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THE WHITE ZONE IS FOR KIDS

Anne Z. Cooke

KEYSTONE RESORT, CO- As the clouds settled over 11,640-foot Dercum Mountain, most skiers had already quit for the day. But at the tubing hill on Adventure Point, at Keystone Ski Resort, kids and adults were still lining up for another ride.

“C’mon Dad, it’s light enough to go again,” said Katie Kitay, age 13, ignoring the storm that had begun with a few drifting snowflakes and was now falling steadily. Getting a thumbs-up from her dad, Katie and her brother Will gleefully dragged their inner tubes back to the launch point.

Has skiing lost its luster? Not for me. Here at one of Colorado’s most popular family ski resorts, winter vacations will always mean the freedom of carving new powder and the promise of big-sky scenery. But where do you ski when some in your clan – your husband, your kids, your sister – MY sister, definitely – would rather do something else?

Not long ago, skiing was the only thing. Now it’s just one of a host of snow play adventures, from ice skating and snowshoeing to cross country skiing, tubing hills and sleigh rides. Pleasing non-skiers has always been a challenge. Now it’s part of the equation.

There’s another fundamental change at work, too, says Myra Foster, at Stratton Mountain resort, in Vermont’s Green Mountains. Technology has revolutionized the on-mountain experience.

“Skiers used to spend half their time riding uphill on those old slow chair lifts,” she told me. “With today’s high speed quads you can ski twice as many runs as you used to and still have time for a sleigh ride or a massage. I can lap the mountain twice by two o’clock, and by that time I’m done and ready for a nice leisurely lunch.”

How does fly fishing in Keystone’s Elk River grab you? Ice climbing at British Columbia’s Big White resort? Paragliding off Aspen Mountain? Heart-thumping thrills with your second-grader on Park City Resort’s Alpine Coaster, or bungee-bouncing at Telluride? Fishing, mushing, mountaineering, all these and more are part of winter’s new profile. For thrills in the white zone, here are a few of the top contenders:

TELLURIDE SKI RESORT, Telluride, Colorado: 800-778-8581; www.tellurideski resort.com.



Snowbikes are the next best thing to a sled: easy to ride and close to the ground.



Tubing rules on Dercum Mtn., Keystone ski resort.

For skiers, the slopes at this remote mountain hideaway, in southwestern Colorado, are sweet. There isn't much better than snow-capped peaks, 2,000 acres of arid powder, groomed cruising runs and off-piste glade skiing.

But for an out-of-the-box experience, head for neighboring Ouray and the natural hot springs that made this village such a hit with 19th century miners. Captured in a series of pools, the 150-degree water cools to 82, 96 and 106 degrees, temperatures ideal for diving and swimming, wallowing and what feels like slow-cooking but is actually heat therapy.

"When the snow flakes drift down and the steam rises, a long soak is magical," says my cousin Dick. Changing rooms, lockers and showers are available; the pools are open daily from noon to 9 p.m.

Sign up – and layer up -- for the guided half-day snowmobile tour to Alta Lakes 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've explored what's left of these drafty cabins.

BIG WHITE RESORT, Kelowna, British Columbia; (800)663-2772; www.bigwhite.com.

If you've already discovered Big White, you know that this 2,000-acre ski resort, in Canada's southeast British Columbia, was designed and built for multi-generational recreation, from dog-sledding and snowmobiling to the tubing hill and the ice skating rink. Après-ski for kids runs from bonfires and marshmallows to fireworks.

But the latest addition – a bonafide extreme sport – tops them all. Test your mettle here – and bone up for your "Survivors" debut – on the Ice Tower, a 60-foot ice climbing feature created from cross-braced telephone poles encased in a three-foot thick layer of blue ice.

The naturalistic Tower, adapted for beginning, intermediate and expert climbers, is managed by Jim and his team, experienced ice climbers and members of the American Mountain Guides Association. He and other guides are here assist with special boots, crampons and safety gear, and to explain how best to use the climbing tools. Good knees will help, but nimble feet win the race.

