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Ski guide | How to choose among eight great Colorado resorts

By ANNE Z. COOKE
Special to The Star

Colorado boasts so many ski resorts, it's hard to choose where to go.

So we've narrowed the list for you. Presenting: Eight Great Colorado Ski Areas, in alphabetical order. Which one works for you?

A-Basin: Untamed

Looking for those deep powder glades and 55-degree steeps? Go for it at Arapahoe Basin, five miles from Keystone Resort.

Sporting North America's highest marked ski trails (the summit is at 13,050 feet), 63-year-old Arapahoe Basin belongs to the locals, powder hounds who'll tell you that skiing isn't a sport; it's all about being out there, getting spiritual in the elements, pushing your limits.

A-Basin is surprisingly small — 900 skiable acres straddling the Continental Divide — but size doesn't matter to real ski mavericks. Neither does the fact that there are only two places to eat. Lunch on this mountain is just an intermission between downhill runs.

As the Web site boasts, there are "no lodges, no condos and no hotels" at the base. Most people stay at Keystone; most, in fact, ski both resorts on the same trip.

•**Getting there:** Fly to Denver and take a ski shuttle, or drive 95 minutes west to Arapahoe, near Dillon.

•**Contact:** www.arapahoebasin.com or 1-888-272-7246.

Aspen: So posh

Tempted by bright lights and good eats? How about jazz clubs, celebrity bars and inspired cuisine? If après-ski nightlife puts the wax on your skis, chill out at Aspen.

The West's most iconic ski area, Aspen is more than a 673-acre mountain where half the trails are rated for experts, half for intermediates. Aspen is where on-mountain dining caters to the rich and famous, and the top-of-the-gondola concierge serves hot cider.

The town, too, is a cultural mecca with art galleries, one-of-a-kind fashion salons, antique shops, classical music venues and hotels like the five-star Little Nell.

Hoping to spot a famous face? Dine at Montagna in the Little Nell, where chef Ryan Hardy makes magic with organic, home-grown ingredients. Or order Japanese fusion entrees at Nobu Matsuhisa's restaurant.

•**Getting there:** Fly direct to Aspen's small airport (in bad weather, planes are rerouted to Montrose). Or through Denver to Eagle County Airport, 90 minutes from Aspen.

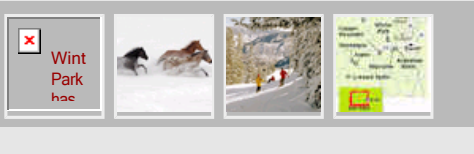
•**Contact:** www.aspensnowmass.com or 800-525-6200.

Crested Butte: High times

If you're looking for a natural-born high, ski at Crested Butte, 9,375 feet elevation at the base and 12,162 feet at the summit. Historically, this 1,167-acre ski area has been a weekend destination, crowded Saturdays and Sundays and wide open on weekdays.



Winter Park has developed a reputation for family friendliness, but that doesn't mean there aren't plenty of steep and deep trails. Steamboat (top) retains a Western atmosphere. Arapahoe Basin is the smallest of Summit County's four resorts, but it also boasts the highest marked ski trails in North America.



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But die-hard skiers love the big views, uncrowded trails and Colorado's funkiest old-time ranch town.

Happily, Crested Butte still feels that way despite a new resort owner and a recent multimillion-dollar upgrade to trails, chair lifts, terrain parks, restaurants and base area hotels.

One caveat: This resort is very high. Even the town, where most lodging is located, is at or above 8,800 feet. If you don't do well in high places, Crested Butte may not be your best choice.

•**Getting there:** Fly nonstop to Gunnison/Crested Butte airport through Denver. Or drive four hours from Denver or Colorado Springs.

•**Contact:** www.skicb.com or 800-841-2481.

Keystone: Family fun

What's a family to do when not everybody skis? Try the 3,148-acre Keystone Resort, geared for guests of all ages.

If you're athletic, cross-country ski (or snow shoe) on groomed trails through the forest, ice skate, ride a snow bike on the slopes or join the kids at the tubing hill. Or sign up for a Sno-Cat ride into the high back country, take fly-fishing lessons (trout bite in winter, too) or go for a sleigh ride.

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If you'd rather stick to indoor activities, spend an afternoon at the solar-powered spa at Keystone Lodge, where treatments include massages, mud-wraps, aromatherapy, facials and long soaks in the sauna or hot tub. Or ride up the River Run Gondola for lunch and a beer at the top. Another option is shopping and lunch in River Run Village, where a dozen shops carry winter fashions, souvenirs, gifts and sportswear.

