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Plan your ski trip on one condition . . . snow

Some resorts win fans for their predictability



Heading for home on Stampede Trail, at Steamboat Resort in Colorado. Below, the village at Taos Ski Valley in New Mexico. (Photos By Steve Haggerty)

By Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty
Globe Correspondents / November 7, 2010

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As the hours pass and the wine begins to flow, the talk turns to snow, a skier's only essential element. We can manage without the usual resort conveniences: on-mountain restaurants, trail maps, maybe even the chairlifts. But without snow, preferably fresh powder, we're nowhere.

George, our waiter tonight and a ski bum by day, cocks an ear. There's no such thing as bad snow, he tells our table. If it's on the slopes, he's there, skiing everything from packed powder and crusty glades to windy cornices and icy snow bowls.

"Never had a bad day in 25 years, and I've skied just about every place you can name," he says, clearing the plates at the Lynn Britt Cabin, on the slopes at Snowmass Resort in central Colorado. He brushes away the crumbs with a flourish. "I guess I'm just lucky."

Now, if George has been cruising US ski trails for that many winters and at that many ski resorts, he's probably developed an intuitive sense of snow. When you work at a ski mountain from November through early April, patrolling the snow by day or grooming the slopes by moonlight, reading the signs becomes second nature.

But the average recreational skier has to pick a date and takes his or her chances. If you have just a few days to ski why not pick a resort most likely to have first-rate snow?

Snow conditions depend on a variety of factors: the latitude; elevation; sun exposure; and micro-climate features like lakes, parallel ranges, and deserts. As spring approaches, nighttime temperatures and storm patterns also come into

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play. Get to know the skinny, then plan ahead so the snow is there when you are. Or you can choose one of these six resorts known for predictably fine snow.

SNOWMASS SKI RESORT Colorado For fresh powder and deep coverage from February through March, we like Snowmass, 20 minutes from Aspen. From December on, a combination of early-season snowmaking and scattered snowstorms keeps Snowmass's 11,000- to 12,000-foot mountains mostly white and skiable. But the heaviest snowfall comes in late February and March, accumulating an average of 300 inches on the trails, a thick base that lasts until the resort closes, usually in mid-April. Freezing temperatures at night and the region's low humidity tend to preserve powder conditions, especially at the higher elevations. Good grooming keeps it smooth until the end of March, when sunny afternoons finally turn the lower slopes to slush.

We try to make reservations for the first week of March, statistically the best month for total snowfall. With thousands of slope side condominiums in Snowmass Village, space is rarely a problem. www.aspensnowmass.com

WHISTLER-BLACKCOMB British Columbia This mammoth pair of Canadian resorts, with 8,171 acres on two adjacent mountains north of Vancouver, sees its first snows typically in November. By December you can ski most of the slopes. Total annual snowfall reaches more than 400 inches, an impressive 33 feet.

But the low elevation (between 2,000-7,400 feet) and the coast range location can create rain at the base village and pea-soup fog on the lower slopes. Visibility shrinks to zero. But you can finesse the problem by boarding the gondola or nearest chairlift and riding up through the mist into clear air.

Snow falls into May, adding to great conditions, especially on the top terrain. Unless it's windy, conditions are generally better up high, with some north-facing slopes skiable into June or later. Most Whistler fans recommend February and March for the best snow coverage and clearest visibility. Accommodations are ample, ranging from budget rooms to luxury lodges. www.whistlerblackcomb.com

HEAVENLY RESORT South Lake Tahoe, Calif. With a reputation for some of the West's most unpredictable winters, when the snow finally does come to Heavenly Resort, it comes in a big way. In a good year, the snow piles up in huge dumps, sticking to the ground and sidewalks and blocking chairlift platforms. By January, most of the mountain trails — which straddle the California-Nevada border — will be open. In a record-breaking year, the heaviest snowfalls occur in February or later.

Heavenly's 10,000-foot elevation supports trees to the summit, a condition that seems to slow late-season melting. But with Lake Tahoe at the base, creating the "lake effect" condition, late-season snow may be wet and sticky, deserving the nickname "Sierra cement." Colorado skiers poke fun at the "cement," but Californians and Nevadans, who treasure their lake, ski it with aplomb.

If the winter looks like a blockbuster, you'll know by January, in time to find space for a trip during non-holiday weeks from early February to early March. www.heavenlyresort.com

TAOS SKI VALLEY New Mexico When the snow's good at Taos, a three-hour scenic drive north of Albuquerque, it's as light and feathery as talcum powder. When it's marginal — as in one of New Mexico's occasional drought years — you may have to search for it. If you ride to the top of the highest lift, at elevation 11,819 feet, then climb 40 minutes more to the top of Kachina Peak, at 12,481 feet, you'll find it.

Happily, the high elevation, thin air, and naturally arid climate here at the tail end of the Rockies make for super powder snow, especially in March, when most of the heavy storms settle over the range. In an average weather year, when the snowfall measures 305 inches, Taos's rugged, north-facing slopes stay covered, with few bare spots or rocks to grab your skis.

Don't let the reputation for best skiing prevent you from trying to find the best

Despite its reputation for near-stopping expert steeps, Taos has both bunny slopes, at the base, and intermediate runs at mid-mountain. Because lodging is limited, book space as soon as winter weather forecasts look promising.

www.skitaos.org

STEAMBOAT RESORT Colorado For whisper light snowfall, with multiple feet on the ground by January and storms through March, point your skis here. The micro-climate in the northern Rockies, on Interstate 40 west of the Continental Divide, puts Steamboat in the path of two storm patterns that blow through at intervals, ensuring regular dumps of Steamboat's legendary (and copyrighted) "champagne powder."

The resulting conditions more than compensate for the lower elevation (6,900-10,500 feet) and for some south-facing slopes, about 23 percent of the total. There are no above-timberline bowls at this altitude, but heavy snowfall and trees to the summit offer challenging glade skiing.

Rarely as crowded as the ski areas closer to Denver, along Colorado's I-70 corridor, Steamboat's ski school and family orientation make this a popular destination resort. A history of varied children's programs and the ever-generous Kids' Ski Free packages, along with base area condominiums in all price ranges, make Steamboat a top choice. www.steamboat.com

SNOWBIRD SKI RESORT Utah Of the 10 or so ski areas in Utah's Wasatch Mountains, Snowbird is among the most unusual, blending three features that create what some call the West's best powder snow.

The high elevation, 8,000-11,000 feet; plus very dry air, due to the location in the arid Great Basin; plus the moisture from the "lake effect" (the Great Salt Lake is nearby) add up to create monster winter storms. So much snow falls — an annual average of 500 inches — that Snowbird opens in mid-November and stays open until Memorial Day.

Though skiers like to hype Snowbird's vertical powder steeps and glades, recreational skiers shouldn't be warned off. Only 35 percent of Snowbird's 2,500 skiable acres is rated for experts; the rest is divided between beautiful beginner and intermediate runs. If you need more elbow room, ski over to sister resort Alta Ski Area, which shares lift-ticket privileges and ski slopes with its neighbor.

Snowbird, privately-owned and non-corporate, has kept its small-town charm, evident in the local accommodations, with rooms in four lodges operated by the Little Cottonwood Canyon Resort. Restaurants and ski rentals are also on site. The resort is about 14 miles from downtown Salt Lake. www.snowbird.com

Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty can be reached at annezcooke@cs.com. ■

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