



Travel

Inside today: Your photo could win AJC's c

SPECIAL SKI SECTION

40 years of schussing and schmooz

AUTUMN OUTINGS

This is the final in a five-part series on hiking the trails of North Georgia, a perfect way to see fall color.

Sept. 26: Two short hikes with big payoffs: Three Forks Trail and Dick's Creek Falls Trail in Rabun County.

Oct. 3: Chestnut Lead Trail near Ellijay is a hot spot for biodiversity.

Oct. 10: Nature's unfinished sculpture, Raven Cliffs Falls near Helen, is a vertical pattern carved between two giant rocks.

Oct. 17: At Moccasin Creek State Park near Lake Burton, a one-mile interpretative hike for children teaches about wildlife and nature. A short hike nearby leads to beautiful falls.

Today: For a 360-degree panorama of fall splendor, Rabun Bald, Georgia's second-highest mountain, is worth the steep climb.

Read previous stories in this series online at ajc.com/travel.

Snowmass rolls out white carpet for families

By ANNE Z. COOKE
For the Journal-Constitution

Snowmass Village, Colo. — Unpack your boots and set the alarm clock. There's not much that rivals the magic of skiing first tracks on a frosty morning with the sun winking through the trees and your skis gliding over new powder like a spoon through custard.

We paused on the slope below the Elk Camp summit (elevation 11,325 feet) for a moment, partly to

re buckle our boots but mostly because the trail suddenly looked unfamiliar. We — six of us, all family — had the slopes to ourselves. We'd skied at Snowmass before, a half-dozen times on as many ski trips to the Roaring Fork Valley, in central Colorado. So why didn't we recognize the run ahead, veering away and disappearing through the trees?

I thought I'd memorized all 3,100

➤ Please see **RESORT, K8**



Two skiers catch their breath at the highest point of Snowmass, the Cirque — elevation 12,510 feet.

STEVE HAGGARTY / ColorWorld

SPECIAL SKI SECTION

Resort: Snowmass is family-friendly for full range of ages and skill levels

► Continued from K1

acres. We'd skied most of the trails, picked out our favorites — Garrett Gulch, Whispering Jesse and Mick's Gully — and discovered by happy trial and anxious error the killers: most of the double-black diamond steeps, for experts only, in the Hanging Valley.

But this one was new — or was it? And those ski chalets half-hidden in the trees, I hadn't seen them before. Was Snowmass really so big we'd never see it all?

To be honest, Snowmass isn't the biggest ski resort in North America or even the Rocky Mountains. From a distance, it doesn't look especially spectacular. When first-timers turn off the highway and start up the hill, they're inclined to crane their necks, wondering where the slopes are. Unlike Ajax Mountain, which dominates Aspen, the 12,510-foot Cirque doesn't immediately catch your eye.

Looks aren't the only difference, said Susan Darch, a spokeswoman for Aspen Skiing Co., owner of Snowmass, Aspen, Buttermilk and Aspen Highlands. Generations of kids have grown up at Snowmass, skiing with their parents, then bringing their own children.

"It's a mountain for a growing family," she said. "Kids start out in the child care center and go on to the kids' ski school. There are cruisers for intermediates and incredible black-diamond terrain for experts. For retirees, we've got groomers that can't be beat."

To be honest, part of it is dumb luck, an accident of geography. Snowmass isn't a single peak but a range with four snowcapped summits ranging from 11,000 to 12,500 feet. You can ski from Sam's Knob to Big Burn and from High Alpine to Elk Camp and never retrace your tracks. There's everything from steep and tree skiing to narrow valleys, rolling hills, above treeline descents, dogleg bump runs and easy run-outs.

Your lodging, moreover, alters your impressions. Previously we rented a condominium on the Fanny Hill run, across from the Snowmass Village Mall. Dozens of buildings crowd together on the hill, but the neighborhood is chiefly residential.

Last year we moved over to the Village side, to the Snowmass Mountain Chalet, a homey, 64-room inn behind the Children's Ski School. The family-owned chalet runs like a B&B, with a hot breakfast and lunch included, served at tables for eight. We met new people each morning, and again before dinner, in the lounge, a big room with open beams, brick trim, a fireplace, leather sofas and sturdy coffee tables.

Since the rooms don't have kitchens, we ate out for dinner, usually at one of the casual cafes in the Village Mall, five minutes away. And it was a relief not to buy groceries or wash dishes. The chalet also has an outdoor swimming pool, ski storage and a self-serve coffee and cocoa stand, offered around the clock.



