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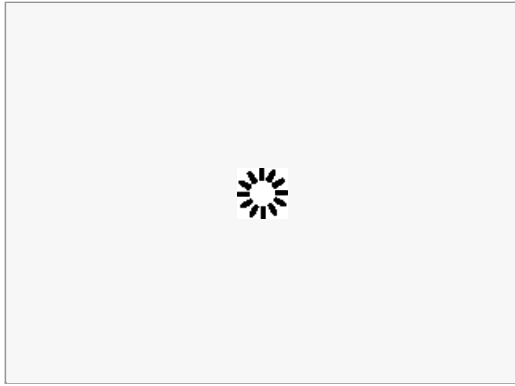
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TAKING THE KIDS

Younger set's quick to learn the slopes

Here are a few of our favorite ski-together runs, perfect for the whole family.



BY ANNE Z. COOKE AND STEVE HAGGERTY
SPECIAL TO THE MIAMI HERALD

"Skiing isn't quite the same," sighed Rob Baker, spreading sun screen 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 each other 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 six-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's 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.

"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 Breckinridge 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."

Where are some of our favorite ski-together runs, perfect for parents and kids? At Winter Park and Keystone Resort, both in Colorado; and at Smuggler's Notch, in Vermont. Check them out, below.

LONESOME WHISTLE

Winter Park Resort, Colorado: 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, located below Snoasis. Or take the Prospector Express to the top of Vista Dome and ski down Butch's Breezeway.

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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; for packages, call Winter Park Central Reservations, 800-979-0332. Ski resort: 970-726-5514; www.skiwinterpark.com. Winter Park is 67 miles northwest of Denver.

SCHOOLMARM

Keystone Resort, Dillon, Colo.: 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.

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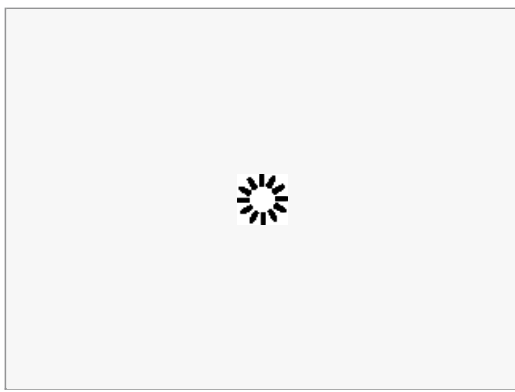
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In fact, Keystone is so big they need two trail maps, drawn with different views, to show the terrain properly and in perspective. If you're a skier, the mere act of looking at all those curvy blue and green lines is better than being the proverbial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

But 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 alternate 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 is a destination resort with hundreds of rental condominiums, and no real town except for the base area Village.

For the ski area, ski school, dining reservations and lodging, call 800-222-0188; www.keystone.snow.com.

SMUGGLERS' NOTCH

Smugglers' Notch, Jeffersonville, Vt.: Rated No. 1 in North America by Ski Magazine for its amazing family learn-to-ski programs, Smugglers' Notch is designed almost exclusively for beginners and intermediates. If your kids are beginners, they should be skiing on Morse Mountain's easy green runs, where two long chair lifts climb to the 2,250-foot summit and connect to ten broad groomed runs, including Garden Path, Log Jam and Dixie's Knoll.

There's enough variety on these gentle trails through the trees, some straight and others curving, to keep kids busy all day having fun. These runs funnel back to a third shorter lift, or back to Smugglers' main base and the Village, where the main lodge, grocery mart, shops and restaurants are located.

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Once they -- or you -- want something a little more challenging, ride the chairlift up again, but this time, ski right down Midway a quarter-mile at least to Smugglers' second ski base, below Madonna and Sterling Mountains. From here, three chairlifts climb to the tops of the resort's blue (intermediate) runs, half of all the total trails.

The easiest runs here -- especially after a new snowfall -- are those off the 3,040-foot summit of Sterling, particularly Upper and Lower Rumrunner, Black Snake and Lower Exhibition. But read your trail map and when you're skiing on Madonna, be sure to follow the signs. From the 3,640-foot summit of Madonna, ski left to Upper Chilkoote and Goat Path, and don't stray onto the double black-diamond trails, especially Freefall, Upper F.I.S. and Upper Lifeline. This last run, a killer when it's icy, drops straight down under the chairlift.

All lodging is on the Smugglers' resort, either near the Village or in Morse Highlands, where the newest condominiums step down terraces on Morse's lower slopes. 800-451-8752 or www.smuggs.com.

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