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When skiing is sheer bliss

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Tribune News Service



BASALT, COLO. —

Winter was still in charge when we spotted them, raggedy brown patches staining the snow at Snowmass Ski Resort, in central Colorado's Pritkin County. In any other year we might have been greeted by mounds of powder on the Cirque, with a generous swath under Sheer Bliss, our favorite chairlift. The basics, indeed, for a last-of-the-season caper.

"All we need is a couple of days skiing the summit," moaned Dillon, the teenager, who'd skipped a school day to make the trip. "Is that too much to ask?"

Spoiled by annual trips to Park City Mountain Resort, in Utah, where a decade of February snowfalls have been as predictable as a ham sandwich, he stumped away toward Fanny Hill to "inspect the snow melt."

But as the sun glared down, the growing puddles of water and dripping icicles confirmed the worst: Spring had invaded overnight.

Then shortly before midnight I heard muffled whooping outside and opened the door to find the skiers from the adjacent condo celebrating the unexpected: an icy wind whirling a cloud of snowflakes over the mountain.

And what a difference a day makes. By 6 a.m. we were up and dressed and by 6:30 I was online, blogging the news on the Huffington Post, to wit:

"The blizzard that began late Tuesday night, on March 23rd, was sheer bliss for skiers at Snowmass and Aspen ski resorts who awoke to the best of all possible worlds: feathery-soft powder snow blanketing mountain peaks, valley trails, forest glades and ski lifts.

"The storm, which blew in just before midnight, was still swirling over Snowmass Village at dawn on the 24th, laying down 4 to 5 inches of new snow on the base area runs before noon, and more - as yet unmeasured by early afternoon - on the two resorts' upper slopes.

" 'It's paradise,' exulted Glenn, a resident from Denver, who said he'd spent the earlier part of the week skiing on hard-packed trails, 'groomed at night ...but mushy by late afternoon.' Joining another group of other early risers who'd seen the snow and

jumped into their gear, he snapped on his skis and followed them down to the lifts, hoping to 'ski first tracks off the top.'

"The storm was the latest of several small snowfalls, adding a total of 9 inches to a previous 66-inch base. The last big storm here in the Roaring Fork Valley fell a month ago, in late February, dumping a season-saving 43 inches.

"Today's snowfall promises to be a winner for once-a-year skiers - families with kids - who come during the annual spring break holiday and for whom good snow can make or break a vacation."

So much for blogging. If you lived in Connecticut or Florida, you could read it and weep. I, however, was lucky enough to catch a brief reprieve in a succession of fickle years at some of my favorite ski mountains.

Bad was when mild breezes turned the snow at Santa Fe Ski Resort to slush; weird was when a succession of storms at Breckinridge, near Dillon, dropped 100 or more inches; and frustration was the result when scarce snow in some of California's Sierra Nevada resorts mountains, including Heavenly in South Lake Tahoe and Squaw Valley-Alpine Meadows (now merged) on the north shore, spoiled the skiing altogether.

By early March of this year (2016), the winter season seemed to be over. Until late March, when a series of blizzards dumped record-setting snowfalls up and down the West Coast, at 12 resorts in California, seven in Washington and five in Oregon. And in Colorado? Only Winter Park and Steamboat got the love.

For now, weather extremes are the new norm. But they don't have to torpedo your ski vacations. Instead of booking lodging and lift tickets months in advance and hoping you've guessed right, you can find everything you want, updated daily, weekly and monthly, on ski resort and snow report websites.

Once resort managers realized they could engage skiers in the moment and on the internet, pricing and advertising changed overnight. No longer are lift ticket prices, multi-resort lift passes and pre-season promotions set in stone. Once posted, they're easy to change or to modify as needed, or to include in discounts and ski-and-stay packages.

If skier numbers are down, resort managers can offer new promotions or discounts and add kids-ski-free programs. If skier numbers are trending up, the resorts can stay ahead of the rush by hiring additional staff, booking more ski-related events and planning a longer season.

Skiers, too have benefitted. Resort websites post far more detail than we used to get. Skip around and you'll find trail maps, daily snow levels, numbers of lifts and runs, peak elevations, incredible videos of high-risk skiers flying off the summit, and actual views of the slopes via web-cams. You can shop around, compare one resort with another or look for the best combination of prices, lodging options and airfares.

Curiously, what few anticipated was that instant internet access would inspire some bigger ski resorts to expand their mission to offer a bounty of non-ski entertainment: Valentine's Day weekends and beer festivals led to rock concerts, hot-air ballooning, professional and amateur downhill races, first-class dining at better restaurants, and a virtual cornucopia of other winter sports. In a word, a theme park.

"Oh, no, I don't ski," said fellow journalist Barbara Beckley when I asked about her winter trip to Breckinridge, in Summit County, Colo. "I went to see what it was all about, and I wound up having a wonderful trip. I snowshoed through the most beautiful snowy woods, and I had a lovely spa treatment, and I tried dog mushing and Nordic skiing. I went ice skating - they rent skates, of course, and tubing, and really, it was the best getaway."

Keystone, in particular, has embraced the theme park concept, offering or arranging most of the above, plus snow machine tours, trout fishing, horseback riding and parasailing. Many of these don't depend on good snow, or even on any snow, an asset for a big family reunion.

As for snow forecasts, some resort websites provide limited details, mostly offering past snowfalls as a guide to the future. For current, informed snow forecasts, it's best to go elsewhere.

"Take a look at www.opensnow.com," suggested former Olympic snowboarder Erica Mueller, at Crested Butte ski resort, 26 miles north of Gunnison, in Colorado. "Joel Gratz, a meteorologist and a skier created it a couple of years ago. That's where we go to look ahead. I think most resorts use it."

According to Gratz, a Boulder resident, his search for the best powder snow began as a hobby, then evolved into a website, and

eventually took off. "After testing it for a year, we went online in November 2011; so far it's a success," he says.

Gratz's team of four full-time and three part-time meteorologists crunch all kinds of publicly available data, including some from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, in Boulder. But they create their own graphics, maps and reports.

"What separates us from other sites is that we know what powder skiers like," he says. "We don't report on regional storms, but instead focus on which resorts are likely to get the next powder storm."

Open Snow is available for anyone to use (and I do) but it reserves some detailed reports for members who sign up and pay a modest fee. See it at www.opensnow.com. I also like On the Snow, a general information website, one which provides not just data like historic snow reports but a range of ski topics. See it at www.onthesnow.com.

When a day makes a difference, it's usually fate deciding. But give yourself a month, and you'll be in charge.

THE NITTY GRITTY: Find some of my favorite ski resorts at websites as follows:

Snowmass Ski Resort at www.snowmass.com, or at www.aspensnowmass.com.

Park City Mountain Resort at www.parkcitymountain.com.

Keystone Resort at www.keystonerestort.com.

Breckenridge Ski Resort at www.breckenridge.com.

Heavenly Resort at www.skiheavenly.com and at www.skilaketahoe.com.

Squaw Valley & Alpine Meadows at www.squawalpine.com.

For quality snow forecasts and reports, go to www.opensnow.com and www.onthesnow.com.

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