

Utah's triple crown

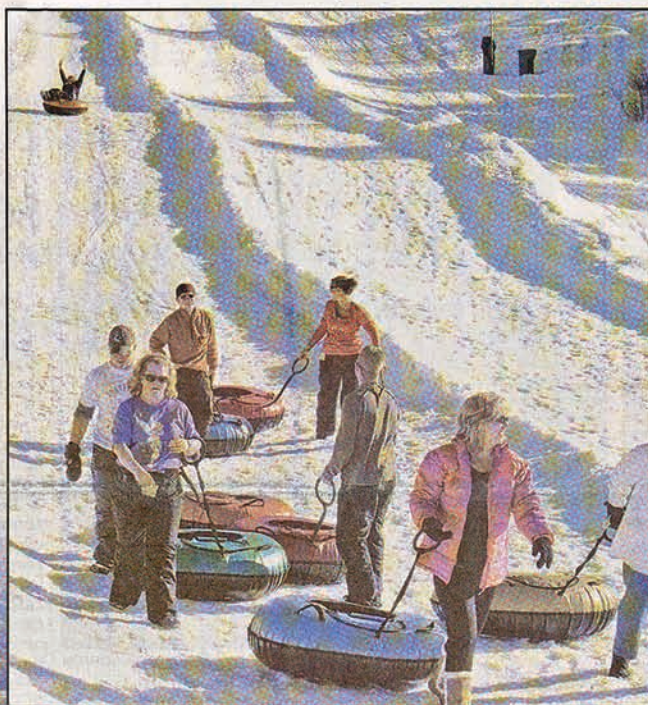
Back-to-back-to-back ski resorts, each one special, cover 8,925 acres of snowy slopes

Riders grab for the handle and the Alpine Coaster's 9-minute ride begins. The new bobsled-roller coaster is one of Park City's family attractions.



Special to the Democrat-Gazette/STEVE HAGGERTY

Gorgoza Tubing Park, 20 minutes from Park City, is a nice change of pace for skiers.



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BY ANNE Z. COOKE
AND STEVE HAGGERTY
SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

THE CANYONS, Utah — For Dillon, sitting across from us in the gondola, The Canyons was a whole new world peopled with children who came from everywhere just to be in his ski class.

"I liked the Tunnel of Fun," said the 9-year-old from Houston, describing the bumpy trail through the trees where the instructors take their classes to cut loose. "We had five boys and one girl," he said, ticking off the names. "Dean, Ivan, Bruce, Hans and me. The girl was Ally, and she was better than any of the boys."

Next was Sherri, from Atlanta, skiing with a friend on the last day of their vacation. A school administrator, she was struck by The Canyons' people-friendly design, a terraced layout that separates cars and traffic, on the lower level, from the Resort Village.

"The Cabriolet saves a lot of walking," she said, referring to the canlike baskets (nicknamed "the teacups") that carry skiers from the parking lot up to the Village, where skiers buy lift tickets and sports clothes, rent skis and check into the Grand Summit Hotel.

And the Red Pine Lodge, tucked into the forest at midmountain, well, that was brilliant. "No traffic, no cars, no noise, just us and the snow," she said.

Then there was Brian, as lean as a beanpole. Taking advantage of two inches of new snow, the Salt Lake City resident was steering out-of-town friends around the first of this former mining town's ski trio: The Canyons, Deer Valley and Park City Resort. With 8,925 acres to cover, he was in a hurry.

"I stick to the highlights," he explained — the new terrain parks, the best groomed cruisers and the photo-friendly vistas. The speedy new "six-pack" chairlifts, too. "But The Canyon's my favorite."

INTO THE CANYONS

We fell for The Canyons. Strung in a ragged crescent above Park City, the three ski resorts are part of the same range and even the same ridge, called the Wasatch Back. Yet we'd forgotten how different they are, each from the other.

The Canyons, its 3,700 acres open and uncrowded, is a bona-fide "best-kept secret." Spread over adja-

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At Park City, miles of ski trails and 22 feet of annual snowfall make a skier's perfect 10.



Utah

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cent ridges, its 152 trails flow and turn, challenging and entertaining in turn.

