

# Travel

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SPECIAL SKIING SECTION



STEVE HAGGERTY PHOTO

Snowmass visitors take a break on Sneaky's run with Sam's Knob restaurant in the background.

## High, wide and handsome

Colorado's **Snowmass** will remember you, even if you can't remember it

By ANNE Z. COOKE  
NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

**U**npack your boots and set the alarm clock. There's not much that rivals the magic of skiing "first tracks" on a frosty March 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 rebuckle our boots but mostly because the trail suddenly looked unfamiliar. We — six of us, all family — had the slopes to ourselves, but that wasn't it.

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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 I recognize the run ahead, veering away and disappearing through the trees? I thought I'd memorized the place, stored all 3,100 acres in read-only memory. 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 steps, 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 come to you. You go to it.

"Each of our ski mountains is unique," agreed Susan Darch, a spokeswoman for Aspen Skiing Company, owner of Snowmass, Aspen, Buttermilk and Aspen High-



From the summit of the Elk Camp lift, you can almost touch the Maroon Bells.



Please see **COLORADO** on **D16**

It's 3 p.m. — time to pick up the kids from ski class.

# Snowmass: Familiarity breeds return visits

## ■ COLORADO

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lands. But looks aren't the only difference, she said. 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 high. 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.

And there are always some changes from one year to the next. The new, advanced-level terrain park below Velvet Falls is a challenge, and the Pipeline terrain park is also bigger.

I'm sorry to report that the pokey old Campground Chair hasn't been replaced, but it has been speeded up, to an 8.5-minute ride, with a new cable and engine. The chairs are new, too. Our expert skiers, sons Paul and Steve, will like the new killer terrain — double-black diamond screamers — in the Hanging Valley Wall.

Why do we keep planning multi-family vacations at Snowmass? It's hard to beat that light white powder, the result of low humidity. 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 kids. 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),



TOM DE WALT / NEWS-PRESS

## IF YOU GO

**Getting there:** Fly directly to the Aspen Airport, a 10-minute shuttle ride to Snowmass, or into Eagle, a 90-minute drive away. Shuttle service and rental cars are available. Or fly into Denver and on to Aspen or Eagle.

**Staying:** Standard double rooms at the Snowmass Mountain Chalet range from \$109 to \$279. Call (800) 843-1579, or check [www.mountainchalet.com](http://www.mountainchalet.com). For other options, call Central Reservations at (800) 262-7736.

Snowmass makes snow on trails that melt soonest. The snow guns cover only 180 acres of trails, but that's plenty. If the resort needed more guns, they'd spend the money in a minute. Your money, actually. One-day lift tickets bought at the ticket window are \$74 for adults, \$67 for teens, \$45 for kids and free for ages 6 and under. Instead, buy a multi-day pass from the resort's Web

site ([www.aspensnowmass.com](http://www.aspensnowmass.com)). Prices are lowest in December and January (excepting holidays) and higher during February and March. A five-day adult pass, good for any 10-day period, is \$345. Seniors 70 and over can buy a pass good every day all season for \$199.

The best strategy is to buy a ski package with one price for lodging, lift tickets and airfare. Find them in ski magazines, newspaper travel and sports sections, on the Internet and at Snowmass Central Reservations. Evenings at the Lynn Britt Cabin are \$70 for adults and \$45 for kids. Seating is limited. Make reservations at (970) 923-0460. Tickets for Tube Town, the family-fun tubing hill open daily from 1 to 8 p.m., cost \$15 per person.

The Aspen-Snowmass main number is (800) 625-6200. For lift tickets and ski school reservations, call (800) 923-1227.

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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 Butter-milk Ski area next door, taking the ski 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 stay open later and

window shopping is a show by itself. Horse-drawn carriages clip-clip 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 Frying 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 up hill to the cabin, perched on a small meadow near Hal's Hollow. Twinkling stars light the return trip downhill.

We usually rent a condominium when we ski, and the family shares the cost and cooking. But last year we stayed in the Snowmass Mountain Chalet, a low-key 64-room inn with a primo location, on the snow behind the Children's Ski School, in the Village Mall.

Family-owned, the Chalet runs on the European style, with a hot breakfast and light lunch included, served at tables for eight. We met new people each morning, and before dinner in the lounge, a spacious living room with wood beams, brick trim, a fireplace and groups of leather sofas and sturdy coffee tables.

The rooms didn't have kitchens so we ate dinner out, trying all the cafes and restaurants in the Snowmass Village Mall. 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.

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.

Anne Z. Cooke is a Marina del Rey-based freelance writer.