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Colorado's most wanted: Eight great ski resorts

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BY ANNE Z. COOKE AND STEVE HAGGERTY
McClatchy-Tribune News Service

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FRASER, Colo. - The trees are bare, the snow is falling, it's time to ski. But where?

Colorado, naturally, world famous for sunny days and intermittent dumps of deep dry powder.

Which one of the following Eight Great Colorado ski areas works for you? Read on:

1. STEAMBOAT RESORT, Steamboat Springs; www.steamboat.com. (877) 237-2628,

How about a ski-free family vacation at Steamboat Resort, in Steamboat Springs? You're not eligible, but your kids might be. For every adult who buys a multi-day lift pass, one child under 13 gets the same pass free. And they can stay free, too, as long as they're bunking with you. Steamboat's offer is a tremendous deal, the best in the west, one that means a family of four can ski for the price of two.

Invite another adult - dad or your brother - and three kids can ski for free. It's a one-to-one offer good for every run on Steamboat's 2,965 acres. Then spend the money you've saved on lessons at the resort's top-rated Kids' Ski School. While the kids learn to carve turns, you can be skiing that trademarked "champagne powder" snow yourself. Fly to Denver and on to the Yampa Valley Airport. Or drive 2.5-3 hours west of Denver.

2. WINTER PARK RESORT, Winter Park; www.skiwinterpark.com. (800) 979-0322.

In a hurry? If you ski just once a year, or mostly on long weekends, make the most of every precious hour at Winter Park Resort, only 67 miles west of Denver. You'll be on Winter Park's 3,060 skiable acres by noon and hucking Parsenn Bowl's fresh powder by 2 o'clock. Here's how: Reserve your rental skis in advance, book a dawn flight to Denver International Airport, board the shuttle bus at baggage claim (departing every hour), and you'll be there in 90 minutes, door to door.

If you rent a car, take I-70 west, turn north at Exit 232 and follow Route 40 north over Berthoud Pass into Winter Park. Or fly into Denver the night before and treat yourself to the iconic "Ski Train," departing Union Station at 7:15 a.m. and delivering you to the base of the ski lifts at 9:30 a.m. Catch the return to Denver at 4:15 p.m. For reservations call (303)296-4754.

3. SNOWMASS RESORT, near Aspen; www.aspensnowmass.com. (877) 682-7736.

Does ski-in ski-out lodging make your day? It should. It's oh-so-luxe to step out your door, click into your bindings and glide away to the nearest lift line. At Snowmass Resort, you'll be "livin' large" when you stay in one of the resort's 2,400 rental units (with beds for 8,750 skiers) clustered around the two main base villages. .

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Hotels, inns, condominiums, town homes, Snowmass has them all. Two on a budget can find a double room in a hotel; families and friends should check the two, three or four-bedroom condos and the four-to-five-bedroom luxury homes.

Sure, you could stay two miles away, carry your skis to the shuttle bus stop, ride to the resort and lug the skis uphill to the nearest chair lift. But why? Stay on the snow and be there to carve "first tracks" on Snowmass's four big mountains. Fly to Denver and on to Eagle; or fly non-stop to Aspen (in bad weather, planes are rerouted to Montrose).

4. ARAPAHOE BASIN, near Dillon. www.arapahoebasin.com. (888) 272-7246.

Looking for wild and woolly slopes, those deep powder glades and 55-degree steeps? Go for it at Arapahoe Basin, six miles from Keystone Resort. Sporting North America's highest marked ski trails (the summit is at 13,050 feet) 63-year-old A-Basin belongs to the locals, powder hounds who'll tell you that skiing isn't a sport; it's all about being out there, getting spiritual in the elements, pushing your limits.

A-Basin is surprisingly small - 900 skiable acres straddling the Continental Divide - but size doesn't matter to real ski mavericks. Neither does the fact that there are only two places to eat. Lunch on this mountain is just an intermission between downhill runs.

As the website boasts, "there's no lodges, no condos and no hotels" at this ski area's base. Most people stay at Keystone Resort; most, in fact, ski both resorts on the same trip. Fly to Denver and take a ski shuttle or drive 95 minutes to Arapahoe.

5. Aspen, at Aspen. www.aspensnowmass.com. (800) 525-6200.

Tempted by bright lights and good eats? How about jazz clubs, celebrity bars and inspired cuisine? If apres-ski nightlife puts the wax on your skis, chill out at Aspen, where ski vacations are multi-dimensional.

