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SKI

THE MAGAZINE OF THE SKI LIFE



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JANUARY 2007



Snowbasin, Utah

This little-skied mountain has piles of powder and plenty of potential. The only thing missing is the people.

By Christopher Solomon

HE "BEST-KEPT SECRET IN THE WEST," DECLARES THE

skier in the hot tub who just returned from his day cruising the vast, unpeopled spraddle that is Snowbasin, Utah. "Why scratch it out with everybody else for one line at Alta or Snowbird?" Bold pronouncements by strangers are usually good for one thing—ignoring—except that I've just returned from Snowbasin, and the water-pruned sage is right: How has this place remained such undiscovered country?

For a long time, geography's been destiny for Snowbasin. Skiers either drove from Salt Lake City International Airport south to the marquee Cottonwood Canyon resorts, or east to Park City. Few visitors ventured 43 miles north of Salt Lake. Those who do still get the same half-joking message from locals on the chairlift: "Go home and tell your friends how great Snowbird was," a nod to the identity problem this place still labors under, and to how badly locals want to keep their secret under wraps.

Fat chance. More visitors are sniffing out Snowbasin—which Americans first met during the 2002 Winter Olympics, when it hosted the men's and women's downhill and other races. But growing interest doesn't mean choked slopes. Last March the resort notched its biggest day ever: 4,600 skiers. That's 1,500 fewer than the number that prompts smaller Deer Valley to stop selling tickets.

A big reason for Snowbasin's purist skier appeal is that it has all of the on-hill assets and none of the off-hill stuff that attracts the hordes—like lodging and dining. On the mountain, deep-pocketed owner Earl Holding (owner of Sun Valley Resort and Sinclair Oil) built a ski area worthy of the Olympics. Two high-speed gondolas, a tram and a

high-speed quad whisk skiers around a 2,820-acre blend of sporty steeps, well-combed groomers and intermediate terrain. The more crimped, pine-flecked area off 9,465-foot Mt. Allen, including the expert Pyramids area that opened last winter, is reminiscent of Alta and Snowbird. The center of the resort, with its on-mountain lodges and heavy concentration of intermediate runs, such as Porky Face and Wildcat Bowl, recalls the village-like coziness of Deer Valley. Snowbasin's eastern side, served by the Strawberry Express gondola, is a rumple of open ridges and bowls akin to Vail's back bowls.

Yet Holding hasn't developed any of the 13,000 acres he owns around Snowbasin's base, and while that means few destination skiers crowd its slopes, it also means zero nightlife and not a single place to stay. (Though rumor has it that an overnight lodge may be in the works.)

The last morning of my visit, Hans Hjelde, a member of the snow safety team (the resort's avalanche patrol), leads me

READY AND WAITING In a state with no dearth of excellent skiing, Snowbasin, an hour and a half from Park City, adds great snow and more challenging terrain to the mix.

around some of the 170 acres of advanced terrain the resort opened last winter, including high-angle hike-to drops along Snowbasin's corniced ridgeline. From there we look down on the Great Salt Lake, the neat rectilinear grid of Ogden and across at the mountains of four states. Below lay a ridgeline of short sweetness—400-vertical-foot runs that nudge 40 degrees. Why hasn't this been trumpeted?

Hjelde shrugs. "That's Snowbasin."

We drop into a chute called Blackbird. It's steep, deep and some of the best skiing I did in Utah that week.

And that's really saying something.

The Town

Though Earl Holding owns vast acres of land around his Snowbasin resort, he's built no overnight lodging. Most Snowbasin skiers are locals who drive from Ogden, 17 miles to the west, or from Salt Lake City, 43 miles to the south. Out-of-towners usually drive about 60 minutes from Park City to ski for the day, or else stay seven miles away in the Ogden Valley (which is not, confusingly, where the city of Ogden is located). Looking for sparkle? Skier, pass by. The valley's soporific hamlets of Eden and Huntsville—more zip codes than towns—are planets away from Park City. In fact, it's an après-ski dead zone. What you will find in the valley is a handful of B&Bs, some vacation rentals and a few restaurants. But that's all the more reason to ski from bell to bell, have a 3.2 beer with dinner and hit the rack early so you can do it again tomorrow.



FRESH TRACKS Off the beaten path, Snowbasin rewards skiers with plenty of powder—and space.

Where to Stay

› **Snowberry Inn** About 15 minutes from Snowbasin, this eight-room log cabin B&B is filled with rustic appeal, but the best part is owners Pat and Sherrie Dohrer's ample and delicious homemade breakfasts, served in a dining room overlooking the mountain. Crème brûlée French toast, anyone? *From \$99 a night; 888-334-3466; snowberryinn.com*

› **Red Moose Lodge** With 27 rooms, two hot tubs and free wifi, the Red Moose in Eden is the valley's traditional hotel experience, about a 25-minute drive from Snowbasin. *\$79-\$175, including Continental breakfast; 877-745-0333; theredmooselodge.com*

› **Moose Hollow Luxury Condominiums** These recently built, 2- to 4-bedroom condos and townhouses on the Wolf Creek Golf Course are perhaps the valley's nicest digs, with fully equipped kitchens, satellite TV and washers and dryers. *\$100-\$800 per night; 877-745-0333; moosehollowcondos.com*

Where to Eat

› **Gray Cliff Lodge** An institution in high-walled Ogden Canyon between Ogden and Snowbasin, the Gray Cliff doesn't serve haute cuisine, but it does serve local trout year-round (deboning it tableside) and never lets a diner escape less than stuffed. *801-392-6775; graycliffodge.com*

› **Wolf Creek Grille** The restaurant at Wolf Creek, a small ski resort—cum—golf

MOST SNOWBASIN SKIERS ARE LOCALS WHO DRIVE FROM OGDEN, 17 MILES TO THE WEST.

club, serves classics like porterhouse steak and caramelized wild king salmon. *801-866-0111; wolfcreekresort.com*

› **Earl's Lodge Sunday Brunch** Served in the 45,000-square-foot log-and-stone base lodge, Earl's brunch menu features brioche French toast and a crepe station, among myriad other specialties. 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. in the lodge's Huntington Room. *888-437-5488*

Where to Play

› **Shooting Star Saloon** Nightlife in the Ogden Valley is the Shooting Star in Huntsville—a crusty cowboy bar that dates to 1879, with Jimmy Rodgers on the juke, sloppy burgers and ice-cold Polygamy Porter in the reach-in. *801-745-2002*

› **Powder Mountain** Allow yourself a day to ski one of the nation's other great unknown ski areas, across the Ogden Valley: 5,500 acres, 500 annual inches, only about 1,500 skiers on a typical Saturday. *Tickets, adults \$50, kids \$30; 801-745-3772; powdermountain.com* ♦

Signpost

Snow Basin 2,820 skiable acres; 2,959 vertical feet; 400 annual inches;

104 runs; 12 lifts, including a 15-passenger tram. Tickets: adults \$60; children (7-12) \$37; seniors (65-79) \$48; seniors 80 and up and kids 6 and under ski free.

Getting there From Salt Lake International Airport: Take I-15 North and exit to north US-89. Merge to I-84 East and exit at Mountain Green. Go east on Old Highway and turn left on State Road 167 heading north. Turn left on State Road 226.

Info 888-437-5488, snowbasin.com