

Simply Snowbasin

The scene at the Utah resort? None, except for the skiing.

By Ben Abramson
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It's the classic traveler's dilemma: You enjoy a place so much you want to share it with anyone who'll listen, but if everyone you told actually went there, it could ruin the experience for you. That's how I feel about Snowbasin.

With glorious scenery, famous Utah powder, an efficient lift system, posh day lodges and an Olympic downhill run, Snowbasin will meet or exceed the demands of most avid skiers. But with no on-mountain lodging (yet) and so much competition in the Salt Lake City area, you can still have much of the mountain to yourself, even on a good-weather weekend in the heart of ski season.

The owner of Snowbasin clearly has other ideas. Earl Holding (who also owns Sun Valley resort in Idaho) undertook a substantial renovation of the local ski hill after being awarded the downhill and Super G events for the 2002 Salt Lake Winter Games, adding new terrain, lifts and lodges. If you've been to Deer Valley, Snowbasin may bring to mind some of the best aspects of that Utah resort, which always finishes in the top five of Ski Magazine's reader rankings. Snowbasin's combination of high-speed lifts (including two gondolas) and the chance to ski fast all day on groomed cruising trails compare favorably to Deer Valley, as do the resort's friendly service and on-mountain dining. And at \$54 for an adult lift ticket -- compared with \$69 for Deer Valley -- Snowbasin offers greater value.

The most obvious difference, though, is the lack of lodging. Deer Valley is replete with ski-in/ski-out options and all the fun of adjacent Park City. From its location five miles up an access road from the no-traffic-light town of Huntsville, Snowbasin is comparatively remote. The flip side is a valley view largely devoid of condominiums and interstates, and very few Sunday-driver skiers.

Snowbasin's ski terrain is spread among six peaks, with the far sides framed by dramatic crags and ridges. The open layout of much of the mountain renders many of the designated trails as mere suggestions, offering seemingly endless options from the top.

Intermediates should head in the morning for the Strawberry area, essentially a bowl sandwiched between the De Moisy and Strawberry peaks, with three marked trails. With a fast gondola to the top and steep cruising runs all the way down, you can rack up mileage at a prodigious rate. Be sure and pause at the top of the mountain for the view -- an expansive vista of Great Salt Lake and the city of Ogden.

The area around Needles Peak is also prime intermediate terrain. From the top of the gondola, a great assortment of interweaving trails beckons. I spent several runs starting on an artery called Sweet Revenge, each time sight-navigating to a connected side trail or shortcut.

For expert skiers (and intrepid others), the Olympic trails are the main attraction. Hop on the John Paul express quad from the base (even on a more crowded day, this lift rarely has lines). From there, the Mt. Allen tram carries you to the summit of Allen's Peak, and a fearsome run unfurls beneath you.

The initial pitch starts at 35 degrees, steep enough to reach terminal velocity in a matter of seconds (Olympians were going more than 70 mph by the end of the top stretch). When I visited just before the 2002 Games, the run was narrowed by course barriers and groomed hard and icy for the races. Skiing it was as challenging as anything I'd tried before. Until I went back last season and found that while the barriers were gone, the snow was left ungroomed and formed one of the more intimidating mogul fields you'll ever encounter.

After a brief narrow stretch through the trees, both the men's and women's downhill runs -- called Grizzly and Wildflower -- cascade down a series of wide but hugely steep bowls and ridges before narrowing and funneling out near the base of the John Paul lift. You'll spot an occasional expert pushing the limits here, but most skiers seem to take wider turns and stop to look before they leap over the many dropoffs and jumps.

One limitation to Snowbasin is the amount of beginner terrain -- around 20 percent of all trails are ranked "easier," with 50 percent intermediate and 30 percent expert. There is a learning area served by its own lift, but there are few green trails, and many of the blue trails are on the more challenging side. For intermediates and experts skiing together, though, options are vast.