STRATTON MOUNTAIN, Stratton, Vermont; (800)STRATTON. www.stratton.com.

Skiing's the headliner here at Stratton Mountain, in Vermont's Green Mountains. Always has been. With 600 acres of marked trails, 2,500 skiable acres inbounds and 4,000 total resort acres – which includes the cross country ski park—in summer, the golf course – skiers are in heaven. But for more than a few visitors the Sport Center's two indoor tennis courts, 25-yard swimming pool, basketball court and steam room are the main attraction.

While the kids are snowboarding, join one of the guided snowshoe treks from the top of the gondola across the summit to the fire-lookout tower.

"If you've come this far, climb to the top for an aerial view of the rest of the Green Mountains and beyond them, the White Mountains, the Adirondacks and the Alleghenies," says Foster.

Alternatively? Pray for a blizzard, then sign up for the Land Rover Driving School's off-road winter driving class, unique to this resort. As their slogan advises, "the worse the weather the better," and they mean it.

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

Aspen is the sort of ski town where people come for the mountain and stay for the lifestyle. By day three you'll notice that most people aren't skiing, at least not all the time. Ride the Silver Queen Gondola to the



Basking in Aspen's high-elevation sunshine, on Ajax Mountain, Aspen, CO.



Dog mushing is increasingly available at ski resorts.



summit of Ajax and check out the crowd, sunbathing in rows of deck chairs facing the snow-capped Maroon Bells peaks.

Up, up, and away: Para-gliding near Aspen, CO.

And here are hikers in shorts on their daily workout, trudging uphill from the resort base, and snowshoers booting up for a summit trail hike. Down in the valley, snowmobilers are on the move. But the highlight is on the back of Ajax, where you can book a guided paraglide launch into the updrafts to soar over the snowy back country.

Don't leave without exploring this upscale mountain village, where window shopping is an eyeopener. As the shadows lengthen, the sun sets and the stars appear, it's time for a tapas bar, a five-course dinner and a nightcap. Aspen is not all about skiing.

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

Park City Ski Resort's 3,300 skiable acres on the slopes above the town of the same name, boasts some of Utah's most accessible and carefully designed ski trails. It's nearly impossible to blunder onto an expert-only trail, or inadvertently wind up in a spot where you have to hike uphill to catch the chairlift. And Park City itself, next to the resort's base area, gets my vote as the North American continent's most inviting and authentic ski town, the kind of place where even non-shoppers like to browse.

And there's plenty of non-ski fun, from tubing, dog mushing, and snowmobiling, to sleigh rides-plus-dinner and heli-ski tours.

But you can dine out on my personal favorite: A ride on the official 2002 Olympic Winter Games bobsled track, which was built here at Park City. With an experienced bobsledder at the helm, you screw up your courage, climb into one of these bullets-on-ice and take off. As the sled reaches 80 miles per hour, you'll drop the equivalent of 40 stories in under one minute and experience 5G's acceleration.

KEYSTONE RESORT, Dillon, Colorado; (800)468-5004; www.keystonerestort.com.

Your spouse, it seems, would rather paint the mountains 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 fly fishing for trout in the Elk River, as good in winter as in summer, is a more interesting option. Buy an out-of-state license and hire a guide to show you those special trout pools and riffles. Afterwards, 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 partially lit by natural light, this officially "green" spa uses only natural products.

IF YOU GO: Some non-ski activities are offered by the ski resorts themselves; others, like horse-drawn sleigh rides and fly fishing, are provided by area outfitters, suppliers or concessionaires who have specific expertise. Advance reservations are advised, since many, like dog mushing and paragliding, are in demand. All charge a separate fee.

Remember to dress warmly. Many outdoor activities, like snowmobiling, parasailing and fly fishing, are less active and therefore colder than skiing, thus requiring layered clothes and windproof outer wear.

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

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Ice skating at the Squaw Creek Resort, near Squaw Valley U.S.A. Ski area, Squaw Valley, CA.



It's party night for kids and adults at Steamboat Ski area's Western Barbecue night.