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WAITING FOR SNOWFLAKES

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

On September 29, the first snowfall of the season dusted Colorado ski resorts, dropping just enough white flakes for impatient snowboarders to score a downhill run through the trees. But the storm was just an opener for the main event.

A couple of days later another white-out blew over the Rocky Mountains, leaving a foot of feathery-soft snow on most resorts, from 12 inches at Snowmass, in the Roaring Fork Valley, to 14 inches at Loveland and 18 inches at Steamboat, in the Yampa Valley. And within the week, three more inches.



At the top of the Alice-in-Wonderland trails, Winter Park Resort.

"I was ready to get my skis out, but it didn't last," lamented Sara Reed, in Estes Park, Colorado.

Though the official ski season doesn't launch until Thanksgiving, when nighttime temperatures are cold enough to make and keep snow, an early winter could mean a long one.

And for recreational skiers – like me – it was a reminder. Time again for the annual online marathon in search of resort news, up-to-date weather forecasts, stay-and-ski family discounts, new bumps clinics and affordable lodging.



At Keystone's River Run base area, walking past the ski rental shop.

Before the internet, pre-season planning was simple. You skied at the same place you skied every year. Now it's a bite-your-fingernails chore guaranteed to turn anyone's hair a lighter shade of grey. With millions of bits of data socked away in dozens of poorly organized resort websites, navigating from one screen to the next is headache fodder.

Just for fun, type "ski resorts" into your favorite search engine. I did and produced a formidable 3,410,000 hits. "Lake Tahoe skiing" scored 60,600 hits, but that included ski lodges and restaurants. Vail Resorts found 472,000 results, including resorts, hotels and real estate investments. That's a lot of choices to winnow to one.

Do you know what you want? That's step one. Trail maps and advanced bumps clinics? Popular kids' stay-and-ski-free programs? Or maybe you'd like to earn some points at an independently-owned and managed ski mountain, one of those much-loved outliers known for its special ambiance and home-grown culture?

When I started looking, I decided that if a website site didn't have a home page that popped up with an easy-to-read, color-saturated photo of skiers schussing down snowy mountain trails, it was probably doomed. Visuals count. And if it didn't include an in-your-face list of sub-topics, I stopped looking.



Getting ready to roll on Dercum Mountain, Keystone Resort.

Then I took the easy way out. I started with last season's two best favorites, Snowmass Ski Resort, in Colorado, and Park City Resort, in Utah, just to see what's new. Faster chairlifts, redesign of the trail system, new top-of-the-peak restaurants, that kind of thing.

Snowmass, (www.aspensnowmass.com (<http://www.aspensnowmass.com>)), one of the Aspen Ski Company's four resorts, next door to each other, is big and broad, a fresh-air destination at any time of year. The runs here, rated for all skill levels, fan down from four high peaks: black diamond widow-makers plunging down vertical steeps, gentle beginners' green trails, and miles of swooping intermediate blue runs.

The on-slope restaurants are as good as anything you'll find anywhere, and ski-in ski-out lodging tucked into the trees is a feature, one I'm too spoiled to give up. When I first started to ski, in Southern California, the parking lot was 500 feet from the snow, walking in stiff, plastic boots and humping skis, poles and a day pack. That was then. Nowadays I want to step out the door and glide away.

As for the Aspen-Snowmass website, it didn't disappoint either. A single site with four divisions, the graphics were inviting and easy to follow, with story-telling photos, charts, maps, lists of lessons, kids' ski school signups, apres-ski events, other winter activities and daily and weekly rates. Once you'd navigated through Snowmass, the others were easy.



Views of the Roaring Fork Valley, Aspen Ski area.

My other resort favorite, Park City Resorts, in Utah (www.parkcitymountain.com (<http://www.parkcitymountain.com>)), is an authentic destination on two fronts. It's not just a big, newly-renovated family-friendly ski mountain but a historic base area village, a restored mining town with great restaurants and hip shops. But Park City, now merged with the Canyon, is a Vail property, one of 17 ski resorts owned or managed by the real estate investment giant, Vail Resorts.

The result is a single website (www.vail.com (<http://www.vail.com>)) for all 17 ski areas. This is an advantage for Vail, of course, facilitating resort-wide promotions. For skiers there's a handy list of names, a quick click from one to the next. But forcing 17 geographically dispersed, very different ski resorts into a single mold homogenizes – and commercializes -- the ski experience.

Some of the best ski areas have created clubs, joining forces to compete. The first is the Mountain Collective (www.mountaincollective.com (<http://www.mountaincollective.com>)), whose shadowy green home page charms like velvet. An association of independent ski areas, the Collective is a club of 16 charismatic, unique and sometimes wild and wooly resorts dedicated to promote unforgettable adventures.

Some of the members you'll know – Aspen-Snowmass and Squaw Valley/Alpine Meadows, in California's Sierra Nevadas. Others you may not, including Coronet Peak, in New Zealand, and Revelstoke, in Canada, known for the continent's longest vertical drop: a wowie 5,620 feet.

Gas up the station wagon (or the Ferrari), buy the Collective's 33 ski-day adult pass, for \$489, and the 12-and-under youth pass for \$99, and you and your 11-year-old can ski two days each at six of the 16 – say, Sugar Bush, Taos Ski Valley, Mammoth Mountain, Sun Valley, Jackson Hole and Banff Sunshine – and still have 21 ski days left.

The other essential website is Colorado Ski Country (www.coloradoski.com (<http://www.coloradoski.com>)), a bright and eye-catching site representing Colorado's 21 large and small ski and snowboard resorts. As a hub, Colorado Ski posts each site's latest news, weather reports and special offers, along with photos, a slide show and general information.

From there, links to each individual site lead to the nitty gritty. Ever skied at Eldora, or Monarch, Wolf Creek or Powderhorn? Ever taken the kids to Howelsen or Sunlight? Colorado has more skiable mountains than Saturday Night Live has skits.

But without snow, no website helps. With weather patterns changing, snowfall is an increasingly dodgy topic. Depending on long range forecasts, maybe – just maybe – it's better to wait a little longer before booking lodging and lift tickets.



A trip down Spar Gulch is like a ride through a salad bowl, Aspen Ski area.