The quality of the skiing alone would make Snowbasin worth a visit, but the resort rewards in many other ways. From the time you arrive, ski-friendly service touches around -- a parking lot shuttle picks you up at your car; attendants at the gondolas handle your skis for the ride up; a water cooler sits outdoors at the top of several lifts; benches with ski and snowboard tools are placed at strategic points on the mountain.

Many ski resorts serve overpriced cafeteria food in a shed, but the restaurants at Snowbasin enticed me to abandon my banana-and-yogurt lunch routine. Among several appetizing options, I've enjoyed an excellent chicken stir fry and claimed the first slices off a juicy rib roast at Earl's Lodge, a grand timbered dining hall at the base of the mountain, with solid wood tables and restaurant-quality place settings.

The day lodges have elevators, to avoid the awkward combination of stairs and boots. And then there are the bathrooms. Imagine clomping into a Ritz-Carlton in ski boots dripping snow and you'll have an idea how jarring this experience is. Marble surfaces abound, while private stalls sport heavy wood-paneled doors.

Locals on the lifts sound as if they still can't believe their bounty, uttering lines like, "You used to have to hike to ski over there," and "See that shed? That used to be the base lodge." Of course this cuts both ways, as in "A lift ticket used to be \$26."

The lingering question is how Snowbasin will recoup the substantial investment its owner has made. Ski areas need base facilities with lodgings, retail shops, restaurants and other recreational options to make maximum profits. Snowbasin's long-term plans include building a base village and an adjoining golf community, but these amenities are at least three years away from completion.

Nearby Ogden is sometimes mentioned as part of the lodging equation, but while the city has an interesting historical center and some college-town cool, it seems a bit rough-hewn to attract the Aspen set.

So it's inevitable that more construction is coming to Snowbasin. And while I'd like to see the proprietors reap some returns for creating such a great place to ski, I hope it's not at the cost of the cookie-cutter condominium development that mars the landscape of so many resorts. Regardless of how this plays out, though, here's some timely advice: Go soon and enjoy the best of all worlds.

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Details: Snowbasin

GETTING THERE: Snowbasin is about 30 miles from the Salt Lake City airport. Current round-trip fares start at \$243 from all three Washington area airports. The drive to Snowbasin takes about 45 minutes from the airport or downtown Salt Lake City. Take I-15 north to U.S. Highway 89 north (Exit 326). Merge onto I-84 east and exit at Mountain Green (Exit 92). Turn left on State Road 167, then left on State Road 226 heading west to the resort.

WHERE TO STAY: There is no on-mountain lodging at Snowbasin. Two downtown Salt Lake hotels -- the Little America Hotel (500 S. Main St., 800-453-9450, www.littleamerica.com/slc; weekend rates from \$84 per room) and the ultra-posh Grand America (555 S. Main St., 800-621-4505, www.grandamerica.com; rates from \$184) -- have the same owners as Snowbasin and often offer package deals. The city of Ogden has many chain hotels for less than \$75 a night. Park City, a scenic hour-long drive away, makes a good base for day trips to Snowbasin.

WHERE TO EAT: Snowbasin's three lodges -- Earl's at the base, and Needles and John Paul on-mountain -- offer wide-ranging menus. Breakfast and lunch run from \$10 to \$15. Apres-ski, the Shooting Star Saloon (7350 E 200 S.), in nearby Huntsville, offers reasonably priced pub fare. In downtown Salt Lake City, try Ichiban Sushi (336 S. 400 E.) for innovative Japanese fare in a converted church; dinner, with drinks and tip, runs around \$25 per person.

LIFT TICKETS: Full-day lift tickets are \$54 for adults, \$33 for children 7 to 12 (6 and under are free with a paying adult), \$44 for seniors. New this year: a terrain park offering rails, table tops and jumps for skiers and snowboarders.

INFORMATION: Snowbasin, 888-437-5488, www.snowbasin.com.

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