

Skiing the West



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Making the most of the region's wealth of winter activities

By Kim Brown Seely



I grew up in Southern California, where our school's winter break was a week long, and we'd almost always spend it skiing the West. My parents would drive our VW camper van to Mammoth, where we'd ski the spine of the Eastern Sierra; at the two-week Christmas break, sometimes we'd trek all the way north to Sun Valley. We accumulated less than 10 ski days a season—but somehow those days crystallized into fantastically vivid childhood memories.

One of the best: My sister and I, maybe 11 and 13, are standing at the lip of Mammoth's Cornice Bowl, named for the massive snow cornice formed when high winds blast its top. An icy gust flies up like a hand and socks us straight in the face. *Yikes!* We've just ridden the gondola to Mammoth's 11,053-foot summit—the highest ski pinnacle in California—and stepped out. It's our first time up. Snow squeaks beneath our boots as we nervously step into our K2s. We're both scared stiff, but the 360-degree alpine view of snowy peaks marching off into the distance is empowering. Gingerly, we drop into the spooky rutted traverses that lead into the iconic run and pick our way down. Our descent isn't pretty, but the recollection of that rite of passage—just making it to the bottom of

Sun Valley was the West's first destination ski resort when it opened in 1936.

PETER MORNING



Mammoth Mountain is known for its sunny skies and long season.

that big bowl edged by so much granite and sky—stands out in the running for most exhilarating of my life. It also leads to a lifelong love affair with winter. And that's why, as a new ski season approaches, these early memories gain fresh strength in my life. When the mountains and snow beckon, the West is the best place to answer the call.

Head out to any of our region's legend-

ary ski mountains—such as Squaw Valley, Alta/Snowbird, Crested Butte, Steamboat, Sun Valley, Telluride, Grand Targhee—and you'll still get those mammoth views from the top, the exhilaration of descending, the bracing touch of sharp, snowy air and the rewarding warmth of exertion.

As a young adult, friends and I talked about taking off on some kind of epic ski trip: a powder pilgrimage to mountains big and small. But back then we could never quite make it happen. So when I recently heard about the Mountain Collective, a new

multi-resort pass (\$409 buys two days skiing at each of 14 different ski areas, plus 50 percent off additional days at some), I thought, *cool*. Maybe it's time to make that trek to all those famous big mountains after all. You see, I eventually made my way back to Sun Valley and now spend much of the winter in Hailey, Idaho—a snowball's throw from the second famous mountain where my first big ski memories were imprinted and where you can still find clear blue skies and wide open slopes; and during midweek especially, you have the views from the top practically all to yourself.

Of course, skiing is different in many ways from the days of my youth. Better skis and boots and much spiffier lifts have been accompanied by amenities such as ski-in/ski-out lodging, terrain parks, pedestrian villages, top-notch on-slope cuisine and more. Those enhancements are all excellent, more so as I grow older. But still, for so many of us fans of winter, each mountain is totally worth skiing for its own unadorned mountainness: terrain, setting, steeps, pitch, visibility, authenticity; and most important of all, snow. (Groomed vs. ungroomed; fast vs. corn; hard vs. soft; and increasingly these days, how consistently it's made and maintained.)

Skiing is not a bargain sport, and we all want our days to be off the charts: bluebird skies, 3 inches of fresh powder overnight, just enough sun and warmth to hold the snow but let us forego the mega-down jacket. But sometimes temperatures plummet, winds growl and your fleece neck gaiter freezes into a ring of ice. Even when it's snowing so hard it feels like the bottom is falling out of the sky, it's tough to have a bad day skiing. If you're a winter lover it's exhilarating just being out there.

In an era when more and more of us crave open space, we can still step into our skis and find mountains upon mountains of soul-stirring beauty. I can, in fact, still



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Squaw Valley hosted the West's first Winter Olympics in 1960, which spurred the area's development as a major destination.

Crested Butte

By Ted Alan Stedman

TUCKED DEEP IN A HIGH VALLEY in Western Colorado surrounded by the Elk Mountains, Crested Butte comprises a tale of two places. The independent-minded town of 1,500 clings to a retro mountain culture that has roots in mining and ranching from the 1880s, but the big-league ski resort that opened its first lifts in 1962 is the reason so many of those residents are here. Crested Butte Mountain Resort's 1,547 acres of downhill territory offer reliable deep powder snow, challenging steeps and uncrowded intermediate cruisers; the skiing matches the town in the sense that both offer simple virtues perfect for those who want a ski vacation to be just that—a getaway with great skiing.

