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Bargain rates for mountain magic at Colorado ski resorts

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MCCLATCHY-TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

SNOWMASS VILLAGE, Colo. - "River rafting? Horseback riding? At Snowmass?" said Larry behind the counter at the Ski Chalet, in Los Angeles.

For most people, just hearing a ski resort name - Snowmass, Steamboat, Copper Mountain, Winter Park, Vail, Taos - is a vacation turn-off. Winter winds, cold feet, blistering snow storms? No way.

"Snowmass? That's for skiers," he told me. "Not where I want to be on my summer vacation."

I'm a skier, so snow is what comes to my mind, too. But after last summer, I'll never think of Snowmass the same way. We floated the idea of a two-family vacation in March, but procrastinated until June. We were about to give up when somebody mentioned Snowmass, the resort and the village.

As it happens, most ski resort lodging, hotel rooms and condominiums, stand empty in summer. As vacancies grow, so do discounts. And sure enough, prices had dropped as much as 50 percent during some off-season weeks. Find an affordable place to stay, a nice place even, with a kitchen, another money saver, was step one. But if we weren't skiing, what else would we do? Dumb question, obviously.

Summer fun in Colorado is a natural. Why? Because ski resorts aren't in ugly flat places. Those slopes are located in magnificent mountain settings where there's more to do in any season than most other places. River rafting, of course, and fly fishing, hiking, music festivals, zip lining, paragliding, jeep trips and golf, and that's for starters. At Snowmass, where we went and where I expected to see hillsides marred by ugly bald gashes (those vertical runs that parallel the lifts), the slopes were transformed, grown into grassy, flower-filled meadows. Switzerland, I thought, without the cowbells.

Hiking trails slipped through the trees, glades where I had so often - and unhappily - crashed my skis into the trees. Taking it easy, we rode the chair lift to the summit, stopped at mid-mountain to watch the Kids Camp kids take turns on a climbing wall, and climbed higher up to admire the views. Since Snowmass and almost all ski resorts are built on leased National Forest land, a network of interconnected, well-defined trails is the rule, often deer or mining trails, paths that existed before the resort was a gleam in some enterprising skier's eye.

The Fanny Hill ski run, a giant bunny slope at the resort base village, was half empty. Until Saturday's music festival, a weekly event drawing huge crowds, most from the area. The musicians - rock, country and pop bands - perform on a raised stage; food and drink tents were set up along the perimeter, and everyone, including us, sat on blankets until the stars came out.

On Thursday night, we went to Snowmass Village's local rodeo, an amateur event, well-attended and pleasingly abbreviated. Held weekly, it attracts bronc riders, ranch cowboys handy at calf roping and barrel racers (on horseback) from towns throughout the county. Half the fun is watching the kids participate; this is their chance to compete in a real arena. I expected the Mutton Busting contest to bore, but it was a side-splitter. The onlookers roared as 20 kids, ages maybe three to six, clutched onto that slippery wool for dear life, tried to reach the finish line

Snowmass is one of my favorites. But it isn't the only ski resort in Colorado or in of the Rocky Mountain states trying to fill empty rooms in summer.

Did I mention horseback riding, chuck wagon dinners, lake canoeing, river kayaking, rock climbing, campfire sings, square dancing and overnight trail rides? And when a ski village gets into the act, the list grows longer: Art shows, Mountain Men Rendezvous, Black Powder festivals, Arabian horse shows, Celtic Festivals, Arts and Crafts Markets.

With Snowmass half empty, traffic was a non-issue. Restaurants abounded and the food was, over all, very good. Pick your choice and you'll be seated immediately. Even our remodeled, upscale condo, in the Top of the Village complex, with a swimming pool and free parking, went a long way toward boosting our vacation comfort.

My "don't miss" suggestions: Guided fly fishing lessons for the kids, and a half-day river trip. The fishing was supposed to be just fun. But our guide Roger Morse, an expert, revealed his secrets. "Watch and I'll demonstrate, and then you can try it," he said modestly.

Morse cast out the line, set the hook down on a quiet pool next to rushing water (for the fish, more oxygen and less effort expended, he explained), told us to watch the line until it jiggled (which it did in seconds), at which point the demonstration turned real. He jerked the hook to set the fish then reeled it

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in. "Easy," he said. By noon, 12-year-old Dillon landed three good-sized trout (catch and release) and I lost three hooks, snagged on underwater tree trunks.

Even crazier was our eight-mile raft trip down the Roaring Fork River. I expected a lazy float with seven other tourists. Instead, the three-hour paddle on the highest water levels in a decade went from a few splashes, to white-knuckle thrills, to scenic pools and back to the splashes. During slow moments, our guide's clever comedy routine kept us chuckling. A caveat: the kind of ride you'll get depends on the water level.

You'll need to buy a ticket to ride the Elk Camp Gondola; rodeo tickets are \$2. A resort concession rents mountain bikes, and the Kids' Day Camp charges a day-rate fee. But the free scent of pines, mountain scenery and red-gold sunsets are part of the best vacation you'll ever have.

IF YOU GO:

For more on lodging and recreation, go to www.snowmass tourism.com; www.aspensnowmass.com; www.aspenfishing.com; and www.blazingadventures.com.

For Top Of The Village condos, go to www.destinationsnowmass.com.

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