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Posted on Monday, 11.21.11

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The white zone is for snow play: When skiing isn't enough

BY ANNE Z. COOKE
MCCLATCHY-TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

PARK CITY, Utah - The Porter clan, 14 strong, were assembled at Park City Ski Resort for the last ski run of the family's annual winter reunion. But Nick, 14, and Andrew, 12, oldest of the cousins, had other ideas.

"Aw, Mom, this is our last chance to do the Alpine Coaster," begged Nick, putting on a woeful face. "We'll meet you later, I promise."

"Yeah, Mom," echoed Andrew.

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

If the Porter kids are like mine, they'll grow up to be skiers. Right now, though, the Alpine Coaster, a high-speed bobsled ride on a roller-coaster track, delivers much bigger kicks. And as ski resorts have discovered, the newest high-speed chair lifts have 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 and quit earlier, leaving plenty of time for something else. Ice skating, the tubing hill, or dog sledding."

You can expect to find the usual: snowshoeing, ice skating, snow bikes, cross country skiing and tubing. But how about fly fishing, ice climbing, paragliding, snowmobiling, hot springs, Olympic-style bobsledding and extreme winter driving classes? You have only to ask.

-PARK CITY RESORT, Park City, Utah; (435) 649-8111; www.parkcityresort.com.

Park City Ski Resort's 3,300 skiable acres boasts some of Utah's friendliest, best designed ski trails. It's almost impossible to blunder onto an expert-only trail or to miss the signs that name the trails to the next chairlift. And yes, the Alpine Coaster is a hoot, but so are the Gorgoza tubing park, dog mushing, snowmobiling and sleigh-ride dinners.

But it's the restored mining town itself, at the resort's base that gets my vote as North America's most authentic ski village. You'll never find a more inviting place to shop, dine well, sample local brews or people-watch.

As for my favorite thrill, it's the real bobsled rides on the official bobsled track built for the 2002 Olympic Winter Games. With an experienced pilot at the helm, you screw up your courage, climb into one of these tin cans-on-steroids and hold your breath. The thing goes at speeds up to 80 miles per hour, reaches 5 Gs acceleration and drops the equivalent of a 40-story fall in one minute. Holy Moly, Superman!

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

Here at this remote mountain hideaway, in southwestern Colorado, it doesn't get any better. And scenic snow-capped peaks, 2,000 acres of dry powder, groomed cruising runs and plenty of expert-only glade skiing is just the beginning.

But 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 pools where it cools to 106, 96 and 82 degrees, for intensive heat therapy, luxury soaking or swimming. Pick a grey, 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

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