The town is a throwback to a bygone era, and historic preservation is embraced with fervor. The compact downtown of eight blocks is a low traffic, pedestrian-friendly oasis with plenty of nooks and crannies to explore on foot. The main street, Elk Avenue, seems like an Old West movie set with historic mining cabins, clapboard Victorians and weathered wooden buildings covered with rusty license plates.

But CB, as locals call it, is no backwoods outpost. There are more than 50 restaurants dishing up everything from sushi to cowboy-cut rib steaks; old-school saloons are cheek by jowl with trendy bars and artisan distilleries; New Age craft shops and night-life venues lie behind weathered facades. To get a twofold sample of local flavor, pop into The Eldo, a brewery and restaurant where



ALEX FENLON / CRESTED BUTTE MOUNTAIN RESORT

locals and visitors mingle over craft brews beneath a sign that proclaims the bar's slogan, "A Sunny Place for Shady People." Locals are marvelously friendly—testament to what happens when life is good, perhaps. Even the dogs are friendly, usually some tail-wagging mixed breed fitted with a bandana.

Three miles uphill, there's a similar easygoing dichotomy at the



NATHAN BILOW / CRESTED BUTTE MOUNTAIN RESORT

Paradise Bowl is a place where beginners swell with pride.

1,547-acre ski mountain. Sure, the mountain draws its share of ultra-advanced thrill seekers, here largely thanks to terrain suitable for adrenaline junkies: If you want a hard-core skiing experience inbounds, you'll find it on Crested Butte's signature steep chutes and expert-only bowls. This terrain is the reason for the many free-skiing and competition events that regularly visit the resort during the ski season.

But in reality, 84 percent of the mountain's 121 trails are rated beginner and intermediate. That explains all the families and other mortals who head to Paradise Bowl, popular for its wide open blue runs that enable giant, crowd-free carved turns on trails with names like Forest Queen and Ruby Chief. It's a place where beginners swell with pride.

Non-Alpine winter sports fans can easily find their outdoor adventure at the Nordic Center, at the ice skating rink (in town) and on the miles of cross-country and snowshoe trails offering wintry solitude and majestic mountain scenery. If ski convenience trumps the downtown scene, the mountain village holds slopeside lodging with numerous modern condos, hotels such as the Elevation Hotel & Spa, and remarkably diverse dining and après-ski hangouts right at the base.

True to its indie streak, pricing for lodging and lift tickets is similarly retro; both are about 10 percent less expensive than better-known major resorts. And lift lines, if there are any, might be all of two minutes—just enough to catch your breath at 9,375 feet before carving through the powder stashes that fall annually in this quirky, fun-loving town that feels like a time capsule of a vanishing era.

Alaska Airlines begins service between Los Angeles and Gunnison, Colorado (Crested Butte's gateway), December 16. For more information visit alaskaair.com/ski or call 800-ALASKAAIR. For town information, go to visitgcb.com; ski resort info is available at skicb.com.



The snow is reliably light and deep at Utah's Alta/Snowbird complex.

hop on the gondola to the top of Mammoth, pause a moment at the top of Cornice Bowl, and relive that long-ago moment that my sister and I first fell in love with winter. Let's all just hope for the monster El Niño that is predicted this year to deliver great snow. Then be ready to take a week and follow it.

Alta / Snowbird, Park City / The Canyons

Alta's appeal is all about authenticity—no gondolas, few high-speed chairs, no-nonsense skiers foregoing fashion statements and show-off runs. I've skied at Alta/Snowbird when it was insanely cold (13 degrees below at midday), and ridiculously warm (snow turning to slush as a group of us swept down Yellow Trail one spring), and once during the 2002 Winter Olympics when no one was even out in Little Cottonwood Canyon but my husband and me and a few diehards. There we met Lou, a 75-year-old stalwart who'd raised five kids while on ski patrol at Mad River Glen, Vermont (famous, along with Alta and Deer Valley, as the three areas in the country that bar snowboarders). Lou took the two of us under her wing for some reason, then talked us down some of the craziest stuff we'd ever skied together. It was a blast.

Time marches on, but Alta stays true to its roots. Stay at one of the timeless lodges that still cater to hard-core skiers, like the

Peruvian or Alta Lodge, or in Snowbird, the larger Cliff Lodge, and you'll go back to a simpler era ... Don't look for plasma screen TVs in rooms at Alta; supper is a set-time family affair.

And the big secret at Alta: Despite its hard-core character, it has a wide array of excellent intermediate territory.

