

# Get a natural high on New Mexico's peaks

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**SANTA FE** — If you're looking for a different brand of skiing this winter, buckle up for a trip to New Mexico. It's back to the future here in the snowy reaches of the southern Rocky Mountains, where 37 peaks tower more than 12,000 feet above the vast Colorado Plateau.

Nearly a dozen large and small ski areas cling to as many alpine valleys. Locally-owned, these hometown outfits are as different from each other as they are from the ski industry's big boys, the corporate-owned resorts that depend on selling vacation real estate.

You don't just ski in New Mexico. You swap stories with the folks in the chairlift lines. You dig into authentic Southwestern food in all its tongue-tingling variations. The state's multicultural heritage — a 300-year-old brew steeped in Spanish traditions, Native American lifestyles, and westward-bound adventurers — seeps into your bones. As the days tick by, it seems you'll never find time to ski those snowy peaks. But you do.

We recently revisited four northern New Mexico ski areas in the Sangre de Cristo Range, curious to see whether the march of time and inevitable improvements — faster chairlifts, new lodges, updated ski schools for children — had changed the natural high that has kept us coming back to this wide-open state. They haven't.

But four resorts in 10 days was too many. If you're a newcomer, split your ski week between two of these four. Later on, do them all.

**SKI SANTA FE**, 16 miles outside the city, is a day ski area. There is no lodging at the base area, and that's good news. It would be a shame to come to the country's oldest and most historic capital city, founded in 1610 at the western end of the dusty Santa Fe Trail, and not stay in one of the half-dozen hotels that cluster near the heart of the central plaza.

Listen for the distant echo of the pack trains, mule skinnners, fighters, mountain men, and soldiers that raised a ruckus on this very spot, now the location for western art galleries, Navajo and Pueblo arts and craft shops, historic Spanish Colonial buildings, and cafes and restaurants. It's also the departure point for the ski area.

Ski Santa Fe, as it's officially named, perches on the slopes of windy Tesuque Peak, elevation 11,995 feet on the official topographic map. It's breathy up here at the top of the new New Millennium triple chairlift, which climbs from the resort base at 10,350 feet to the summit.

Most skiers stop to photograph each other and the panorama of desert and plains rolling away for 150 miles. Then it's over the edge and down to a network of seven lifts and 72 trails, 40 percent rated for intermediate skiers, 40 percent for experts, and 20 percent for beginners. We ski the off-piste trails (not groomed or marked) below the summit, courtesy of the just-above-timber-line elevation.

If you keep moving, you can ski most of the mountain in two



THATCHER DORN

The slopes around Taos, N.M., accumulated their reputation over many years. The highest at Taos Ski Valley is 11,819 feet.

## If you go . . .

**Ski Santa Fe**  
505-982-4429  
www.skisantafe.com  
Full- and half-day adult lift tickets in high season are \$60 and \$45. For lodging call 800-777-2489 or visit www.santafe.org.

**Taos Ski Valley**  
866-968-7386  
skitaos.org  
Adult lift tickets \$69 and \$52. Book early and ask for a room at one of the three hotels on the slopes.

**Angel Fire**  
800-633-7463  
www.angelfireresort.com  
Adult lift tickets \$59 and \$44. Lodging is in the base area hotel or adjacent condominiums.

**Red River**  
redriverskiarea.com  
Adult lift tickets \$61 and \$46 in high season. For lodging call 800-331-SNOW or visit www.skiredriver.com.

or three days, though we generally slow down and savor the flavor. The highlight is the mountain's longest run, a three-mile cruiser back to the base. Plan to ski for a good part of each day, grabbing lunch at Totemoff's Bar & Grill at mid-mountain before driving back to town to explore, shop, take in a museum, and dine out.

**TAOS SKI VALLEY**, 18 miles outside the town of Taos in a narrow valley, is New Mexico's only nationally-known ski resort. A skiers' mountain and US classic, it feels like a Swiss village, with hotels, inns, shops, and private chalets crammed onto every spare inch of space. The area grew as word spread of its legendary slopes.

