

Ski Vacations

The Backlash Against Big and Trendy

Smaller mountains that cater to the locals are upgrading their lifts and food -- and gaining over some vacationers tired of rising prices and swelling crowds at larger resorts

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Michelle Richardson and her husband have been taking ski trips to Whistler Blackcomb in British Columbia for more than 20 years. But lately, the scene has become kind of "nutty," she says. The slopes are so crowded that they fork over the \$488 a day for a private instructor in part so they can cut to the front of the 20-minute lift lines.

This winter, the Richardsons, who live outside Seattle, will be trying a different British Columbia spot -- a place they hadn't even heard of a year ago, Red Resort. The family of five is renting out a 3,000-square-foot house for half the price of their Whistler hotel room. Another plus: From the top of the mountain, the slopes fan out 360 degrees, an unusual feature that helps disperse skier traffic.

With this season shaping up to be an unusually crowded and expensive one, **more skiers are turning their backs on hotspots like Aspen and Vail. Instead, they are opting for places popular among locals but lesser-known among the fly-in crowd.**

Part of the reason the **midsize mountains** are getting more attention now is that a number of them are **making significant upgrades, from new high-speed lifts to better food** in the restaurants, to draw skiers from more-distant parts of the country. Crystal Mountain, about two hours from Seattle, recently completed a new high-end food court, while Winter Park, near Denver, added a \$6 million six-person chair lift and remodeled its base lodge.

At Loveland Ski Area in Colorado, the closest thing to Vail's six-day spas is a bratwurst and a cold beer. But at Loveland, you don't have to pay \$16 to park across from the lift. **At Snowbasin, not far from Salt Lake City, you're unlikely to see Danny DeVito on the slopes, as you might at Deer Valley, an hour away. But you get access to an unusually large network of gondolas and chair lifts that were built for the 2002 Olympics -- the downhill event was held at Snowbasin.**

Not everybody is thrilled that some once-sleepy ski mountains are trying to turn themselves into destination resorts, and some environmental groups are filing lawsuits to

stop expansion into wilderness areas. These battles capture a broader debate running through the West. When a number of today's big U.S. ski resorts took off in the 1960s -- building chair lifts in what was then mostly back country -- there was little opposition. But now, as a new wave of small mountains pushes to become major resorts, they're facing hurdles that didn't exist then. At the same time, while some towns are eager to become the next Park City, others, like Bend, Ore., near Mount Bachelor, are doing all they can to avoid that fate.

All of this comes amid a boom period for the ski-resort business. The price of a ski vacation is up 6% this year, according to the Mountain Travel Research Project, and there has been a surge in advanced bookings due to some sizeable early snowfalls. The higher ticket prices are a function of rising energy costs as well as new investments in high-speed lifts. Meanwhile, room rates at many resorts have increased as developers are rushing to build private time-share properties and condominiums instead of hotels, keeping the supply of rentable rooms flat in some areas.

There are some tradeoffs, of course, for skiers who opt for more-obscure mountains. While places like Aspen and even Snowbird, Utah, offer hotels on the slopes themselves, allowing visitors to literally ski to their doorstep, skiers at Red Lodge, Mont., have to stay in an old mining town six miles away. The night life in some smaller ski towns consists of drinking eggnog and playing cards. "You better like who you're traveling with," says Shari Winter, founder of Ski the Rockies travel agency. She says she's seen an increase in ski clubs skipping the standard big resorts and going to places like Mount Bachelor and Panorama in British Columbia.

The level of skier flight is hardly at the point where it is hurting the bottom line at the big resorts. But other travel agents and travel-industry analysts say they, too, **have seen more signs of skier frustration with the crowds and prices at some of the trendier spots.** Bryan Boice, president of Ski-Pak, a ski-based travel agency focusing on the western U.S., says he's seen a 25% increase in the last two years in trips that he books to smaller resorts. (Some of that interest, of course, is coming from people who simply want to ski at a variety of places.)

At Purgatory, a mountain in southern Colorado, 30 condos have been built in the last four years and others are in the works, and more of the buyers are from places like Florida and Connecticut than in years past. Red Resort, meanwhile, was a private ski club in the 1980s, but was bought last year by an investment group led by San Diego entrepreneur Howard Katkov. He has embarked on an \$853 million development project -- including 1,400 residential units and a ski village -- styled after a turn-of-the-century mining town.

In some cases, midsize mountains like Jay Peak in Jay, Vt., have lured skiers from their bigger rivals through creative marketing. At Miguel's Stowe Away, a Mexican restaurant near the base of Stowe, which is about an hour from Jay, people who order the "Jay Avalanche" sundae desert get two lift tickets at Jay Peak for the price of one.

But expanding a ski mountain can prove tricky when it involves gaining access to national or state forest land. Groups like Save Our Canyons in Utah have opposed expansion of resorts there because it takes terrain from recreational back-country users. The Backcountry Snowsports Alliance and the Crystal Conservation Coalition have challenged expansion in Colorado and the Northwest.

Sometimes, the opposition comes from locals. John Wood, an occupational therapist in Hood River, Ore., says his local mountain, Mount Hood Meadows, used to be empty during the week. This season, the parking lots are significantly fuller, and Mount Hood Meadows is planning to build condos in a nearby town, Government Camp. Mr. Wood and others fear that Mount Hood Meadows will expand into back-country areas -- the resort, in fact, has already tried to do that but ran into opposition. A spokesman for Mount Hood Meadows says the resort is committed to finding a solution that works for all sides.

More modest-size resorts have become increasingly attractive as lift-ticket prices at trendier places have reached new heights. Vail, for example, now charges \$81, up from \$77 last year -- and up from \$48 in 1997. Other mountains are following suit. And, while high-speed lifts that fit six people have helped shorten lines, they also increase the amount of people on the runs.