Nearby, at the other end of the spectrum, Vail Resorts bought Park City ski

resort last year for \$182.5 million and has just linked it to The Canyons, creating the largest ski complex in the United States, with 7,300 acres of terrain. A new high-speed, two-way gondola will whisk skiers in eight-passenger cabins between the base of Park City's Silverlode Lift to The Canyons' Flatiron Lift. The result leapfrogs the pair past Big Sky (formerly the biggest ski resort in the country) and takes Ski Utah one step closer to its "One Wasatch" goal—adding a few more connecting lifts and turning seven resorts into the largest contiguous ski experience in North America, as in the Alps.

buzz and glamour that comes with the annual Sundance Film Festival, taking place this winter January 21–31.

Either way, whether you choose to ski big and bigger or wild and steep, one of the best things about Utah is that it's so accessible. Since it's only a 45-minute drive from Salt Lake City airport to either Park City or Alta/Snowbird, you can fly in and hit the slopes the same afternoon.



LARRY PIERCE

Steamboat's "champagne powder" is perfect for tree skiing.

Steamboat

Steamboat is known for whisper-light powder, and when storms align, tree skiing through perfectly spaced pines and aspens that make it viable for all of us. The resort's easy access from nearby



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Hayden Airport makes me wistful for the last time I skied those trees. A group of us rented a condo on the mountain and in the mornings we would all have breakfast in our long johns, then jump into our one-piece ski suits (it was the '80s, OK?) and walk a few feet to the lifts.

The best day, though, was a blizzard day when we all stayed in, playing Monopoly and grumping, until someone said: "The heck with this!" Out we went. Floating through the Twilight Glades, air sharp with the scent of pine, boughs heavy with snow, then making those

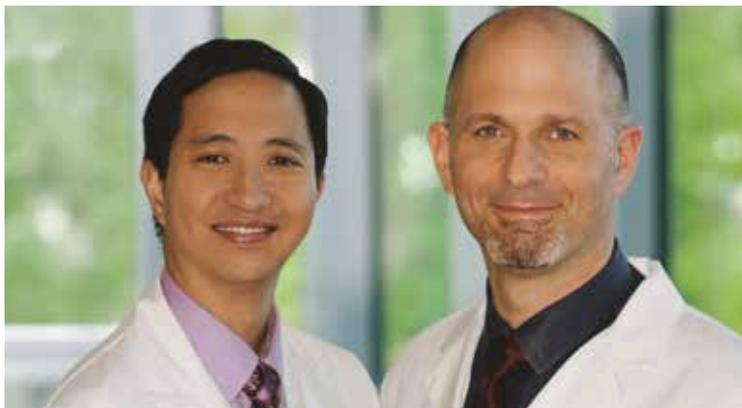
The snow was so light that even those of us who hadn't skied much powder could enjoy it that morning.

accentuated slo-mo turns through the trees, champagne powder pillowed in the glades, is something I'll never forget. The snow was so light that even those of us who hadn't skied much powder could enjoy it that morning. That's all it takes: a single day like that, a ski day you might have so easily missed, and you're hooked all over again.

Steamboat is also, like Crested Butte 100 miles south, a real historic town whose main drag, below the mountain, offers authentic delights such as the famous F.M. Light & Sons, a 110-year-old family-owned Western outfitter. "Designer wear" here consists of Carhartt, Stetson, Levi's, Pendleton and Tony Lama goods. Yes, you can take some of that right uphill to the mountain and see how denim handles ultra-light powder. Pretty well, I'd say.

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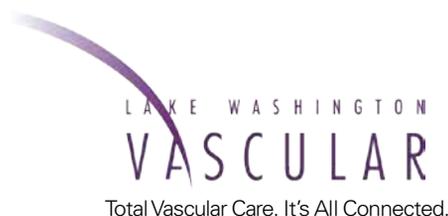
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Big Sky

