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Colorado ski resorts offer myriad options



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A snowboarder makes a rooster tail on a slope on opening day at Arapahoe Basin, Colo., on Oct. 15, 2008.

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Published: 05 January 2012 10:54 PM

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IDAHO SPRINGS, Colo. — With winter snows on the slopes and a promising forecast for 2012, it's time to think about skiing, this year in the Colorado Rockies. With 36 (or maybe it's 37) resorts to choose from, each famous for azure skies, sunny days and more feet of deep, dry powder snow than you'll ever find in the Alps, get ready for an unforgettable ski experience. Check out our eight never-fail favorites:

Steamboat: Five-Star ski school for kids

If you want your kids to love skiing, ski at Steamboat Resort in central Colorado. The resort runs one of the country's top-rated children's ski programs, and it offers the best kids-ski-free packages.

Steamboat has built a loyal following with generations of people who want skiing to be a family tradition.

For adult who buys a five-day (or more) lift pass, one child 12 and under — sharing a room with an adult — gets a free ski pass and ski rentals, no taxes, tips or fees tacked on. Weekend skiers won't benefit

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The money saved? Spend it on lessons. Private lessons are an option, and recommended for adults. For kids, the all-day group lessons rock. Grouped by age, ability and interest and led by energetic young instructors, the kids learn fast. It doesn't take long before they're skiing all over the mountain's 2,965 acres, whizzing through glades and over bumps and throwing snowballs at each other.

Fly to [Denver](#) and on to the Yampa Valley Airport.

Contact: 877-783-2628; [steamboat.com](#).

Winter Park: in Denver's back yard

If you can't let another winter go by without skiing, [squeeze](#) in a long weekend at Winter Park. This three-peak, 3,060-acre ski area has some of the Rockies' biggest slopes plus trails for all ski levels, and it's only 67 miles west of Denver. Fly into Denver the night before or book an early flight to arrive before noon. Hop on one of the ski shuttles near the baggage claim lobby and you'll be hucking Parsenn Bowl's fresh powder by 2 p.m.

Our favorite way to streamline the process is to reserve rental skis in advance at the ski shack on the base area — usually demos, for better performance — so they'll be waiting with our names on them. Book lodging at the Base Village, a room or studio condo, and buy lift tickets in advance on Winter Park's website, for pickup at the base area ticket window.

The shuttles get busy, so reserve a seat. Check out Home James Transportation, 800-359-7503, [homejamestransportation.com](#); or Big Sky Shuttle, at 877-336-8267 and 303-300-2626. For a better way to enjoy Winter Park's lively après-ski scene, rent wheels and drive.

Contact: [winterparkresort.com](#); 866-239-3994.

Snowmass: first for families

If you're skiing with the children, ski-in, ski-out lodging will make a good ski vacation great. At Snowmass Resort, on-slope lodging is easy to come by at one of the 2,500 rental units, all clustered around the ski resort's two base areas.

Two on a budget can find a room in a base area inn. Families, friends on holiday, reunion groups and wedding parties can snare and share condos or luxury lodges, up to four bedrooms. Stay on or near the snow and be there when the lifts open, ready to carve "first tracks" on one of Snowmass' four big mountains.

Everything you need for a stress-free family vacation is at the newly expanded and redesigned Snowmass Village. The top-rated ski school offers group lessons for toddlers to teenagers and classes and clinics for adults. A couple of ski rental shops are also right there, as is the overnight ski check and a half-dozen restaurants, gift shops and skiwear stores with even a place to buy groceries nearby.

The most glittering improvement is the addition of the five-star Viceroy Hotel, at the base of Fanny Hill, with a star-studded clientele, an atmospheric après-ski bar and a restaurant with a chef-styled menu.

Contact: 877-682-7736; [aspensnowmass.com](#).

Arapahoe Basin: high and mighty

Arapahoe Basin, six miles from Keystone Resort, has deep powder glades, 55-degree steeps and no crowds. With North America's highest marked ski trails (the summit is at 13,050 feet), 63-year-old A-Basin belongs to the locals and powder hounds, skiers who believe that the ultimate high is pushing the limits.

A-Basin, which straddles the Continental Divide, has just 900 acres and seven lifts. Half of the resort is above timberline with much of the terrain in open bowls. But off-piste thrills aren't the only reason the resort has a devoted following, says snowboarder Craig Bannister, a spokesman for Colorado Ski Country. It's the area's 10-month ski season, with T-shirt skiing stretching into mid-summer.

