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Travel

TRAVEL

Ski resorts add plenty of play to their activities

By Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty | GLOBE CORRESPONDENTS NOVEMBER 20, 2011



STEVE HAGGERTY FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

At Park City Ski Resort in Utah, seat belts get checked on the Alpine Coaster.

The Porter clan, 14 strong, were assembled at Park City Ski Resort in Utah for the last ski run of the family's annual winter reunion. But Nick, 14, and Andrew, 12, oldest of the cousins, wanted to beg off.

“Aw, Mom, this is our last chance to do the Alpine Coaster again,” said Nick, trying to look woeful. “We’ll meet you later, I promise.”



“Yeah, Mom,” echoed Andrew.

If you listened to Nick - or looked at ski resort numbers, flat over the last couple of years - you might wonder if skiing is in trouble. That would be a mistake. Diehard alpine skiers and snowboarders will always be a ski resort’s core mission. But with more families traveling with children, even the smallest ski hills are rebranding themselves as family-style winter playgrounds.

If the Porter children are like mine, they will grow up to be skiers. Right now, though, the Alpine Coaster, a high-speed bobsled ride on a roller coaster track, delivers bigger kicks. And as ski resorts that have installed high-speed chair lifts have discovered, the new technology has changed the way you can plan your day.

“You used to spend more time riding uphill than you did skiing down,” said Jeff Hanle, at Snowmass Resort, in Colorado. “Now you can ski more of the mountain and still quit early enough to try something else: ice skating, or the tubing hill, or dog sledding.”

You would expect the usual snow sports: snowshoeing, ice skating, snow bikes, cross country skiing and the like. But you might be surprised what they think of: snowmobiling, fly fishing, ice climbing, paragliding, hot springs, and bobsledding. You have only to ask.

TELLURIDE SKI RESORT ( 800-778-8581  , www.tellurideskiresort.com)

It doesn’t get any better than this remote mountain hideaway in southwest Colorado. Snow-capped peaks, 2,000 acres of powder, groomed cruising runs, and plenty of expert-only glade skiing are just the beginning.

For an out-of-the-box experience, drive to neighboring Ouray and the natural hot springs that made this mining town such a hit with 19th-century fortune hunters. The 150-degree water flows into three connected pools, cooling to 106, 96, and 82 degrees, for intensive heat therapy, luxury soaking, or swimming. Pick a gray, snowy day to come, and wallow while the flakes drift down and the steam rises. It’s an out-of-body experience. Changing rooms, lockers, and showers are available; the pools are open daily from noon to 9.

Alternately, sign up - and layer up - for the guided half-day snowmobile tour to the

ghost town and historic mining sites in Alta Lakes, in the Alta and Turkey Creek basin. Your cozy condo with the fireplace will look twice as good after you have explored the skewed timbers on what's left of these drafty cabins.

BIG WHITE RESORT ( 800-663-2772  , www.bigwhite.com)

Big White is a 2,000-acre ski resort in Kelowna, in the southeast corner of British Columbia, specifically designed for multigenerational recreation, from dog-sledding and snowmobiling to the tubing hill and the ice skating rink. Kids' après-ski starts with bonfires and marshmallows and ends with fireworks. Adults' après-ski would be in the pub. But the newest thrill here is a bona fide extreme sport.

Test your mettle on the Ice Tower, a 60-foot ice climbing feature created from cross-braced telephone poles encased in a 3-foot-thick layer of blue ice.

The Tower, with climbs adapted for beginning, intermediate, and expert, is managed and operated by members of the American Mountain Guides Association who are also experienced ice climbers. You will be outfitted with special boots, crampons, and safety gear, and will learn how to use ice climbing's specialized gripping tools. It's fun, safe, and a hoot.

KEYSTONE RESORT ( 800-468-5004  , www.keystoneresort.com)

Your spouse, it seems, would rather paint the peaks in Dillon, Colo., than ski on them. No problem, I get that. So while he or she is capturing Keystone's silver shadows and snow-flecked pines in watercolors, head outdoors with snowshoes, or take the kids to the lakeside ice skating rink or the tubing hill at Adventure Point.

But a more interesting option is fishing for trout in the Elk River, as good in winter as it is in summer. Hire a guide; they provide rods, reels, and waders - and the required out-of-state license. Most important, they know just where to find those special trout pools and riffles. Afterward, pamper yourself at Keystone Lodge's Rock Resorts Spa, a 10,000-square-foot full-service facility, with massage rooms, relaxation therapy, an indoor swimming pool, a sauna, and hot tubs. Powered entirely by solar and wind-turbines, and lighted partially by natural light, this officially "green" spa uses only natural products.

ASPEN MOUNTAIN ( 800-525-6200  , www.aspensnowmass.com)

Aspen, Colo., is the sort of ski town where people come for the mountain and stay for

the lifestyle. By day three you will notice that the gung-ho skiers that rode up with you on the Silver Queen Gondola to the summit of Ajax are now sunbathing in rows of deck chairs facing the mighty snow-capped peaks of the Maroon Bells.

Or start your ski day by joining one of the residents who don shorts for the daily (grueling) hike from the resort base to the summit. They wear hiking boots and walk on the edge of a groomed run.

At the top, join a naturalist-led snowshoe hike, scheduled twice a day. Or explore the valley below on a guided snowmobile tour; check starting times with local outfitters. Once again, layer up for a two-man paraglide launch off the top of Ajax; the pilot controls the glide - you are the passenger.

Window shopping is a must in this town. At sunset, find a tapas bar then stay for dinner.

If you go...

Some **non-ski activities** are offered by ski resorts. Others, such as horse-drawn sleigh rides, log cabin dinners, and fly fishing, are provided by **area outfitters**. Reserve in advance, since many activities, like dog mushing and paragliding, are in demand. All charge a **separate fee**.

Dress warmly. Less energetic activities, such as snowmobiling, parasailing, and fly fishing, will **feel colder** and require more layering.

All resorts list additional **on- and off-the-snow activities** on their websites, with details and phone numbers. **Visitors' bureaus** maintain lists of recreation, entertainment, lodging, and restaurants.

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