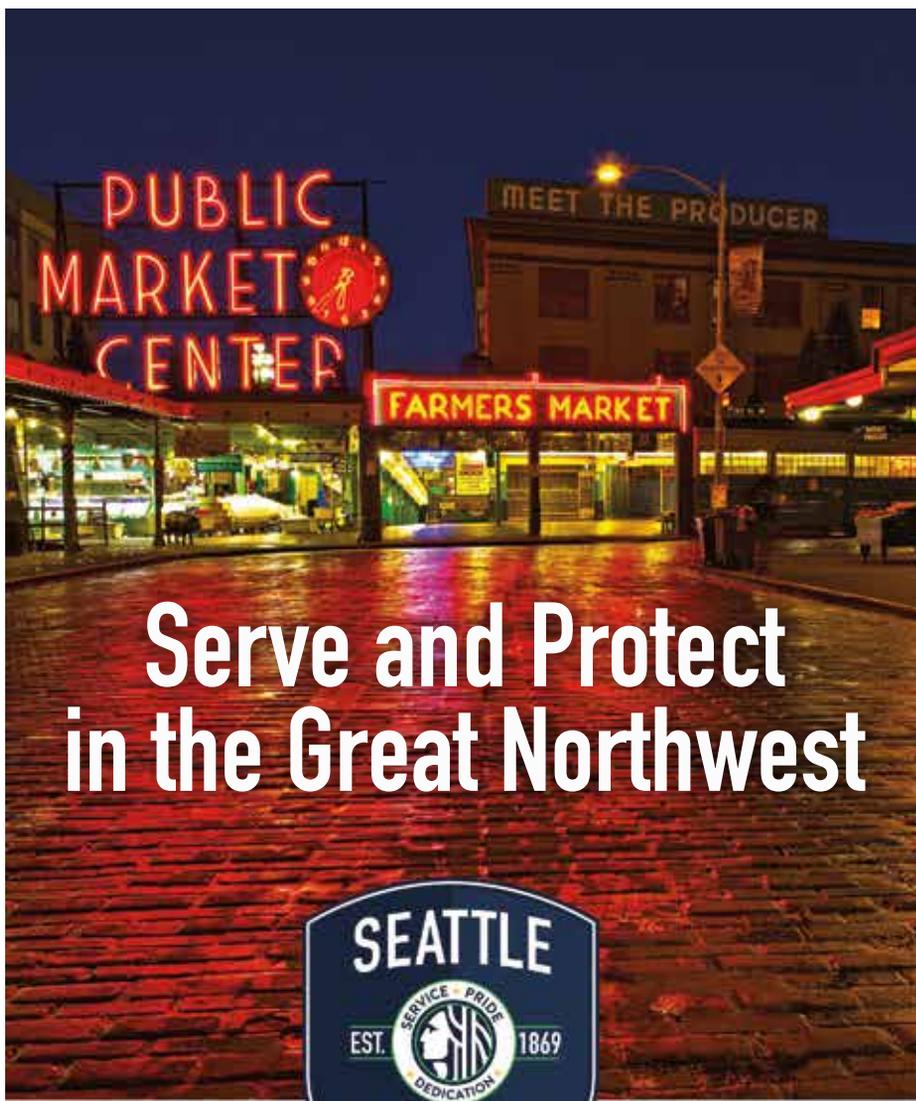
Big Sky makes an epic winter break ski trip. Once my teenage son and I flew from Seattle to Bozeman, rented a car, and wound upward through the canyons



JEFF ENGERBRETSON

Lone Mountain dominates the skyline at Montana's Big Sky Resort.

of the Gallatin Basin. Moonlight Basin and Lone Mountain had just combined operations, creating what was until this year the “biggest skiing in America,” with 5,800 acres and 4,350 vertical feet. You can rent a big-timbered small cabin a short walk from the lifts and cruise blue runs all day, or challenge your legs with laps from the top. The year we were there, Big Sky had just installed its Lone Peak Tram, built to whisk you to Lone Mountain's 11,166-foot summit and extreme treeless terrain. The inside of the tram's cabins were painted pink to have a calming effect on the passengers, but I still remember the hillside dropping away precipitously, the sound of the wind whistling past as we rose higher and higher, and a lot of anticipatory chatter. It was the spookiest thing



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my younger son and I had ever done together, but awesome too—stepping out at the top with its 360-degree views, then descending the ungroomed dome of Liberty Bowl and, in my case, finding out I could keep up with a teenager.

