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A flurry of activity

COLORADO | Keystone is the family friendly option among Vail's ski resorts

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BY ANNE Z. COOKE AND STEVE HAGGERTY

KEYSTONE RESORT, Colo. — As the clouds settled over 11,640-foot Dercum Mountain at Keystone Resort, some skiers already had quit for the day.

But at the tubing hill on Adventure Point, kids and adults were still lining up for another ride.

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Keystone Resort is one of Colorado's most popular family playgrounds.

(Courtesy)

"C'mon Dad, it's light enough to go again," said Katie Kitay, 13, ignoring the storm that had started with a few drifting snowflakes but was now falling steadily.

Getting a thumbs up from her dad, Katie and her brother Will gleefully dragged their inner tubes back to the launch point.

Has skiing lost its luster, outshone by tubing and snowboarding?

Not for me, it hasn't. Here at one of Colorado's most popular family playgrounds, winter vacations still

mean the freedom of swooping downhill on freshly groomed slopes, the thrill of carving new powder and the promise of big-sky scenery.

Now in its 38th year, Keystone seems to defy age, staying young with a popular and progressive kids' ski school, state-of-the-art grooming, 1,600 rental condos and annual tweaks to already ample skier facilities. One of the Vail group of ski resorts — the "product line" includes tony Vail, exclusive Beaver Creek, earthy Breckenridge and big-dog Heavenly (in California) — Keystone is the homey one, with lodging and lift tickets designed and priced for friends and families.

New this year is a hardware hunk guaranteed to please skiers: a new, faster River Run Gondola, with spacious eight-passenger cabins and mid-mountain loading and unloading stations. Debuting last month, the gondola not only replaced the former six-seater, but it is longer, with the base loading station in the River Run Village. Hop aboard — with your skis or snowboard — for the 12-minute ride up Dercum Mountain.

This resort, on my Top 10 list, has 151 trails, 20 lifts, three peaks and five magnificent above-timberline bowls.

About those non-skiers in your family — your husband (or wife), your sister, my sister definitely. Not a problem. I joined our kids on the tubing hill for a lark. But it only took one wild ride to see what I'd been missing. Steep and long, the tubing hill is shaped into eight steep troughs formed by slick, hard-packed snow.



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CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

You sit on what looks like a mutant doughnut, grab two of the four handles and pray. Once the tube operator shoves you over the edge, there's no stopping the thing until it finally slows down and bumps to a stop. Trust me, you need no skills other than an iron grip and the lung power to scream. When the Kitay family went, they formed a "train," grabbing each other's handles and roaring downhill together.

Another favorite are the snow bikes for rent at Adventure Point. These converted bicycle frames sit on short skis. You wear even shorter skis and use your feet and the handle bars to carve turns. It's fun, simple and, they say, improves your skiing.

The new RockResorts Spa in Keystone Lodge is a 10,000-square-foot "green" facility that relies on natural light and wind-generated power. The spa has 10 treatment rooms, offers a variety of massages and wraps, and uses organic products.

If shopping is your thing, River Run Village is a good place to check out. Wake up with coffee at Starbucks, then wander through the shops for dressy winter clothes, sports gear, crafts, T-shirts and jewelry. Or ride up the River Run Gondola and watch football on the screen at Killian's Bar in the Summit House.

Outdoor winter sports include ice skating at Lakeside Village and cross-country skiing at the Nordic Ski Center a mile from Lakeside Village. The center, which rents skis and snowshoes, grooms 10 miles of level trails and maintains more than 30 miles of marked, "packed" trails in the White River National Forest. For fly fishing, a year-round sport here, contact local outfitters.

To see where extreme skiers brave the steep (without having to do it yourself), take a snow cat ride into one of Keystone's five above-timberline bowls, either on 11,660-foot North Peak or the 11,980-foot Outback. Sightseers get unbelievable views; the skiers get a lift to the steep where chair lifts don't go.

What some skiers miss at Keystone is that old-fashioned look of historic ski towns like Telluride, Aspen and Park City, all 19th century mining camps. But purpose-built resorts like Keystone have other benefits. Designed for skiing, they're not hampered by historic restrictions or a lack of growing room. Keystone's current four-year redevelopment plan for the Mountain House base incorporates state-of-the-art design and technology.

What the resort could really use are more of the free ski shuttle buses that loop between the River Run Base and the Mountain House Base. In theory, you don't need to rent a car. But our family found that the buses never seemed to be there when we needed them. Getting the kids ready for ski school and marched out to the bus stop a block away was bad enough. When the buses were late, so were the kids.

Then there was the problem of shopping for food. When you rent a condo, you need groceries. But Keystone's convenience store sold mostly snack items. The upside was that we ate out often, which was why we sampled Keystone's better restaurants. The headliners were the two award-winning restaurants at the top of North Peak (reservations required at 800-354-4FUN). The Alpenglow Stube, a superb restaurant with a top ten rating from Zagat, served continental cuisine on white tablecloths in an old world chalet atmosphere. It's not recommended for kids.

In contrast, Der Fondue Chessel, a colorful medieval banquet, was one of those rare restaurants that appeals equally to adults and kids alike. Diners sitting at long tables are entertained by a rollicking oom-pah band while waiters and waitresses in alpine costumes rush around taking drink orders and delivering huge trays of food.

Heaping platters of thick grilled steaks, barbecued chicken, grilled fish and roasted vegetables filled our table, crowded next to pots of hot Swiss raclette and bubbling fondue, served with hunks of bread and sliced roast potatoes. The food was delicious, the dress casual and the atmosphere so boisterous that even howling babies could hardly be heard.

Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty are California-based free-lance writers.

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