

Some slopes are perfect for family runs

Some resorts cater to adults who prefer to bring the kids along.

By ANNE Z. COOKE
Special to The Star

LAKE TAHOE, Calif. | "Skiing isn't quite the same," Rob Baker said with a sigh, spreading sunscreen on an already-burned nose and pausing to reminisce about life before Emily.

Back in the day, he and his buddies were "cool dudes," he said, hucking off windswept ridges and chasing one another through deep powder from Colorado to California. On sunny March afternoons, they stripped to their shorts and raced down the bump runs, the loser buying a round of beer. "We were liberated," he said, smiling at the thought.

Now this buff 6-footer from Chicago was side-slipping down a bunny trail with a pert, red-headed 7-year-old. He was there when she took her first group lesson, he took her up on her first chairlift ride and when she fell down in tears, he brushed off the snow and wiped her nose.

"I know I'm getting rusty," he said. "But I wouldn't trade Emily for anything. My family's what matters now."

Baker, 45, doesn't know it yet, but if Emily is a typical grade-schooler, it won't be long before she's keeping up with her dad on those groomed intermediate cruisers. She's snowplowing around the corners now. But after a week of lessons, most beginners are riding the chairlifts in perfect confidence and skiing — if a bit more slowly — the same intermediate cruisers their parents have skied for years.

For a host of reasons Baker, too, is typical, just another dad skiing with the little nippers. Couples are starting their families later in life, school schedules often include handy winter breaks and leaving the kids at home isn't an option. Anticipating the demographics, ski resorts have revamped their children's ski programs to make them more like camp.

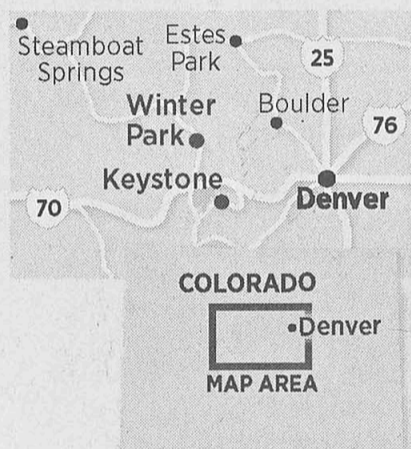
"Eight and 9-year-olds who spend five days in ski school will be making parallel turns by Friday," said John Buhler, ski school director at Breckenridge Ski Resort in Colorado. "The kids aren't afraid, and their learning curve is shorter. When you show them something new, they're quicker to try it."

"Kids learn fast," said Mary Nichols, a former instructor with the Children's Center at Winter Park Resort, west of Denver. "When you're 6 you're



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Groomed blue runs and sunny skies combine for great skiing at Keystone Resort in central Colorado.



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not thinking about how breaking a leg can hurt. You're only worrying about whether you're having fun."

Where are some of our favorite ski-together runs, perfect for parents and kids? At Winter Park and Keystone Resort in Colorado; and at South Lake Tahoe, in California and Nevada (the ski area straddles the state line). Check them out.

Lonesome Whistle, Winter Park Resort

Plenty of great blue runs crisscross Winter Park's 1,848 groomed acres (another 1,212 acres are within bounds but off-piste), but Lonesome Whistle and Allan Phipps go on forever.

From the top of the Zephyr Express, bear right and follow signs to March Hare and Allan Phipps. Stay on Allan Phipps, gliding down until you reach the crest of a rounded hill. Stop here to admire the treeless bowl below and a small mound in the distance named Vista Dome.

From here you can sail straight down, or double your ski time by carving big round C-turns. Continue down on Allan Phipps or Cranmer Cutoff to Snoasis, an on-mountain lodge. To go up again, board

the Eskimo Express, below Snoasis. Or take the Prospector Express to the top of Vista Dome and ski down Butch's Breezeway.