"A-Basin is the first to open and the last to close," said Bannister. "People who buy a season pass get their money's worth. People high-five their friends in the cafeteria and people are generally laid back. The locals probably won't show you where to find those hidden stashes (never-skied fresh powder snow), but the guys who work there will."

You can buy lunch at three on-mountain lodges. You can rent skis, get your edges sharpened or buy a pair of gloves at the base area ski shop. The website reminds that the resort has "no lodges, no condos and no hotels." Stay at Keystone Resort and ski both resorts on the same trip.

Contact: Near Dillon, on Highway 6; 888-272-7246; [arapahoebasin.com](#).

Keystone: snow sports galore

During winter's snowy months, Keystone sheds its summer camouflage to become a winter sports and activities center. With 3,148 acres to play on, there's something for everyone.

For downhillers who've discovered Nordic skiing, Keystone maintains miles of groomed cross-country



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trails as well as marked, off-piste (ungroomed) trails for snowshoers. Both Nordic skis and snowshoes are available for rent at the resort base. Ice skating and rentals are available at the Lakeside Rink. The famous Tubing Park, sculpted on the back side of a precipitous slope, is one of the most satisfying thrills available.

Other recreation includes snow bike rentals; snow cat rides into the back country; fly fishing (trout bite in winter); scenic sleigh rides; snowmobile tours, [GPS Geo-Cache Adventures](#) and NASTAR family races; indoor pleasures run from spa treatments at the Keystone Lodge, to [yoga](#) classes and scenic rides uphill on the River Run Gondola.

Contact: 877-625-1556; keystoneresort.com

Crested Butte: wild and woolly

Crested Butte, where the base area is at 9,375 feet elevation and the summit rises to 12,162 feet, provides a natural high. In the past, this historic, 1,167-acre ski area has been a weekend destination. Devoted skiers love the big views, uncrowded runs and the genuine rustic ranch town at the base.

But new ownership has brought improvements and jobs. With upgraded trails, faster chair lifts, terrain parks, more restaurants and base area hotels now on site, the number of destination skiers is growing. Some residents oppose the changes; still, most agree that up-to-date ski services and first-class lodging are the best way to keep the ski resort alive and the community afloat. As our lift operator said, "Colorado already has enough ghost towns."

Contact: 800-810-7669; skicb.com

Vail: wide-open spaces

Leave crowds behind at Vail, the largest of Colorado's ski areas. Spread over seven miles of mountains, Vail's 5,289 skiable acres are organized into three distinct areas: the Front Side, the Back Bowls and Blue Sky Basin.

Most recreational skiers stay on the Front Side, where beginner and intermediate trails predominate and skier services and on-mountain restaurants are located at regular intervals.

Advanced and more aggressive skiers often head for the Back Bowls and Blue Sky Basin. According to Vail, each acre of skiable snow averages only four skiers at any one time. And after a snowstorm, fresh, untracked powder is almost guaranteed.

Contact: 800-503-8748; 800-805-2457; vail.com.

Aspen Mountain: bright lights, good eats

With its fine cuisine and jazz clubs, art galleries, classical concerts, antique stores, celebrity bars and five-star hotels, this former mining town is half the attraction.

Though most slopes on Ajax — the ski mountain — are rated for experts, there are a half-dozen swooping intermediate runs off the summit. Almost always groomed, they curve gradually down, dip steeply for a few feet, and then end at a mid-mountain [chairlift](#). To reach the summit, take the Silver [Queen Gondola](#) up, and as you exit, stop at the on-the-snow kiosk where a concierge serves hot cider by the cup.

Be sure to stop at the energy-friendly Sundeck Restaurant, the newest version of the original 50-year-old warming hut, and try Reborn, the restaurant's popular gourmet menu.

You can ski to the base area or ride the gondola back down. Save time to enjoy the town; Aspen's narrow streets and restored, turn-of-the-century brick buildings relive the excitement of the town's early days.

Contact: 800-525-6200; aspensnowmass.com

Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty are freelance writers based in Marina del Rey, Calif.

When you go

Most Colorado ski resorts make snow as soon as night-time temperatures drop, building an icy base thick enough to hold the natural snow that falls. The resorts open anywhere from early to late November and keep some trails open into April or later, depending on conditions. Prices for single-day tickets — the most expensive way to ski — are set when the resort opens. The smart skier's method is to purchase a multi-day lift ticket online, or to buy one of the widely advertised packages that combine lodging and lift ticket. Search online or in the travel section.

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