

KEYSTONE, COLO. | 36 years old and growing

More than one way to have fun

Keystone burgeons with recreation options for nonskiers, too.

By ANNE Z. COOKE
Special to The Star

KEYSTONE, Colo. | "Pleease, Dad, one more time," begged Will, age 10, oblivious to the storm that had begun with a few drifting snowflakes that were 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.

Now 36 years old, Keystone has built a 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 121 trails on three mountains, with plenty of terrain for all levels of skiers.

But for nonskiers — your husband, your sister, my sister, definitely — Keystone's other winter activities provide some surprisingly enticing options. And 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 Slopecycle, also available at Adventure Point. Snowbikes are converted bicycle frames mounted on short-short skis, with a seat and handlebars. You also wear short skis and use the handle bars 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. Slopecycles 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. There are a bakery and a Starbucks and some very nice shops selling winter wear, dresses, scarves and shoes.



STEVE HAGGERTY | SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Snow enthusiasts take in the view from Dercum Mountain in the Keystone ski area, now 36 years old.

TRAVELER'S CHECK | KEYSTONE, COLO.

Getting there

From Denver, drive west on Interstate 70, exiting at Silverthorne/Dillon (Exit 205). Turn east on U.S. 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 a 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 about 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 1-888-FOR-ROCK). Prices vary according to the date and availability.

To learn more

Phone numbers include (800) 427-8308, (800) 255-3715 and 1-888-222-9285. See www.keystonerestort.com for prices, rentals, ski lessons, activities, events and lodging.

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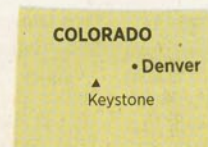
You can rent ice skates and brush up on your spins at the rink at Lakeside Village or take a lesson at the Nordic Ski Center, a mile from Lakeside Village. The center has 16 kilometers of groomed, level trails and 57 kilometers of "packed" trails winding through the White River National Forest. You can also snowshoe; the center rents equipment for both sports.

To see where extreme skiers push the boundaries, book a Sno-Cat 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 the Arctic up there, minus the polar bears.

If watching the backcountry skiers climb out of the Sno-Cat, snap into their bindings and disappear through the trees is catching, think about taking a lesson or two. 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 Moun-



tain 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 such as Breckenridge, Aspen and Telluride. But the tradeoff has been plenty of space to expand. The resort's several base area villages, ski school, rental shops, restaurants and condo

complexes now stretch along the base of the mountains, 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.

We 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 four restaurants at Lakeside Village.

But the highlights were the two nights we dined at the top of 11,444-foot North Peak. The Alpenglow Stube, a superb four-diamond restaurant that the Zagat survey rates among Colorado's 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 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.

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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