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Free skiing for kids keeps families on their toes

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BUTTERMILK SKI RESORT, Colo. — As the thermometer drops in the Roaring Fork Valley, sport shop clerks, restaurant owners and hotel managers in the town of Aspen study the sky, eager for signs of winter. Grey days are promising; black clouds could bring the season's first big snow.

But there's blue sky ahead for families planning a ski vacation at one of the "fantastic four" - Snowmass, Buttermilk, Aspen Highlands and Aspen - all within 25 minutes of each other. That's because the ski group is offering one of the most generous "Kids Stay and Ski Free" packages we've seen, the answer for parents who can afford a ski vacation for two or maybe three skiers, but not for four or five.

Free ski play for preschoolers, the 5 and under bunch, is more popular now than ever before. But the Aspen-Snowmass program is for children ages 7-12, those critical years when kids are strong enough to ski, learn fast and aren't afraid of taking a tumble. And as any ski instructor will tell you, the 7-year-old who loves snow-plowing on the bunny slopes will be skiing intermediate runs next year and flying off the top by the time he or she is 10.

Here's how the "Kids Stay and Ski Free" package works. For every adult who buys a three, four or five-night lodging-and-lift ticket package (or more days if you have the time) one child gets the same package free, plus one group lesson. If the adult rents skis and boots, the child gets ski gear, too. The child must be sharing a room with an adult and there are some date restrictions.

Do the math. Four can ski for the price of two, six for the price of three, eight for the price of four, and so on. The adults in your group can be grandparents, aunts, uncles or friends; the kids can be your kids or anyone's kids, as long as they're 7-12 years old. Especially sweet are this season's available travel dates, the last two weeks of March and the first week of April, when things warm up a little (January is too cold).

It's not that the suits at the "fantastic four" suddenly got it in their hearts to distribute gifts to the needy. But they want parents who love ski vacations to be able to bring their kids. If the resort is up and running anyway, paying for electricity, snowcats, chairlifts, the instructors and the office staff, they need customers. And just maybe it's a nice way to reward loyal fans.

That would include us, of course, staying in a condo at Snowmass, riding the chairlifts, hitting the slopes early and using the money we saved to pay for Grandpa's gala 70th birthday dinner. As befitted the occasion, we held it at Snowmass' slick newcomer, the fabulous Viceroy Hotel, at the base of Fanny Hill. Grandpa didn't actually ski downhill. But he loved the dog sledding, the snowmobiling and the trout fishing.

With 3,332 skiable acres, Snowmass isn't the biggest in North America. But it's still a giant. With 94 trails and 21 chairlifts spread over four separate summits, the slopes are rarely crowded. You can ski

from the summit, in the clouds at 12,510 feet, down to Snowmass Village on trails that fit your skills, from steepes and glades to bump runs, and from open bowls to cruisers and bunny hills.

"Snowmass and Aspen do have different personalities," said resort spokesman Jeff Hanle, when asked to compare Snowmass with Aspen. "Snowmass is a family kind of place. The same kids who learn to ski in our ski school come back as college kids, then as young marrieds and eventually bring their own children."

For skiers who haven't been to Snowmass recently a surprise is in order. The base Village has been relocated in an expansive new area at the base of the hill, and the Fanny Hill run is also longer. The old chair lift is gone, replaced by the Village Express, a super-doooper high-speed six-pack. The new "Sheer Bliss" chair goes where few skiers went before, accessing the expert-only terrain in the Big Burn area. And an advanced-level terrain park below Velvet Falls keeps boarders and freestyle skiers on their toes. Literally.

The kids' ski schools have moved to new quarters where it's easier for parents to drop off and pick up their children. Kids in group lessons are divided by age and skill level and guided around the slopes by very cool young instructors who think there's no better way to spend a day skiing than with a bunch of kids.

Snowmass' ski school ends at 3 p.m., leaving time for family skiing, a chance for the kids to show their parents what they've learned. Our family fave is Sneaky's, an intermediate trail off the Big Burn Summit, with Banzai running at second place.

Since lift tickets are good at all four ski resorts, spice up your vacation by skiing a day at Aspen and one at Buttermilk. The night before, leave your skis in the outdoor ski check with instructions to be delivered to wherever you're skiing next. Get there the next morning on the free shuttle bus, and your skis will be waiting.

Don't miss our favorite family night out, a hearty ranch dinner with wine and live bluegrass music at the Lynn Britt Cabin, a restored log cabin on an upper slope. Diners meet at Snowmass Village at 5:30 p.m. for a snowcat-pulled sleigh ride uphill to the cabin. The ride back down, with the stars lighting the way, is an evening our kids still talk about. Reservations are a must.

When does it snow? Usually by Thanksgiving, with frequent storms in January and February, big snows in March and into April. January is the coldest month to be skiing; mid-February through March is peak season. By April, when most town residents are scanning the trees for budding leaves, you can ski in shorts.

IF YOU GO:

RESERVATIONS: Book the Ski-Free-Stay-Free packages in advance and by specified dates, listed on the website, at www.stayaspensnowmass.com. To talk to a real person call the resort office, at (877)308-8703.

FLIGHTS THIS WINTER TO PITKIN COUNTY AIRPORT, six miles from Snowmass, include the following: United will fly daily from Houston, twice daily from San Francisco, four times daily from Los Angeles and Chicago O'Hare and 13 times daily from Denver. American Airlines will fly daily flights from Los Angeles and Dallas/Fort Worth; and Delta will fly from Atlanta and Minneapolis/St. Paul. PHOTOS (from MCT Photo Service, 312-222-4194): UST-COLORADO-SKI

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