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## Fun runs

### On New Mexico's ski slopes, the pace – like the place – is unusual

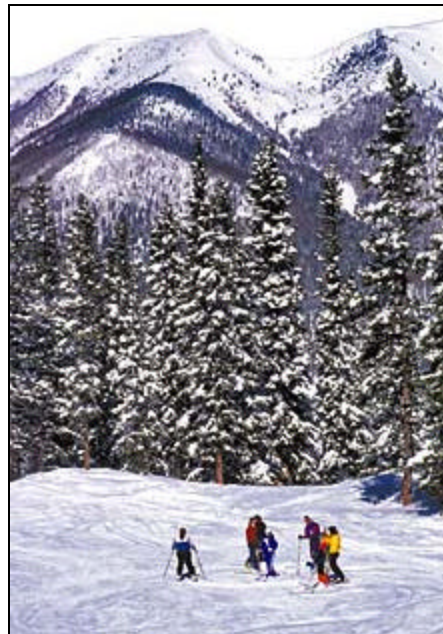
By Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty  
November 6, 2005

TAOS, New Mexico – Patience is more than a virtue at Taos Ski Valley, in northeastern New Mexico. It's a lifestyle.

The Ski Valley is the state's largest ski-sport area by far. With 1,284 skiable acres, its bounteous powdery glades and breathtaking vertical steeps are legendary. But high-speed chairlifts and a hurry-up pace are not the Taos Way.

Newcomers riding chair five as it chugs and wheezes uphill above the famously moguled face of Al's Run soon learn to relax and reset their inner clocks. "This lift works perfectly fine," announced Albuquerque resident Weller Brown, introducing himself as we pulled down the safety bar. He smeared his nose with sunscreen then offered us a daub. "I don't see any reason to upgrade it. To crowd more people onto the slopes? To save a couple of minutes? This is my day off. I'm here to relax."

Welcome to New Mexico's Sangre de Cristo Range, in the southern Rocky Mountains, home of the country's most eccentric ski areas. Taos, Angel Fire, Red River and Santa Fe may belong to the same species as corporate-run resorts in Colorado and California, but they've evolved in an entirely different direction. Skiing in New Mexico is a homegrown phenomenon, as quirky as Georgia O'Keefe and as hot as a chili pepper.



ANNE Z. COOKE AND STEVE HAGGERTY  
The Sangre de Cristo Range of the Rockies gives New Mexico skiers sunny days and mountains of powder.

Looking for the unique? You 'll find it here.

**Taos Ski Valley**, Eighteen miles from the town of Taos, is an American classic, the only New Mexico ski area with an international reputation, quaint Swiss-style ski village, towering terrain, historic hotels and haute cuisine dining. Taos also has an attitude.

Snowboarding is banned – the resort is one of the last holdouts – and there are no plans to upgrade the area's lifts. Four quad lifts, one triple and five double chairs are plenty adequate, said the management, enough to move customers around the mountain.

"We're resisting the kind of expansion that turns ski resorts into a zoo," said spokesman Chris Stagg. "Some people don't understand that, but we're interested in promoting ski culture, even if it means some snowboarders may decide to stay away."

Taos Ski Valley can afford to be choosy. With a base area of 9,207 feet and top-of-the-lift summit at 11,819 feet, snowstorms sweep in early and last long. The boldest skiers can hike to the top of 12,481-foot Kachina Peak for another 662 expert-only feet down Main Street's vertical powder, and thrills and chills off the steep rear ridge.

Intermediate skiers will find plenty of groomed slopes, but slopes for beginners are limited. Still, Taos's ski school is one of the best.

(800) 776-1111; [www.skitaos.org](http://www.skitaos.org).

**Angel Fire Ski Resort**, Twenty-two miles east of the town of Taos, is an intermediate skier's dream. Planned for family adventures, the resort's 67 groomed trails on various rolling slopes are varied enough to keep adults interested but moderate enough for beginners to ski with confidence.

Ditto for grandparents, for whom the rustic surroundings and low-key atmosphere go a long way toward evoking the 1960s. Better yet, the resort's 445 skiable acres are sufficiently self-contained so older kids can roam safely by themselves, and even younger kids can ski with minimal supervision.

All the more surprising, then, that Angel Fire has two state-



ANNE Z. COOKE AND STEVE HAGGERTY  
At Taos Ski Valley, devotees gathered at the bottom of Al's Run.