•Getting there: Travel about two hours west from Denver on Interstate 70, then west on U.S. 6. Keystone is eight miles east of Dillon.

•Contact:
www.keystoneresort.com
or 800-468-5004.

Snowmass: Ski in, ski out

It's oh-so-luxe to step out your door, click into your bindings and glide away to the nearest lift line.

At Snowmass Resort, you can stay in one of 2,400 rental units (with beds for 8,750 skiers) clustered around the two main base villages.

Choose from hotels, inns, condominiums or town homes. Two on a budget can find a double room in a hotel; families and friends should check the two-, three- or four-bedroom condos and the four- to five-bedroom luxury homes.

Sure, you could stay two miles away, carry your skis to the shuttle bus stop, ride to the resort and lug the skis uphill to the nearest chair lift. But why? Stay on the snow and be there to carve "first tracks" on Snowmass' four big mountains.

•Getting there: Fly to Denver and on to Eagle County Airport, or fly nonstop to Aspen (in bad weather, planes are rerouted to Montrose).

•Contact: www.aspensnowmass.com or 877-682-7736.

Steamboat: Kids free

How about a ski-free family vacation at Steamboat Resort, in Steamboat Springs? You're not eligible, but your kids might be.

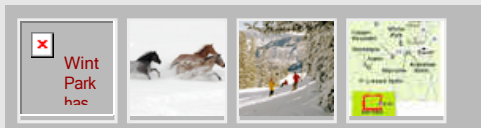
For every adult who buys a multiday lift pass, one child younger than 13 gets the same pass free. And children can stay free, too, as long as they're bunking with you. Steamboat's offer is a tremendous deal, the best in the West, meaning a family of four can ski for the price of two.

Invite another adult — your brother perhaps — and three kids can ski for free. It's a one-to-one offer good for every run all season long on Steamboat's 2,965 acres.

Then spend the money you've saved on lessons at the resort's top-rated Kids' Ski School. While the kids learn to carve turns, you can be skiing that trademark "champagne powder" snow yourself.



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•**Getting there:** Fly to Denver and on to Yampa Valley Airport. Or drive 2 1/2 to three hours northwest from Denver.

•**Contact:** www.steamboat.com, 877-237-2628,

Vail: The giant

Do you shrink from crowded ski slopes and long lift lines? Cut loose and fly at Vail, the behemoth of Colorado's ski areas. Spread over seven miles of mountains, Vail's 5,289 skiable acres actually encompass three distinct areas, the Front Side, the Back Bowls and Blue Sky Basin.

Most recreational skiers stay on the Front Side, where beginner and intermediate trails predominate and skier services and on-mountain restaurants are located at regular intervals. Even here, the lift lines and many trails are rarely crowded.

Even so, good skiers — and some confident but not-so-skilled skiers — make a bee-line for the Back Bowls and Blue Sky Basin, where on a busy day, each acre averages only four skiers.

If the weather is good and some runs are groomed, test your mettle on these slopes. Skiing here reminds you that the best skiing isn't really a social activity but the meeting of elemental forces: you and your skis in the mountains in winter.

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•Getting there: Travel west about 2 1/2 hours on Interstate 70 from Denver. Vail is about 30 minutes east of the Eagle County Airport.

•Contact:
www.vail.snow.com or 800-404-3535.

Winter Park: Just a hop from Denver

In a hurry? If you ski just once a year, or mostly on long weekends, make the most of every precious hour at Winter Park Resort, only 67 miles west of Denver. You'll be on Winter Park's 3,060 skiable acres by noon and hucking Parsenn Bowl's fresh powder by 2.

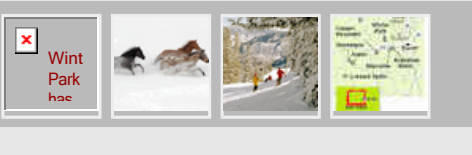
Here's how: Reserve your rental skis in advance, book a dawn flight from Kansas City to Denver International Airport, board the shuttle bus at baggage claim (departing every hour) and you'll be there in 90 minutes, airport to lodging.

•Getting there: If you rent a car at the Denver airport, take Interstate 70 west, turn north at Exit 232 and follow U.S. 40 north over Berthoud Pass into Winter Park. Or fly to Denver the night before and treat yourself to the iconic "Ski Train," departing Union Station at 7:15 a.m. and delivering you to the base of the ski lifts at 9:30 a.m. Catch the return to Denver at 4:15 p.m. Call 303-296-4754 or see www.skitrain.com.

•Contact: www.skiwinterpark.com or 800-979-0322.



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