If the kids are up for more, ride to the top of Mary Jane and ski down Lonesome Whistle, an easy Green trail until it reaches the top of the Olympia Express and becomes a super-cruising intermediate run. A half-dozen easy "Alice in Wonderland" runs offer lots of variety here. Both the High Lonesome Express and Olympia open up all kinds of interesting but easy terrain.

Winter Park has condominium and hotel lodging at the base area and a lot more in town.

Winter Park is 67 miles northwest of Denver. Winter Park Central Reservations: 800-979-0332 for lodging and packages. For the ski resort: 970-726-5514 or winterparkresort.com.

Schoolmarm, Keystone Resort

Keystone's three mountains

and 3,148 acres are famous for family skiing. So it's no surprise that about half of the trails are rated for beginners and intermediates, with lots of variation between the two.

In fact, Keystone is so big they need two trail maps, drawn with different views, to show the terrain properly and in perspective. If you're a skier, the mere act of looking at all those curvy blue and green lines is better than being the proverbial kid in the candy store.

If we had to pick one noteworthy intermediate run, it would be Schoolmarm, 3.5 miles long from top to bottom. If you're staying near the River Run base area, ride up the River Run Gondola to the top of Dercum Mountain and look toward the right for signs to Schoolmarm. First stop to inhale the view of a sea of distant snowy peaks, and then head down the run, a smooth, wide highway of snow, perfect for practicing those C-turns.

The first time you ski it, stay on it all the way down until it takes an abrupt left and Ina's Way forks to the right. Follow Ina's Way back to the bottom of the Gondola for another ride up. The next time around, try some of the alternative runs that parallel Schoolmarm, but wind up in the same place at the bottom. Silver Spoon, Schoolmaster and Last Chance are all green (easy) runs, or you can try Paymaster, a big swooping blue run. Paymaster looks steep in places, but as long as it's groomed you'll love it.

After you've got your ski legs, try skiing Mozart, a blue run also from the top of Dercum Mountain, into the far valley. Be sure to stay on Mozart all the way (avoid Diamond Back and Mine Shaft), and bear right at the bottom to ride back up on the Ruby Express.

Keystone, near Dillon, is a



THE KANSAS CITY STAR

destination resort with hundreds of rental condominiums and no real town except for the base area village. For ski area, ski school, dining reservations and lodging: 800-222-0188 or keystone.snow.com.

Big Dipper, Heavenly Resort

The blue intermediate runs at Heavenly Resort, overlooking Lake Tahoe's South Shore, are the kinds of slopes that skiers dream about. Groomed to perfection, they're the kinds of broad highways that make it easy to carve big round C-turns and stay in the slow lane at the same time.

For one thing, most of the best blue runs are on the upper mountain, where the views are stupendous and the snow averages 30 feet annually. And Heavenly is huge, with 4,800 skiable acres and 90 named trails, with 45 percent rated for intermediates and 20 percent

for beginners.

As for the views, bring your camera. To the front there's Lake Tahoe, 22 miles long and 1,645 feet deep in the middle, a saturated azure blue. To the rear is the desert, a pastiche of browns and golds, shimmering in the distance.

To get to the Dipper Express chairlift, and our favorite group of blue runs, take the Gondola up from Heavenly Village, on the California side, and ride it to the top. (On the way, familiarize yourself with the trail map, which — at last — includes directional arrows wherever the topography isn't clear.)

From the top, look for signs to the Sky Express. Ride up the Sky Express and follow Skyline Trail, an intermediate ridgeline trail to Dipper Knob, off a left fork. Below is Big Dipper, one of a group of intermediate trails back to the Dipper Express and the Comet Express, both high speed quad chairlifts. Afterward, ski down on California Trail and Cascade to reach the Gondola for a ride back to the Village.

Heavenly's top elevation is a moderate 10,067 feet, easier to handle if you're coming from sea level.

For resort information, skiing and lodging: 800-HEAVENLY, heavenlyresort.com or (for lodging) tahoechamber.com.

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