The heart of the resort is at Red Pine Lodge, where the gondola unloads and the ski school classes meet. A half dozen lifts start here, carrying skiers to near and distant peaks and a variety of groomed and off-piste slopes, with trails of every skill level.

Plenty of scary double-black-diamond chutes descend into Murdock Bowl and off Apex Ridge beyond. But The Canyons (it seemed to us) is a bonanza for recreational skiers, people happiest carving turns on intermediate trails.

On the lower slopes, look for the network of woodland trails that provide ski-in-ski-out access to a cluster of multimillion-dollar houses spawned by the huge real estate component that (even here, in the forest) drives most ski resort growth. Check out the huge peeled logs, the elaborate rock work and multiple chimneys as you whiz on by. Some of these babies, big enough to sleep 20 of your closest friends, are actually in the lodging rental pool.

Mainly, The Canyons is so spread out that you need a trail map just to find a restaurant. Chili and hot dogs are staples at some of the mountain's five chow lines. Pass them up for the Lookout Cabin, where you'll dine on gourmet cuisine with tablecloths, wine and 30-mile views. Or get down and jitterbug at the Saturday night Western Barbecue at the Red Pine Lodge on Saturdays. Beef, chicken and the trimmings come with a country band.

PARTY TIME AT PARK CITY

We rented a cottage in Park City, the historic 19th-century mining town, so we skied its eponymous resort first; it seemed like the thing to do. There we found a family party in progress, with skiers, shoppers and parents waiting for children, and sightseers, latte drinkers and diners coming and going.

The focus here is the Legacy Lodge, its namesake bar and grill, the Coffee Cafe, the Dining Court, the lockers and boot check, ski rental shops and sports stores. Nearby are the adult and children's ski schools, the ice-skating rink and the Alpine Coaster, which was where we met George, a 14-year-old with a buzz-cut and an opinion.

"Park City's a 9 on a scale of," he said, digging out \$10 for a



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No cheap T-shirts for sale in Park City's restored downtown, which goes for charming rather than kitschy.

Ways and means

Many nonstop flights go directly to Salt Lake City International Airport, 36 miles from Park City. Rent a car or take an airport shuttle. All Resort Express will pick you up for \$57 per person round trip: (800) 457-9457 or go to www.allresort.com.

RECOMMENDED RESTAURANTS

The Snowed Inn: Bring the kids to a horse-drawn sleigh ride to the Snowed Inn, at Park City Resort. Hearty chuck wagon dinners include prime rib, chicken or trout, with Caesar salad, Dutch oven potatoes, vegetables and chili. Adults each at \$79, and children at \$49. Call (866) 647-3310, or go to www.snowedinnsleigh.com.

The Wasatch Brew Pub, 250 Main St., Park City. Local beer and a casual atmosphere, with steaks, trout, spaghetti and chicken, with soups and salad. Call (435) 649-0900.

Fireside Dining at the Empire Canyon Lodge: Swiss Alpine and American cuisine.

Open Wednesday through Friday evenings. Reservations

third ride up the bobsled-cum-roller coaster, which opened last season. The Coaster, the newest family diversion, is so popular that it takes reservations. We showed up at 2 p.m. to risk the 9-minute, 6,000-foot-long ride, which climbs

available through Deer Valley Resort, or call (435) 645-6632.

The Western Barbecue, at (435) 615-3446, and the Lookout Cabin, at (435) 615-2892, are on the slopes at The Canyons. Call or make reservations through the resort.

SKI RENTALS

Black Tie Ski Rentals comes to your door, bringing a choice of skis, boots and poles for the entire family. All equipment is pre-selected to match your preferences and sizes, and finetuned upon delivery. If you don't like your skis, Black Tie's experts will bring you another pair to try, on short notice.

The rentals cost us a little more, but the skis were demography, and the entire visit took only an hour, saving us the trip to a rental shop. Reserve at parkcity@blacktieskis.com, or call (888) 333-4754 for information.

STAYING THERE

* If you're skiing with a group of family or friends, sharing a condo or town house can save

slowly up, then rockets down over hairpin curves at avalanche speed.