When ski school ends at 3 p.m., it's time to pick up the kids and head out for a family run. Photos by STEVE HAGGARTY / ColorWorld

There were other changes afoot, as well. The new, advanced-level terrain park below Velvet Falls is a challenge, and the Pipeline terrain park is also bigger. The pokey old Campground chairlift hasn't been replaced, but it has been speeded up, to an 8½-minute ride, with a new cable and engine. The chairs are new, too. Our expert skiers, sons Paul and Steve, are in the target group for the new killer terrain — double-black diamond screamers — in the Hanging Valley Wall.

Why do we keep planning multifamily vacations at Snowmass? It's hard to beat that light white powder, the result of low humidity. And the huge stock of ski-in, ski-out lodging, of varying prices and types, sweetens the pot.

But comfort has something to do with it, too. Like chicken soup, a lot of the pleasure is anticipating the familiar. For the kids, the ski school is like day camp with small groups led by young, hip instructors who like children. The atmosphere is easygoing, and learning is disguised as adventure games. It's an approach that starts in Snow Cubs, where the toddlers make snowmen and get familiar with ski boots by clumping around in them.

After Snow Cubs, our kids moved into Big Burn Bears (3½ to 4 years), then graduated to Grizzlies (ages 5-6), across Fanny Hill near the big kids. At age 7, they moved into the preteen ski school (ages 7-12) and then to the teen lessons.

No wonder the school is so popular. The routine is familiar, the kids know the setup and they see the same instructors every year. On a cold Monday morning with a little hand holding yours, it sounds good to hear, "Well, hi there, Dillon (or Paul, Dagny, Diane, Will or Katie). I remember you from last year."

Ski school ends at 3 p.m., so there's time to ski one last run with the kids. Our latest fave is Sneaky's, an intermediate run from the Big Burn

Summit, and down to Banzai and Coney Glade. Or we go tubing, something even Grandma can be persuaded to do. We also spend a day at Buttermilk Ski area next door, taking the shuttle back and forth and sending our skis and poles over courtesy of Snowmass' ski-check transfer service.

A tradition for the grown-ups is a night out in Aspen, with dinner in a first-class restaurant. Even if you can't afford that \$15,000 antique gong, the shops are open late and window shopping is a show in itself. Horse-drawn carriages clip-clop past, offering rides around town, and thousands of tiny white lights threaded through parkway tree branches create a sense of magic.

The highlight of the week is dinner at the Lynn Britt Cabin, a log cabin uphill at Snowmass. The cabin serves one-price, family-style dinners with wine and a toe-tapping evening of first-class bluegrass music. John Livingston and Kevin Glenn, the heart and soul of the Fryling Pan Bluegrass Band, are mighty fine pickers on banjo and guitar.

You meet at Snowmass Village at 5:30 p.m., climb into big sleighs pulled by snowcats, bundle up under piles of blankets and chug uphill to the cabin, perched on a small meadow near Hal's Hollow. Twinkling stars light the return trip downhill.

People ask about the weather in Snowmass, but I've had no luck second-guessing Mother Nature. I can say there's always snow by Christmas, January is the coldest month and mid-February through late March (peak season) are primo. You can ski in shorts in April, but south-facing runs get mushy by noon.

That's the time to ski first tracks, when the air is cold, the runs are freshly groomed, the first rays of the sun glint over the mountains and there's nobody out but you. For us, it's a tradition.



A favorite ski route for repeat visitors to Snowmass is Sneaky's, an intermediate run from Big Burn Summit, with Sam's Knob restaurant in the background.

IF YOU GO

Getting there

► Expect to pay about \$500 round trip for airfare to Aspen, Colo. Packages that include air, lodging and ski-lift tickets likely will save you money.

About Snowmass

► Snowmass makes snow on trails that melt the soonest. The snow guns cover only 180 acres of trails, but that's plenty. One-day lift tickets purchased at the ticket window are \$74 for adults, \$67 for teens, \$45 for preteens and free for ages 6 and under. Tube Town tickets are \$15 per person.

► To be fair, prices are soaring everywhere. It's always cheapest to buy a multiday pass from the resort Web site. Prices are cheapest during December and January (except the holidays) and higher during February and March. A five-day adult pass, good for any 10-day period, is \$345. Ages 70 and older can buy a pass good every day all season for \$199. Snowmass Village, 1-800-525-6200 (the resort), 1-800-262-7736 (central reservations), 1-800-923-1227 (the ski school); www.aspensnowmass.com.

► The other strategy is to buy a ski package with one price for



lodging, lift tickets and airfare. Look for these in newspaper travel and sports sections, ski magazines, on the Internet and at Snowmass Central Reservations.

► Evenings at the Lynn Britt Cabin are \$75 for adults and \$45 for ages 3-11. Seating is limited. Make reservations at 970-923-0460.

Information

► Aspen Chamber Resort Association, 970-925-1940, www.aspenchamber.org