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Park City resorts: Triplets that are far from identical

By Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty Cox News Service

PARK CITY, Utah - For Dillon Cook, sitting across from us in the gondola, the Canyons was a whole new world filled with kids who came from everywhere just to be in ski class with him.

"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. "The girl . . . was better than any of the boys."

Sherri Williams from Atlanta, on the last day of her vacation, noticed the Canyons' people-friendly design - a terraced layout that separates cars on the lower level from the Resort Village at midlevel, a pedestrian zone with the ticket office, rental shops, restaurants and the Grand Summit Hotel.

"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. And tucking Red Pine Lodge 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 Price, wiry and tan. 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, Park City Mountain Resort, and Deer Valley. 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."

We fell for the Canyons, too. 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 the resorts are quite different.

The Canyons

Its 3,700 acres are open and uncrowded, making it a best-kept secret. Spread over adjacent ridges, the resort's 152 trails flow and turn, challenging and entertaining in turn.

The heart of the resort is Red Pine Lodge, where the gondola unloads and ski school meets. A half-dozen lifts climb from there to near and distant peaks, each one connecting skiers with a new set of slopes.

Plenty of expert-only chutes, most rated double-black-diamond, plunge into Murdock Bowl and off Apex Ridge. But the Canyons really seems to be a bonanza for intermediate recreational skiers, who are happiest carving turns on groomed trails.

On the lower slopes, look for a tangle of woodland trails providing ski-in, ski-out access to a cluster of multimillion-dollar homes. Spawned by the real-estate greed that drives most contemporary resort development, some of these places, big enough to sleep 20 of your closest friends, are actually in the rental pool.

The Canyons is so spacious and 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 Lookout Cabin, where you'll dine on gourmet cuisine, with tablecloths, wine and 30-mile views. Or get down and jitterbug on Saturdays at Western Barbecue at Red Pine Lodge. Beef, chicken and the trimmings come with a live country band.

Park City

We rented a cottage here, so we skied its eponymous resort first. The base area - bustling with skiers, window shoppers, kids waiting for their



Deer Valley

That's snow, not sand, at McHenry's "Beach," where skiers at Deer Valley Resort soak up rays on warm days. More images

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parents, and newcomers renting skis - felt like a block party in progress.

The adult and children's ski schools meet on the snow across the square, and beyond is the Alpine Coaster, where we bumped into George, a 14-year-old local boy with a buzz cut.

"Park City's a nine on a scale of 10," he said, digging out money for a third ride on the over-snow roller coaster that opened last season.

The coaster, Park City resort's newest family diversion, is so hot that the ride was forced to take reservations. We showed up at 2 p.m. to risk the nine-minute ride in the bobsled-shaped car, which climbs slowly up a 6,000-foot-long track and rockets down around hairpin curves at avalanche speed.

With Park City's 3,300 skiable acres, you can keep moving all day and never ski the same run twice. But if you want to ski with the little ones, head for the slopes under the King Con and Motherlode chairlifts. Parallel runs, most intermediate but a few rated for experts, make it easy for parents and kids to split up and still meet at the bottom of the chairlift.

You can design a route to suit everyone, using the resort's Personal Mountain Planner. This computer program creates custom routes depending on your skill level, desired terrain and a challenge quotient. The information desk in the Legacy Lodge will do it for you, or you can do it at home, at www.mymountainplanner.com. For example: "Exit right off Bonanza lift. Take Homerun to Claimjumper. Board Silverlode lift."

The resort's real claim to fame - its link to Park City's early history - lends a genuine sense of authenticity. Century-old structures, restored or stabilized, have been left in place on the mountain, many next to the ski runs. More than 1,200 miles of abandoned mining shafts are still there, too, a reminder that skiing is a late arrival.

Deer Valley Resort

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

At the entrance, valets took our skis and carried them up the steps. Every lift attendant made sure we sat together safely, and handed us dropped gloves and poles. Mountain hosts were on duty at the top, offering assistance. The trails were well-marked, and the signs were easy to read from a distance.

With 1,825 acres, Deer Valley 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 at midmountain for lunch at the Royal Street Cafe. With a limit of 6,500 lift tickets sold daily, there were few crowds, either on the slopes or in the lift lines. But the cap 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.

Former Olympic gold medalist Stein Eriksen, a legend at Deer Valley, happened to be at the next table. Typically gracious, he leaned over to offer a few words of welcome. Eriksen, who will be 80 this year, likes to get out and meet people, even skiing along for a few runs.

Who knows? You could be lucky.

Hitting Park City's Slopes

Delta flies nonstop to **Salt Lake City International Airport** from **Philadelphia International Airport**. The lowest recent fare was about \$319.

The airport is 36 miles from **Park City**. Rent a car or take an airport shuttle. All Resort Express will pick you up, for \$34 per person. 1-800-457-9457, www.allresort.com.

If you get an early flight, you can get a free day of skiing at one of the three Park City resorts, through **QuickSTART**. Present your boarding pass, a voucher from www.parkcityinfo.com (register and print it out ahead of time) and an out-of-state photo ID at any ticket window at the Canyons, Park City or Deer Valley ski area. Available through Dec. 24, Jan. 2-Feb. 14, and March 24 till the end of the season.

Places to stay

If you're skiing with a group of family or friends, sharing a condo or townhouse can save money. We found our cottage, in downtown Park City, through R&R Properties. Properties come with fully equipped kitchens and laundry facilities; most have Internet access and hot tubs. 1-800-348-6759; www.parkcitylodging.com

Places to eat

The Snowed Inn

Park City Resort

1-866-647-3310

www.snowedinnleigh.com

Bring the kids for a horse-drawn sleigh ride. Chow-line chuck wagon dinners include roast beef, chicken or trout, with Caesar salad, Dutch oven potatoes, vegetables and chili. Adults, \$79, children, \$49.

Wasatch Brew Pub

250 Main St., Park City

435-649-0900

www.wasatchbeers.com

Local beer and a casual atmosphere. Steaks, trout, spaghetti and chicken, and soups and salad.

Fireside Dining

at Empire Canyon Lodge

435-645-6632

www.deervalley.com/dining_shopping/fireside_dining.html

Swiss Alpine and American cuisine served Wednesday through Friday evenings. Reservations available through **Deer Valley Resort**.

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

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More information

Park City Convention and Visitors Bureau

1-800-453-1360

www.parkcityinfo.com

Salt Lake City

Vacation Planning

1-800-541-4955 www.ski-saltlake.com

The Canyons www.thecanyons.com 1-888-226-9667

Park City Mountain Resort 1-800-222-7275 www.parkcitymountain.com

Deer Valley

1-800-424-3337

www.deervalley.com

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