The West's most iconic ski area, Aspen is more than a 673-acre mountain where half the trails are rated for experts and half for intermediates. Aspen is where on-mountain dining caters to the rich and famous, and the top-of-the-gondola concierge serves hot cider.

The town, too, is a cultural Mecca with art galleries, one-off fashion salons, antique shops, classical music venues and hotels like the five-star Little Nell, at the base of the Silver Queen Gondola.

Hoping to spot a famous face? Dine at Montagna in the Little Nell, where Chef Ryan Hardy makes magic with organic, home-grown ingredients. Or order Japanese fusion entrees at Nobu Matsuhisa's restaurant. Touted for this season is Buenos Aires Fusion, serving grilled meats and seafood. Fly direct to Aspen's small airport (in bad weather, planes are rerouted to Montrose). Or through Denver to Eagle, 90 minutes from Aspen.

6. Keystone Resort, near Dillon; www.keystonerestort.com. (800) 468-5004.

What's a family to do, when not everybody skis? Keystone Resort, geared for guests of all ages, is the place to make it happen. Treat yourself to an all-around winter vacation at this 3,148-acre resort, and you can do it all. If you're athletic, cross-country ski (or snow shoe) on groomed trails through the national forest, ice skate, ride a snow bike on the slopes or join the kids at the tubing hill. Or sign up for a snow cat ride into the high back country, take fly fishing lessons (trout bite in winter, too) or go for a sleigh ride.

If you'd rather stick to indoor activities, spend an afternoon at the solar-powered spa at Keystone Lodge, where treatments include massages, mud-wraps, aromatherapy, facials and long soaks in the sauna or hot tub. Or ride up the River Run Gondola for lunch and a beer at the top. Another option is shopping and lunch in River Run Village where a dozen shops carry winter fashions, souvenirs, gifts and sportswear.

7. Crested Butte, in Crested Butte; www.skicb.com. (800) 841-2481.

If you're looking for a natural-born high, ski at Crested Butte, 9,375 feet elevation at the base and 12,162 feet at the summit. Historically, this 1,167-acre ski area has been a weekend destination, crowded on Saturdays and Sundays and wide open on week days. With big views, uncrowded trails and Colorado's funkiest old-time ranch town at the base, die-hard skiers feel like pigs in clover.

Happily, Crested Butte still feels that way despite a new resort owner and a recent multi-million dollar upgrade to trails, chair lifts, terrain parks, restaurants and base area hotels. The mission is to keep the resort and the town afloat by providing up-to-date ski-services and lodging, and filling those empty week days with a new kind of recreational skier.

One caveat is worth noting: this resort is very high. Even the town, where most lodging is located, is at or above 8800 feet. If you don't do well in high places, Crested Butte may not be your best choice.

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Fly nonstop to Gunnison/Crested Butte airport from Dallas/Fort Worth, Chicago, Atlanta and Salt Lake City, or through Denver. Or drive four hours from Denver or Colorado Springs.

8. Vail, at Vail; www.vail.snow.com; (800) 404-3535. (970) 845-5745.

Do you shrink from crowded ski slopes and long lift lines? Cut loose and fly at Vail, the behemoth, the big daddy, the largest of Colorado's ski areas. Spread over seven miles of mountains, Vail's 5,289 skiable acres actually encompass 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. Even here, the lift lines and many trails are rarely crowded.

Even so, good skiers - and some confident but not so skilled skiers - make a bee-line for the Back Bowls and Blue Sky Basin, where on a busy day, each acre averages only four skiers. In these secluded back-country valleys, most trails are rated more or most difficult, with an occasional intermediate trail offered as a sort of lifeline.











If the weather's good and some runs are groomed, test your mettle on these slopes. Skiing here reminds you that the best skiing isn't really a social activity but the meeting of elemental forces: you and your skis in the mountains in winter.

IF YOU GO:

Most Colorado ski resorts start to make snow as soon as nighttime temperatures drop below freezing. The resorts open by mid-to-late November. Prices for single-day tickets are set when the resort opens. Multi-day lift ticket prices are listed by September.

Lodging packages and discounts are priced lower if purchased before the resort opens. It pays to call early.

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