"Me, use the brake?" George asked. "Naahhh. Well, maybe just a little, the first time. But not after that."

Famous for 22 feet of an-

money. We found our cottage, in downtown Park City, through R&R rentals, which represents large and small properties in the Park City area. All have fully equipped kitchens, laundry facilities; most have Internet access and hot tubs.

SKI RESORT, DINING AND LODGING

Park City General and Resort Information: (800) 222-7275.

Park City Convention and Visitors Bureau: www.parkcityinfo.com, or call (800) 453-1360.

Salt Lake City Vacation Planning: www.ski-saltlake.com, or call (801) 534-4900.

R&R Property Management: www.parkcitylodging.com, or call (800) 348-6759.

The Canyons: www.thecanyons.com, or call (888) 226-9667.

Park City Mountain Resort: www.parkcitymountain.com, or (800) 222-7275.

Deer Valley: www.deervalley.com, or (800) 424-3337.

— Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty

nual snowfall and bright sunny days, the resort's link to history adds a special luster. Century-old structures remain in place, some with informational plaques. More startling was learning that 1,200 miles of abandoned mine shafts lie

below the surface.

The ski terrain, on 3,300 acres above the mine, includes rows of parallel runs down a single slope, especially under the King Con and Mother Load Chairlifts. Ski here if you want to keep track of the little nippers; they can ski independently and still meet you at the bottom of the chairlift.

The smartest innovation is the Personal Mountain Planner service, which creates custom route maps, available in the Legacy Lodge (or at www.mymountainplanner.com). Select a skill level, terrain type and challenge, and the program designs a map and an itemized route. Sample: "Exit right off Bonanza Lift. Take Homerun to Claimjumper. Board Silver-load Lift."

The maps also include distance traveled and suggestions for where to eat. And you can ski at your own pace.

DEER VALLEY

Luxury is Deer Valley's middle name, but courtesy comes closer. The resort upgrades its chairlifts regularly, improves grooming and restyles its restaurants. But it's the people here who lift skiing from a sport to a culture.

At the entrance, ski valets took our skis and carried them up the steps. Every lift attendant was on hand to make sure we sat down together and safely, and handed us dropped gloves and poles to carry up. Mountain hosts were on duty at the top, offering assistance. Skiing back down, we spotted and could read every sign from a distance.

Deer Valley, with 1,825 acres, is half the size of The Canyons. But the mix of beginner, intermediate and expert trails off Bald and Flagstaff mountains meant we could ski together or separately and still meet for lunch at the Royal Street Cafe in Silver Lake Lodge, located at midmountain.

By chance, Stein Erickson, the ski legend and creator of Deer Valley, happened to be at the next table. Typically gracious, he personified Deer Valley when he leaned over to offer a few words of welcome. Erickson, who will be 80 this year, likes to get out and meet people, even skiing along for a few runs. "But you have to be pretty good to keep up," said one of the instructors. "He doesn't wait."

There were few crowds during our visit, either on the slopes or in the lift lines, which we put to the daily lift-ticket limit of 6,500. But the cut-off, we learned, has nothing to do with skiing and everything to

do with eating lunch. It is, in fact, the total number of seats available at noon in the resort's on-mountain restaurants.

The other notable meal, with an Alpine flavor, was the Fireside Dining feast. Served at the Empire Canyon Lodge, this five-course marathon is the sort of extravaganza that Deer Valley does with élan. Diners, with waiters helping, served themselves from tables piled with platters and bowls, and from two open fireplaces, one melting huge rounds of raclette cheese and the other turning a fat leg of lamb on a spit.

The menu suggests a starter of raclette and potatoes, followed by stews — venison, beef and vegetable — followed by the lamb, rice, vegetables, salads, pastry and fruit. A melted chocolate fondue with fruit and cookie chunks, for dipping, comes last — or first, as you wish. Each course is paired with a choice of wines. Served Wednesday through Friday nights, the cost is \$48 for adults and \$24 for children 11 and under. Once a ski trip is enough; save it for the finale.



Special to the Democrat-Gazette/STEVE HAGGERTY

Full chairlifts ferry skiers to where the wide, groomed cruising trails spread skiers out over the mountain in Utah.