### If you go: Taos/Santa Fe skiing

■ New Mexico winters are a study in contrasts. Snowy, gray days are very cold, while sunny days can range from crisp to hot. Wear layered clothing and drink plenty of water, especially at higher elevations.



of-the-art high-speed quads and three double chairs for quick access to winding cat tracks, roller-coaster dips, small bowls and wide cruisers. Though many of the runs are actually close to each other, the trees that separate them are so thick that you feel you have the forest to yourself.

■ Fly to Albuquerque and drive 90 miles north to Santa Fe, then 2.5 hours to Taos.

Angel Fire has made a special effort to court snowboarders, offering lessons, clinics and building three terrain parks with catchy trail names like Fat City, Hells Bells and Fire Escape. Expert downhillers will want to head for Minder Binder, Charisma, Detonator and Baa-Da-Bing.

The Children's Ski Center, at the base area, has everything in one place: rental skis and boots, a lunch kitchen, rest area for the younger kids and storage cubbies. What the center doesn't provide are what instructor Brad Mider calls "distractions." He means toy trucks, doll houses, video games and art supplies. "We're not baby sitters, because that's not what parents tell us they want," he boomed. "Our job is to get the kids skiing, so the family can ski together. If your child would rather play, we'd recommend private lessons to start."

*Lodging is in the hotel at the base area: (800) 633-7463. Ski packages: (800) 754-4761; [www.angelfireresort.com](http://www.angelfireresort.com).*

**Red River Ski Area**, Thirty-six miles north of Taos, is as much about lifestyle as about skiing. This hometown resort, with just 290 acres and seven lifts, is the winter half of the town of Red River, population 400.

In summer, vacationers come to Red River to ride horses, fish and hike. When the snow falls and the same folks show up to ski, the preferred apres-ski wear leans more toward cowboy boots than designer fashions.

The town sits at the bottom of a valley; the ski area, with three triple chairs and two double chairs, lies on the slopes above it. You can ride uphill on two long lifts that start in town or park at the Ski Chalet base and ride up from there.

Most of Red River's trails are rated for intermediates, but both the expert and beginner runs are at the summit. "Cat Skinner," "Chicken Run," and a couple of other expert-only thrillers descend from the 10,353-foot summit. The beginner's area is on the Back Side. Happily for beginners, the easiest way down, on Cowpoke Cruise, starts here and winds back to the bottom. The resort has a summit cafe, a ski school and child care.

Half the fun is eating out in town, where you're sure to find fiery-hot



STEVE HAGGERTY

With the village behind them and the next run in front of them, Taos Ski Valley visitors experience lifted spirits.

peppers on the menu. Order them without blinking, and your welcome rating rises significantly. "You sure you want chilies on that?" asked Frances, the waitress, pencil poised doubtfully in midair. "You must be from around here, to like them so hot."

*Lodging and ski packages: (800) 331-SNOW; [www.skiredriver.com](http://www.skiredriver.com) or [www.RedRiverSkiArea.com](http://www.RedRiverSkiArea.com)*

**Santa Fe Ski Area**, Sixteen miles from the city of Santa Fe, is what's known as a "day ski area," meaning there's no lodging at the resort. That's the bad news. The good news is that you'll have to stay in historic Santa Fe, America's smallest big town.

Large enough to have a variety of terrain, the resort's 500 acres climb to 12,003 feet, with spectacular views from the summit. Though the snowfall can be uncertain here, when storms come through they're huge, leaving mountains of incredibly deep, dry powder. If you keep moving, you can ski most of the mountain in two days. But you'll find that most skiers take their time and savor the experience.

A third of the trails are black-diamond runs; the rest are rated for intermediates and beginners, with some long, sweeping cruises, and a long, wide, flat beginner run near the base. Confident intermediates will love the resort's longest cruiser, a three-mile run from the summit to the base area.

After the lifts close, explore Santa Fe, the capital of New Mexico. Founded by Spanish explorers, this ancient town is the historic and cultural heart of the Southwest and a vibrant center for Western and Native American art. It's also the spiritual home of Southwestern cuisine, served here in many first-class restaurants.

This is also the place to see – and to buy – pottery, silver and turquoise jewelry, Western oil painting and weaving. If you like Spanish colonial architecture and authentic "pueblo" architecture, you'll be in awe.

*Convention and Visitors Bureau, (800) 777-2489; [www.santafe.org](http://www.santafe.org).  
Ski information: [www.skinewmexico.com](http://www.skinewmexico.com)*

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