

## Utah's 'Secret' Slopes

Ski More, Wait Less at 4 Crowd-Free Resorts

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How's this for heresy: going to Utah's Wasatch Mountains for a ski holiday and then skipping Park City, Deer Valley, Alta and Snowbird.

Those ski areas are famous, and deservedly so. But in the search of fresh perspectives, I suggest skiing or riding Solitude and Brighton.

A quick pre-Christmas visit to Solitude, along with earlier trips to Brighton -- as well as to Snowbasin and Powder Mountain, a little farther away -- have convinced me that these alternatives offer the same great Utah snow at lower cost, without the crowds and with similar convenient access to Salt Lake City.

Are they really that worthwhile? Absolutely. Solitude lives up to its name.

Every time I have visited, I wonder, where is everyone?

### **Solitude**

The folks in charge at Solitude Mountain Resort insist they prefer it uncrowded. "You go to the mountains to reconnect with yourself," said Jay Burke, the resort's marketing director. "We have a very different strategy here [than at Park City]. You don't come here to party and eat at 25 different restaurants."

Solitude--as well as Brighton, just three miles east on the same road--is well under an hour's drive from the Salt Lake City airport in Big Cottonwood Canyon, near Park City to the north and Little Cottonwood Canyon (home of Alta and Snowbird) to the south. Once you leave the interstate, the metropolis seems distant indeed. The winding road, wider and prettier than Little Cottonwood's, is less apt to be closed by avalanche danger during a snowstorm. Before you can say "wish we were there already," you are.

It wasn't always quiet at Solitude. Back in the 19th century, the region was abuzz with saws felling timber and picks breaking rocks. At the height of the silver boom in the 1870s and 1880s, miners dug hundreds of mines (one of which was named Solitude) in the region, traveling to the rich Alta strikes in the next canyon via underground tunnels. (Today, the ski area gets its water via one of the subterranean tunnels.)

Solitude the resort came into being after a wealthy former uranium miner from Moab in eastern Utah was denied access to a restroom at the Alta ski area in the 1950s. (Because sanitation waste had to be trucked out of the canyon, facilities were reserved for overnight guests.) The miner, Robert M. Barrett, vowed to build his own ski hill and bought up as much land as he could in the adjacent canyon. He cranked up the first Solitude lifts in 1956, according to the resort.

Ten years ago the place got its first accommodations for overnight visitors with the opening of the Inn at Solitude. A housing boom has come in the past five years, with Intrawest, the giant Canadian company, developing a mini-village of condominiums at the base.

I stayed overnight in one of the condos, which are best described as generic Intrawest -- spacious enough and familiar to anyone who has been to the developer's other villages. This particular one, however, was pleasantly petite compared with the high-rises at the Intrawest Corp.'s flagship ski resort, Whistler-Blackcomb in British Columbia.

It's a five-minute walk from either the inn or the condos to the Apex double chairlift, which takes you up the "front side" of the mountain. For those driving from the Salt Lake Valley, there is a new day-use base lodge called Moonbeam with its own parking area, rental shop, lockers and cafeteria, as well as a new high-speed quad lift.

Solitude does not have immense terrain, but its 1,200 acres are comparable to Crested Butte and Purgatory in Colorado; it has more than double the acreage of such storied Vermont places as Stratton and Stowe. However, the deal-clincher, in comparison with its renowned neighbors, especially Park City, is that its seclusion embraces you like a fluffy down parka. I almost felt I had the place to myself.

You can choose to do blue- and black-groomed run laps, via the Eagle Express quad, on the front of the mountain. I loved the many swooping, steep, high-intermediate runs, the kind that make you look like you're running a giant slalom course. When there is fresh snow, investigate Honeycomb Canyon, a V-shaped gladed stash of double- and single-black diamonds.

Chances are you'll run out of leg strength before you run out of untracked snow -- either the deep stuff or corduroy groomed by snow cats. As Adam Barker, a Solitude marketing staffer I skied with, said, "When the snow is old and used elsewhere, the groomers up here are still so sweet!"

## **Brighton**

Just east of Solitude is Brighton, a venerable ski institution that caters more to local skiers, even though it is owned by Boyne USA, parent of the big Michigan resort and others.

Brighton holds an important place in Utah history -- it was here that Brigham Young and the Latter Day Saints celebrated the 10th anniversary of their settlement in 1857. The Mormon connection didn't prevent Brighton from advertising a year ago with billboards that poked fun at the now-banned practice of polygamy. The billboards featured a photo of a four-person lift and the caption: "Wife. Wife. Wife. Husband."

