


TRAVEL

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Nonskiers turn on the tube for wild ride at Keystone

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SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

KEYSTONE RESORT, COLO. —

"Pleeeeee, Dad, one more time," begged Will, 10, oblivious to the storm that had begun with a few drifting snowflakes and was now falling steadily. Getting a thumbs-up from his dad — who was having just as much fun — Will and his sister gleefully dragged their snow tubes back to the starting point.

Some skiers, seeing the clouds settle over Dercum Mountain at Keystone Ski area in Summit County, had already quit for the day. But on the tubing hill at Adventure Point, kids and adults were still waiting for another turn.

Has skiing lost its luster? Not a chance. Here at one of Colorado's most popular family playgrounds, winter vacations still mean the joy of gliding down freshly groomed slopes, the challenge of carving new powder and the certainty of top-of-the-range views.

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Tubers zoom down the tubing hill at Adventure Point, on Dercum Mountain. Tubing is a popular activity at the Keystone Ski area in Colorado.

Keystone

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Now 36 years old, Keystone has built a solid reputation as an affordable ski resort, with a professional ski school and an enormous stock of lodging choices, mostly condominiums. With the recent addition of more backcountry terrain, the resort has 2,870 skiable acres and 116 trails on three mountains, with plenty of terrain for all levels of skiers, from the never-evers to experts.

But for nonskiers — your husband, your sister, *my* sister, definitely — Keystone's other winter activities, geared for all ages and interests, provide some surprisingly enticing options. And for me, personally, the sport of tubing, in which one hurtles downhill in a giant u-shaped track carved into the snow, is one of the more exhilarating possibilities.

The doughnut-shaped tubes, twice the size of an ordinary inner tube and sized separately for kids and adults, are made of heavy-duty vinyl with reinforced seams and two big handles. You need no skills other than the strength to hold onto the handles, the lung power to scream as the tube picks up speed and the nerve to stick it out until the tube slows down and bumps to a stop at the bottom of the run.

When Will, his sister and his dad reached the head of the line, the tube operator — one at the top of each run — helped them link handles to make a "train." Then with a running start she launched the three tubes over the edge. As they roared down slope, the kids' happy howls wafted up to the top.

And once you've overdosed on tubing? Rent a snowbike or a slope cycle, also available at Adventure Point. Snowbikes are converted bicycle frames mounted on short-short skis, with a seat and handle-bars. You also wear short skis, and use both the handlebars and your feet to steer, turn and stop. It's fun and easy and, according to fans, actually helps you get the feeling of skiing. Slope cycles are more like scooters; you don't wear ski boots, but you do stand up to ride.

If cruising the shops is your thing, you can spend a morning in the village at the River Run Base area. A bakery and a Starbucks are here, and some very nice shops selling winter wear, dresses, scarves and shoes. You can also ride up the River Run Gondola to the Summit House to watch a football game in Killian's bar. We spent one afternoon in front of the fireplace in



Tubers line up at the top for a wild ride down the hill at Adventure Point, on Dercum Mountain in Keystone, Colo.

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our condo, munching popcorn, reading and watching the snow drift down through the aspen groves.

You can rent ice skates and brush up on your spins at the rink at Lakeside Village or take a lesson at the Nordic Ski Center, a mile from Lakeside Village. The center has about 10 miles of groomed, level trails and about 35 miles of "packed" trails winding through the White River National Forest. You can also snowshoe here; the center rents equipment for both sports.

To see where extreme skiers push the boundaries, book a snowcat trip with Keystone Adventure Tours, which takes sightseers and skiers — the latter are dropped off to ski back down — into 861 acres of above-timberline bowls on North Peak and The Outback. It looks and feels like Antarctica up there, minus only the penguins.

If watching the backcountry skiers climb out of the snowcat, strap into their bindings and disappear through the trees is

envy-inducing, there are lessons available. The ski school classes, for kids and adults, are very efficient at speeding beginners past that awkward first lesson: learning to do a snowplow stop. Once that's mastered, your instructor will move you away from the overcrowded River Run Base area and up onto the easy "green" runs near the summit of 11,640-foot Dercum Mountain.