Though much has changed over the decades, fans come back every year because of the valley's

long history, the Ernie Blake Ski School's Ski Better Weeks, and the resort's dedication to skiing as a sport and not a commercial enterprise.

With 1,194 acres and 13 chairlifts, Taos is the state's largest resort, a wonderland of powdery glades and breathtaking steeps. Seen from the bottom on Chair 5, at the 9,207-foot resort base, the mountain's front face, known as Al's Run, is a minefield of moguls sure to give pause to the less confident downhiller.

But skiers who climb aboard for the ride to the top find that Ski Valley's best intermediate terrain is on the mountain's upper meadows, where groomed runs, powder snow, and solitude make for perfect skiing. Happily, there's an easy way down, on the cat track that loops back around the side of the mountain.

The resort's highest lift climbs to 11,819 feet, but the intrepid often climb beyond to the top of 12,481-foot Kachina Peak for a plunge down the black-diamond run Main Street. Beginners have their own bunny hill and several easy "green" runs near the base area. And there's a do-it-yourself tubing hill. The resort supplies the monster-sized tubes, but you have to pull them uphill yourself.

**ANGEL FIRE SKI RESORT**, 22 miles east of Taos, is New Mexico's premier family ski resort, the kind of place your children will remember for where they learned to ski. With 445 skiable acres on two adjacent slopes, parents — or grandparents — who bring the youngsters will find lots of mostly moderate slopes, with groomed cruising runs, curved turns, small bowls, some tree skiing, and the occasional short bumps run. Snowboards and snow bikes are welcome, as are cross-country skiers.

Set back in the woods, the resort feels warm and unpretentious, with a rustic but well-designed base area, a large lodge and cafeteria, and a ski rental

and sports shop. The main lodging is steps away in a comfortable hotel, with rooms of various sizes, including some large enough to sleep the family. Additional lodging is available in a number of privately owned ski chalets, most in the rental pool.

Though Angel Fire offers plenty of space for snow play, it's nearly impossible to get lost, meaning that children can ski with minimal supervision. Though many runs parallel each other, the forests that separate them lend a sense of seclusion.

Two high-speed quad lifts and three double chairs provide quick access to 67 groomed trails with names like Fat City, Hells Bells, and Fire Escape, and for experts, Mind Binder, Charisma, Detonator, and Baa-Da-Bing. Liberation

and Lowrider are the resort's two top-ranked terrain parks.

The Children's Ski Center, organized for parental convenience, is a no-nonsense place to learn. Everything is in one building: the rental skis and boots, kitchen and lunch tables, a play and rest area for the younger kids, and storage cubbies. What the center doesn't provide are distractions such as toys, trucks, video games, doll houses, and crayons.

"Our parents enroll their kids in group lessons because they want them to learn," said instructor Sam Pettit. "We really don't do baby-sitting."

**RED RIVER SKI AREA**, 36 miles from Taos, is all about lifestyle. The 290-acre ski area climbs a steep green hill behind the town

of Red River, population 400, doubled in summer by vacationers there to fish, ride horseback, and hike. When the snow flies and folks show up to ski, the preferred après-ski wear leans more toward cowboy boots than designer fashions.

Explored by trappers in the early 1800s and settled by miners in the 1860s, the town is tucked into a small valley, with the resort's fixed-grip chairlifts — two triples and four doubles — climbing to the 10,353-foot summit on two long lifts that conveniently load right in town. Or you can park at the Ski Chalet base area and ride up from there.

Most of the front-slope trails are rated for intermediates. The expert runs — Cat Skinner, Chicken Run, and a couple of other challengers — drop off the front. The beginners get all the luck, with the bunny slopes on the back of the top, great views, and the easiest trail back to the base, Cowpoke Cruise. Red River has a Summit Café, ski school, rentals, and child care.

Half the fun is eating in town, where you're sure to find fiery-hot peppers on the menu. Nibble them without blinking and your welcome rating rises significantly. Chew and swallow and they'll think you're a native.

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