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Ski resorts broaden their offerings for new skiers

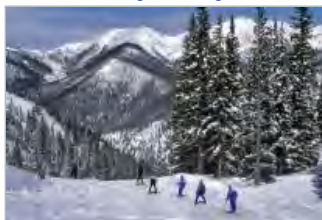
If you're just a beginner, you can learn and have fun on the snowy slopes

By ANNE Z. COOKE, STEVE HAGGERTY
For the Atlanta Journal-Constitution
Sunday, October 19, 2008

Here's a secret about skiing: With today's groomed slopes, shorter skis designed for turning, and stiff, ankle-supporting boots, almost anyone can do it, even on the first day out.

In fact, so many skiers now rate themselves as intermediates that most ski resorts are moving resources into more moderate slopes and better recreational programs. At the top of the list are improved grooming, expanded ski schools, more adult teaching clinics and first-class on-mountain restaurants. Here are five recommended resorts.

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STEVE HAGGERTY/Special

Winter Park, on the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado, has challenging runs; but it emphasizes its ski schools.

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The young children's program at the Buttermilk Ski Area is the best in the area around Aspen, Colo.

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Buttermilk Ski Area Aspen, Colo.

Buttermilk, three miles from its sister resort, Aspen Mountain, is an intermediate skier's dream, with runs that rank among Colorado's broadest, most velvety smooth. Even Buttermilk's half-dozen expert-only trails are more exciting than they are terrifying.

Most of Buttermilk's 470 skiable acres are spread over rolling hills and meadows, forested with spruce and aspen groves, with moderate slopes that climb to the 9,900-foot summit. Perfect for beginners and intermediates, these runs are broad and winding, with easy trails winding through the glades, just a few ungroomed pitches and some starter bumps. The longest run is a lovely 3-mile sweep from the summit to the base, at 7,870 feet.

Skier services are equal to Aspen's, including an on-mountain concierge station, the Cliffside and Bumps restaurants on the mountain, and overnight ski check that includes free transportation to Aspen and Snowmass resorts. Buttermilk's young children's program is the best in the area. The terrain park for boarders moves from easy to moderately challenging rails and jumps.

The base area is small but complete, with a large main lodge, indoor and outdoor dining, and one ski-in, ski-out hotel, the Inn at Aspen. The free ski shuttle connects you with Aspen, 10 minutes away, and Snowmass, about 20 minutes away. Call Buttermilk at 800-525-6200 or visit www.aspensnowmass.com.

Dollar Mountain Sun Valley, Idaho

Beginners heading for Sun Valley, in central Idaho, shouldn't start on Mount Baldy, where most of the trails go straight down the fall line. Spend the first couple of days skiing on Dollar Mountain next door, where the resort started in 1936. The easiest, best-groomed beginning and intermediate runs are here, along with acres of ungroomed snowfields, a perfect place to practice skiing on powder.

Dollar Mountain, 6,638 feet in elevation, has three double chairs and a beginner lift on the front side, close to the Dollar Cabin base area. For more variety, skiers can take the triple chair on the far side up to the 6,678-foot Elkhorn summit. Several cross-over trails, including "Sepp's Bowl" and "Shepherdher," connect the two areas.

Dollar is much less crowded than Baldy, too, for a safer ski experience. But it's close enough to Baldy to make it easy to meet friends who are better skiers. For parents skiing with kids, it's the only place to start. Once you feel comfortable here, head to Baldy to ski Upper and Lower College runs.

The kids' ski school and adult beginning and intermediate lessons meet at the Dollar Cabin, served by Sun Valley's free ski shuttles. There's a ski rental shop, restaurant and outdoor deck at the base. Call 800-786-8259 or visit www.sunvalley.com.

Mount SnowWest Dover, Vt.

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Buttermilk Ski Area in Aspen, Colo., with its gently rolling terrain, is a terrific place for intermediate skiers.

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If you're looking for easy skiing, stay away from Mount Snow's steep North Face. The trails on this mountain, in Southern Vermont, are rated for experts. But every rule has to have an exception. Four-fifths of this resort's 588 skiable acres are gentle beginner trails (green) or shorter, moderate intermediate trails (blue). Beginner skiers can get their ski legs at the Perfect Turn Discovery Center, or they can head straight for the main slopes or even the top of the mountain at 3,600 feet.

Mount Snow used to be a typical Eastern ski resort, whose narrow trails zigzagged from top to bottom through a mixed evergreen and deciduous forest. Nowadays those trails have been recut to appeal to recreational skiers, making them wider and more moderate. Improved snowmaking and grooming has also made a difference, especially important in Vermont where increased humidity makes the snow crusty or icy.

Four easy green trails, all with snowmaking, are Long John and Deer Run, connecting the summit with the base area, and Low Traverse and Seasons Pass. Somerset Road is a long sloping horizontal green run; Link, a blue trail, is a little more demanding. Snowdance and Ridge Run are kept white with snowmaking.

Lodging ranges from hotels to inns and B&Bs. At the base area, the Grand Summit Hotel, on the slopes, puts skiers close to restaurants, rentals, shopping and the main lodge. Call 800-245-7669 or visit www.mountsnow.com.

Northstar at Tahoe Truckee, Calif.

The builders of Northstar ski resort, northwest of Lake Tahoe, had families in mind when they chose a bowl-shaped valley halfway up a mountain for the main ski arena, then connected it to the village in the valley below. The layout made it easy for parents and kids to ski together or separately and still keep track of each other.

Since then, the resort has grown to 2,500 acres, with a new base village, challenging trails on adjacent mountains and a community of vacation homes and condominiums. The improvements, completed last year, make Northstar a major player in the Lake Tahoe area.

Ski central is still at the Lodge at Big Springs, at the top of the Gondola, where the Vista, Arrow and Pioneer lifts meet. The snowboard park, the children's ski school and the demo rental shops are in this area. Free daily ski lessons for intermediates also meet here, at the top of the Comstock Express Lift. The expert terrain is on the back side of Mount Pluto, served by the Backside Express Quad Chair, and on the far side of Lookout Mountain.

The ticket office, ski rental shop, child care center, sports shops, offices and restaurants are in Northstar Village. The resort also has an exercise and fitness center with a swimming pool, hot tubs and locker rooms, available for use by skiers staying at Northstar. Call 800-466-6784 or visit www.skinorthstar.com.

Winter ParkFrasier, Colo.

Winter Park, in the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains west of Denver, has some of Colorado's most challenging runs. But the emphasis on adults' and children's ski schools is as important today as it was in 1940, when the resort was founded.

Beginning skiers can spend all day at Discovery Park, skiing on nine separate trails and eating lunch at the Snoasis Lodge. But the genius of the park is its location, close to the superlong green (beginning) runs on the back side of Winter Park Mountain and to Vasquez Ridge just beyond. Even better, the Outrigger triple chairlift goes directly up from Snoasis, dropping skiers off at the top of Winter Park Mountain, elevation 10,700 feet, where dozens of green (beginner) and blue (intermediate) runs begin.

Beginners can stick to the easy runs off Pioneer Express and High Lonesome Express. Or they can move up a notch to the adjacent intermediate slopes. The best thing about Winter Park's network of runs is that families can stay together, experts skiing the black diamond runs and beginners skiing adjacent easy slopes, close enough to meet and ride up the same chairlifts. Call 800-729-5813; visit www.skiwinterpark.com.

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