Sun Valley

Sun Valley has long been a refuge, a secluded gem of a place where refined and rustic have gone hand in hand. This year's big news is that the iconic Sun Valley Lodge has just revealed a major new look with 94 gorgeous updated rooms and suites, and the addition of

Fly first, then ski

Alaska Airlines provides daily service between numerous West Coast cities and many of the West's winter-sports destinations, from Alaska to New Mexico. Among the gateways are:

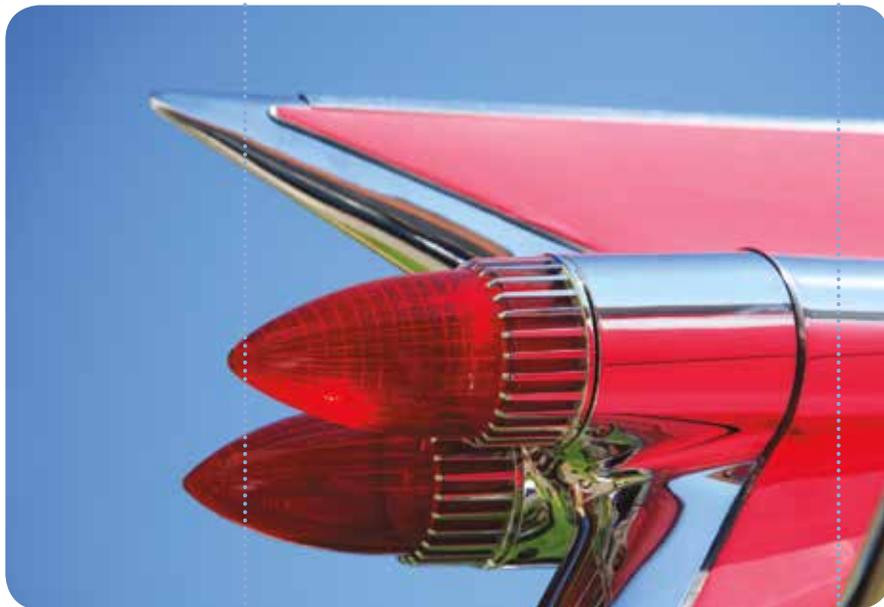
- ▶ **Albuquerque:** Sandia Peak, Santa Fe, Taos, Red River, Ski Apache and Angel Fire.
- ▶ **Anchorage:** Alyeska.
- ▶ **Denver:** Winter Park, Loveland Basin, Arapahoe Basin, Copper Mountain, Vail and Breckenridge.
- ▶ **Portland:** Timberline, Mt. Hood Meadows, Skibowl.
- ▶ **Redmond/Bend:** Mt. Bachelor.
- ▶ **Reno:** Squaw Valley, Heavenly, Sierra-at-Tahoe, Alpine Meadows, Kirkwood, Mt. Rose and Northstar.
- ▶ **Salt Lake City:** Alta, Snowbird, Park City/The Canyons, Deer Valley, Solitude and Sundance.
- ▶ **Seattle:** Crystal Mountain, Stevens Pass, Snoqualmie.
- ▶ **Vancouver:** Whistler.

For tickets or for flight information, call 800-ALASKAAIR, or go to alaskaair.com/ski.

a 20,000-foot spa. And tiny Ketchum, Idaho, is in the midst of an upscale hotel boom. A five-star \$53 million Auberge Resorts Sun Valley lodge is under construction, along with Aspen Skiing Co.'s 99-room Limelight Hotel (modeled after the company's luxurious Little Nell).

In other words, plenty of excellent

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hotel rooms await you if we get lucky and score another holiday powder day. It's an increasingly rare privilege. Even though Sun Valley has one of the largest snow-making systems in the country and immaculate grooming, some years are better than others. And in midwinter there's nothing like waking to a foot of fresh-fallen snow.

That's what happened last Christmas. Our boys (now in their 20s), my husband and I woke early, took one look outside and yelled, "Christmas can wait!" We grabbed our skis and headed for the hill, where a small group of skiers was already in line for the gondola. By the time we made it to the top the snow was glittering white and the sun was shining: a Christmas Miracle.

The fastest way into Baldy's bowls is to ski straight from the top onto Lookout Chair, which everyone calls the "Chair to Nowhere" because it winds along the ridgeline rather than heading up the mountain. That day, though, it became the Chair to Everywhere.

If skiing consists of a lifetime of standout moments, that one—epic sunny bowl skiing Christmas Day with my family—is like that long-ago first run down Mammoth's Cornice Bowl, something I'll never forget. In our case, riding a chair that feels like it's strung from the sky while listening to childlike whoops of delight as grown men and women plop into untracked powder below. It's glorious: mountains marching off into the distance, and the sky the deepest blue imaginable.

When we reach the top we all ski off together and find our own lines. I watch my boys make their turns, snow flying, and at the bottom we agree it's the best Christmas ever, the stuff winter dreams are made of. Then we ride straight back up, marveling at the twin gifts of sun and snow, and do it all over again. ▲

Kim Brown Seely divides her time between Seattle and Idaho.

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