawalpine.com>).

For quality snow forecasts and reports, go to [www.opensnow.com](http://www.opensnow.com) (<http://www.opensnow.com>) and [www.onthesnow.com](http://www.onthesnow.com) (<http://www.onthesnow.com>).

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*Sheer bliss is a day outdoors, with snowy peaks and valley views, here at Snowmass Village, Snowmass Resort, Colorado.*



*Fiery sunsets look better when seen from the Snowmass gondola, in Colorado's Rocky Mountains.*



*A day to remember: kids on skis and snowflakes in the air, at Park City Resort, Utah.*

