

TRAVEL

# Secrets to best ski trips start online

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**T**ABERNASH, Colo. — Ready or not, powder hounds, here comes the snow.

On Sept. 29, the first snowfall of the season dusted Colorado ski resorts, dropping just enough white flakes for impatient snowboarders to score a downhill run through the trees. But the storm was just an opener for the main event.

A couple of days later, another white-out blew over the Rocky Mountains, leaving a foot of feathery-soft snow on most resorts, from 12 inches at Snowmass, in the Roaring Fork Valley, to 14 inches at Loveland and 18 inches at Steamboat, in the Yampa Valley. And within the week, 3 more inches.

"I was ready to get my skis out, but it didn't last," lamented Sara Reed, in Estes Park.

Though the official ski season doesn't launch until Thanksgiving, when nighttime temperatures are cold enough to make and keep snow, an early winter could mean a long one.

And for recreational skiers — like me — it was a reminder. Time again for the annual online marathon in search of resort news, up-to-date weather forecasts, stay-and-ski family discounts, new bumps clinics and affordable lodging.

Before the internet, pre-season planning was simple. You skied at the same place you skied every year. Now it's a bite-your-fingernails chore guaranteed to turn anyone's hair a lighter shade of grey. With millions of bits of data socked away in dozens of poorly organized resort websites, navigating from one screen to the next is headache fodder.

Do you know what you want? That's step one. Trail maps and advanced bumps clinics? Popular kids' stay-and-ski-free programs? Or maybe you'd like to earn some points at an independently owned and managed ski mountain, one of those much-loved outliers known for its special ambiance and home-grown culture?

When I started looking, I decided that if a website didn't have a home page that popped up with



Photos by Steve Haggerty

Groomed blue runs and sunny skies make great skiing at Keystone Resort in Colorado.

an easy-to-read, color-saturated photo of skiers schussing down snowy mountain trails, it was probably doomed. Visuals count. And if it didn't include an in-your-face list of sub-topics, I stopped looking.

Then I took the easy way out. I started with last season's two best favorites, Snowmass Ski Resort, in Colorado, and Park City Resorts, in Utah, just to see what's new. Faster chairlifts, redesign of the trail system, new top-of-the-peak restaurants, that kind of thing.

Snowmass, (aspensnowmass.com), one of the Aspen Ski Company's four resorts that are next door to each other, is big and broad, a fresh-air destination at any time of year. The runs here, rated for all skill levels, fan down from four high peaks: black diamond widow-makers plunging down vertical steeps, gentle beginners' green trails, and miles of swooping intermediate blue runs.

The Aspen-Snowmass website didn't disappoint either. A single site with four divisions, the graphics were inviting and easy to follow, with story-telling photos, charts, maps, lists of lessons,

kids' ski school signups, après-ski events, other winter activities, and daily and weekly rates. Once you navigated through Snowmass, the others were easy.

My other resort favorite, Park City Resorts (parkcitymountain.com), is an authentic destination on two fronts. It's not just a big, newly renovated family-friendly ski mountain but a historic base area village, a restored mining town with great restaurants and hip shops. But Park City, now merged with the Canyon, is a Vail property, one of 17 ski resorts owned or managed by the real estate investment giant, Vail Resorts.

The result is a single website (vail.com) for all 17 ski areas. This is an advantage for Vail, of course, facilitating resortwide promotions. For skiers, there's a handy list of names, a quick click from one to the next. But forcing 17 geographically dispersed, very different ski resorts into a single mold homogenizes — and commercializes — the ski experience.

Some of the best ski areas have created clubs, joining forces to compete. The first is the Moun-

tain Collective (mountaincollective.com), whose shadowy green home page charms like velvet. An association of independent ski areas, the Collective is a club of 16 charismatic, unique and sometimes wild and wooly resorts dedicated to promote unforgettable adventures.

Some of the members you'll know — Aspen-Snowmass and Squaw Valley/Alpine Meadows, in California's Sierra Nevadas. Others you may not, including Coronet Peak, in New Zealand, and Revelstoke, in Canada, known for the continent's longest vertical drop: a wowie 5,620 feet.

Gas up the station wagon (or the Ferrari), buy the Collective's 33 ski-day adult pass, for \$489, and the 12-and-under youth pass for \$99, and you and your 11-year-old can ski two days each at six of the 16 — say, Sugar Bush, Taos Ski Valley, Mammoth Mountain, Sun Valley, Jackson Hole and Banff Sunshine — and still have 21 ski days left.

The other essential website is Colorado Ski Country (coloradoski.com), a bright and eye-catching site representing

Colorado's 21 large and small ski and snowboard resorts. As a hub, Colorado Ski posts each site's latest news, weather reports and special offers, along with photos, a slide show and general information.

From there, links to each individual site lead to the nitty gritty. Ever skied at Eldora, or Monarch, Wolf Creek or Powderhorn? Ever taken the kids to Howelsen or Sunlight? Colorado has more skiable mountains than *Saturday Night Live* has skits.

But without snow, no website helps. With weather patterns changing, snowfall is an increasingly dodgy topic. Depending on long range forecasts, maybe — just maybe — it's better to wait a little longer before booking lodging and lift tickets.

Ski resorts aren't weather forecasters, but do post ski conditions online, with current temperatures, past and recent snow levels, and sometimes even charts showing annual snowfall every month of every year for the past decade. Nonetheless, it's better to consult science.

If you're planning to ski more than two weeks in advance, advises former Olympic snowboarder Erica Mueller, at Crested Butte Resort, near Gunnison, Colo., "Look for a science-based website, like opensnow.com." Founded by skier Joel Gratz, a Colorado-based meteorologist, the site has been monitoring weather forecasts and future storms for the last six years. "That's where most of the ski resorts I know go to look ahead," says Mueller.

Like most skiers, Gratz's search for the best powder snow began as a hobby. Then it evolved into a full-time occupation.

"What separates us from other sites is that we know what powder skiers like," says Gratz. "So we focus on which resorts are likely to get the next powder storm." After a year of testing, the site went online in November 2011, and so far, it's a success.

For more information on all things ski, from weather forecasts to package deals and late-season discounts, I go to onthesnow.com. When it comes to planning the best ski vacation ever, you can never know enough.