Mountain access is from the River Run Base and the Mountain House Base. From here, you can ski on to 11,660-foot North Peak, and from there to The Outback, at 12,200 feet, where the slopes are much less crowded.

As a purpose-built resort, Keystone has little of the charm of Colorado's mining towns, historic destinations like Breckenridge, Aspen and Telluride. But the trade-off has been plenty of space to expand. As a result, the resort's several base area villages, ski school, rental shops, restaurants and condo complexes now stretch along the base of the moun-

tains, often at some distance from the village base.

Riding Keystone's free ski shuttle buses that loop between the River Run Base and the Mountain House Base should be the best way for getting from one place to another. Theoretically, you shouldn't need to rent a car. But with eight in our extended family, the bus schedules seemed unnecessarily unwieldy.

Getting the kids into their ski clothes and boots, and out the door to the bus stop on time, made some of our early mornings as rushed and stressful as the ones we'd left at home. We also found that grocery shopping — an essential task if you're staying in a condo — was nearly impossible without a car. Keystone has a small market, but the supplies were limited and often sold out.

As a result, we ate out more than expected, which was how we discovered Keystone's many good restaurants. There are at least 10 restaurants, cafes and snack bars at the River Run Base, and another four restau-

rants at Lakeside Village.

But the highlights were the two nights we dined at the top of North Peak. The Alpenglow Stube, a superb four-diamond restaurant which the Zagat Survey rates among Colorado's top 10 best, serves a continental menu, with white tablecloths and polished stemware, in an "old-world" Swiss-chalet atmosphere.

The rollicking Der Fondue Chessel, a noisy medieval banquet, is one of those rare restaurants that please adults and intrigue children. Diners sitting at long tables are entertained by an oom-pah band while waiters in alpine costumes pile on the groaning board, serving enough food to feed a hungry regiment.

Platters of thick grilled steak, chicken, fish and vegetables are crowded together with pots of hot raclette and melted fondue, served with hunks of bread and sliced roast potatoes. The food is delicious, the dress casual and the atmosphere so boisterous that even howling babies can hardly be heard. Both restaurants serve wine, beer and spirits.

Two other first-class restaurants, Ski Tip and Keystone Ranch, are associated with Keystone's early days when the area was an old family ranch. We didn't eat there, but the people in an adjoining condo told us the food was superb and the atmosphere nostalgic. On our next ski trip to Keystone, we'll try them.



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Helmets on, everyone? Ski lessons are about to begin. Keystone lessons and activities are geared to all ages and experience levels.



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Keystone Resort in Colorado offers plenty of fun and activities for nonskiers, for instance ice skating at Lakeside Village.

WAYS AND MEANS

GETTING THERE: By car: From Denver, drive west on I-70, exiting at Silverthorne/Dillon (Exit 205). Turn east on Hwy 6 and continue 6.2 miles to Keystone. Allow two to three hours depending on weather and traffic. For airport shuttle service from Denver International Airport, call Colorado Mountain Express at (800) 334-7433. Round trip rides run about \$75 per person.

LIFT TICKETS AND LODGING: Ask about affordable Stay-Free Ski-Free packages, which bundle lift tickets and lodging together. Interchangeable lift passes are good at sister resorts Breckenridge, Vail, Beaver Creek and Arapahoe Basin.

Condominiums provide most of the lodging at the resort: for

information call Keystone Reservations at (800) 404-3535 or (877) 753-9786. For a hotel room, ask for the 103-room Inn at Keystone, at the Mountain House base village; and the 180-room Keystone Lodge, a four-diamond Rock Resort hotel at Lakeside Village — also available at (888) 367-7625. Prices vary according to the date and availability.

INFORMATION ON LINE: See www.keystoneressort.com for prices, rentals, ski lessons, activities, events and lodging. When you check in, get a Trail Map. It's a concise guide to the resort layout, roads, activities, restaurants, services and phone numbers. Shuttle bus maps and schedules are also available.

— Anne Z. Cook