An early celebrity visitor to Brighton was the English adventurer and writer Sir Richard Burton in 1860, who described it as "a kind of punch-bowl, formed by an amphitheatre of frowning broken mountains." The bowl gets huge dumps of snow comparable to Alta's, as well as lots of classes of elementary school children.

By all means come to Brighton with your kids -- if they are under age 10, they ski or ride free. It's got plenty of runs to engage adults, too. My friend Harriet, a former ski instructor, considers Brighton her "home" mountain because it has varying challenges on the snow and is easy to negotiate off the snow. There is a level parking lot (no huffing and puffing from your car), a comfortable day lodge with lockers in the underground level and an elevator from there to slopeside. For those with more than a day's worth of energy, there is also night skiing.

Harriet likes to say Brighton has "wraparound skiing" because the lift fans out from the base area. The Millicent lift (to the right as you look up from the base lodge), which everyone refers to as Milly, serves steep groomed and ungroomed runs that are usually in the sun. The Great Western Express, far to the left, goes over some hairy double-black diamond runs that you can "shop before you buy." From the peaks at the top of each of the five longer chairs, you can find easier runs or test yourself through gladed woods and narrow chutes.

Only a fraction of Brighton's visitors come from the East, according to Randy Doyle, Brighton's area manager. But intrepid out-of-towners do find their way here. Last March, my New York friend Donald came to Big Cottonwood for a week. He wound up skiing with Brighton and Solitude instructors and a few business people who'd taken a day off to hit the slopes.

Donald opted to stay at the Silver Fork Lodge, a B&B about a mile from Solitude with a shuttle to the slopes. "I'm the sort of person who likes to have good food, great skiing, a nice quiet place to read in the evening, and then I go to sleep," he said. "Park City is too glitzy for me."

## **Snowbasin**

You will need a car to get to Snowbasin, perhaps Utah's most sensational untapped snow resource. This Bunyanesque former Olympic venue near Ogden is an easy hour's ride along roads widened specifically for the 2002 Salt Lake Winter Games. It's worth the drive (guests at Salt Lake City's Grand America and Little America hotels have the option of a \$20 round-trip shuttle), and you won't go hungry.

Rising from an area known originally as Wheeler Basin up the broad shoulders of Mount Ogden up to muscular granite cliffs and broad open bowls, Snowbasin is an unlikely combination of craggy mountain scenery and Lucullan lodges and lifts. Two gondolas, four triple chairs and one high-speed quad help you access the 2,650 acres of skiing here -- more than at Alta or Deer Valley.

At the top of the quad chair is a 20-passenger tram, kind of like a big soup can, which carries brave souls to the start of the 2002 Olympic downhill course, a vertical freeway whose first several hundred yards hurl you downward at a terrifying pitch, then mellows into a broad, still-steep boulevard. You won't want to take intermediates here, but they can play all day on a vast expanse of milder terrain served by the Strawberry and Needles express gondolas.

If you've been to Sun Valley, the soaring wood beams, chandeliers, deluxe restrooms and high-class cuisine at Earl's Lodge at the base will remind you of that gracious Idaho resort. It's the kind of place where you feel almost underdressed walking through in ski clothes. You can have a quick sandwich or wood-fired pizza lunch, or dine in the Huntington Room and spend two hours, European-style, dining on wild mushroom-stuffed chicken breast and other specialties.

The great Snowbasin mystery is this: Why go to the trouble and expense of building such facilities, yet have no base-area accommodations?

Management insists it has plans for an entire village someday. Meanwhile, spokesman Kevin Stauffer bragged that Snowbasin's busiest day last season was the "equivalent to Deer Valley on Monday." I don't understand what's preventing expansion, but go enjoy uncluttered Snowbasin now.

## **Powder Mountain**

For an even more empty experience, head a little bit farther north from Salt Lake City or Park City to Powder Mountain, another underutilized ski hill that claims the most in-bounds terrain in the United States (5,500 acres, bigger than Vail). It is prized by Salt Lake's deep-snow fiends, but navigating it can be tricky. Some newcomers feel there are too many flat areas you must skate across.

Powder's parking, near the top of the mountain, is reached via a two-lane road that can get slick. If you don't have a four-wheel-drive vehicle, you might be happier if you stop and park at Wolf Creek Resort, where you catch a shuttle bus to the resort center.

Best bet for first-timers: a full- or half-day tour from a mountain host. Beyond the view from the lifts is an immense wilderness of ungroomed snow called Powder Country. Ski it and you wind up on the resort's access road. Shuttles run continuously, taking skiers back to the base lodge.

Aside from the fun, how much can you save skiing these resorts? A single-day adult lift ticket at any of the four is cheaper by at least \$16 compared with Park City. The only thing you'll miss are the bragging rights. And the crowds.

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