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# STEAMBOAT SPRINGS

## Whooshing through champagne powder in Colorado

By ANNE Z. COOKE and STEVE HAGGERTY Special to the Chronicle  
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Larry Pierce Steamboat  
Skiers enjoy racing downhill on the signature champagne powder of the Steamboat Ski Area.

STEAMBOAT SPRINGS, Colo. - By January, the snow lies steep and deep on the slopes at Steamboat Ski Resort in northwest Colorado. Which is just how former Olympian Billy Kidd likes it.

But Kidd, Steamboat's official ambassador, doesn't need the real thing to feel that old adrenaline rush or hear the whoosh of skis slicing through fresh powder. There's snow in his yard this morning, enough for a lesson, but he ignores it. Instead, the 65-year-old jumps up from the breakfast table to show visitors how he does it.

"I can improve your skiing right here in this room," he says, reaching for a pair of imaginary ski poles. He bends his knees and balances lightly, poised to power-carve through a snowy glade. "You don't believe me?" he asks, not waiting for an answer. "The secret is visualization."

We'd watched Billy - everyone calls him that - in action the day before at one of his "Ski With Billy" clinics, held on most winter afternoons at the top of the Christie Peak Express, Steamboat's new high-speed six-pack chairlift. The 90-minute clinics are one of the mountain's most popular events.

By the time Billy showed up, wearing his signature cowboy hat with the pheasant-feather hatband, a crowd was waiting to meet the man whose face and career have been synonymous with Steamboat Ski Resort for 30 years. Some were serious skiers, hoping for a moment of enlightenment. Others were fans, there to gawk and shake his hand. But few could resist Billy's high-energy and confidence. After the final ski-along back to the base area, even skeptics were convinced that sliding on snow was as natural as walking.

When Billy gave up racing and decided to put down roots, this area's so-called "champagne powder" - the resort has patented the phrase - was one of the reasons that he hitched his star to Steamboat Ski Resort. If there's a flurry within 100 miles of here, it seems to find its way to the Park Range, on the westernmost slopes of the Rocky Mountains. The snowfall is so predictable, in fact, that climatologists come to study how those featherlike flakes are formed.

"It's our location that's so unique," resort spokesman Mike Lane said. "We get the south end of northern storms and the north end of southern storms. We're the first real barricade most Pacific storms hit after they cross the Wasatch Mountains."

Last season's snowfall, totaling 489 inches measured at midmountain in early April, was a record-breaker, Lane said. And the storms came at intervals, regularly dumping new powder to create perfect ski conditions all season.

Seen from the middle of town, a mile from the resort, the mountain appears to be a single massive peak. But the behemoth actually has six mini-peaks, including 10,372-foot Storm Peak, 10,384-foot Sunshine Peak and 10,565-foot Mount Werner. Twenty chairlifts on 2,965 skiable acres access 165-odd ski trails that run along sloping ridge lines, down through gladed steeps, through gentle meadows and down to the base along wide groomed cruisers.

There's some expert terrain here. But Steamboat is mostly intermediate country. More than half the mountain's trails are rated for the average recreational skier; at least one-tenth of the trails are groomed for beginners, a safe place for a novice to practice those self-visualization techniques.

Ahead of his time, Kidd discovered the power of imagination in grade school. In the Green Mountains of Stowe, Vt., skiing was a school elective. While most of the kids were shooting hoops, Billy was jumping the bumps. When he wasn't on the slopes, he was pretending.

"I realized I could sit in the classroom and build muscle memory by imagining how to turn," he says. "When I got older, I watched films and analyzed what the skiers were doing. You get those mental images in your head, then you just let it happen."

Where it happens today is at the Steamboat Resort's Billy Kidd Performance Center, designed for motivated skiers of all ski levels. The one-, two- and three-day camps offer Olympic-style coaching with a strong emphasis on what Billy calls "building the basics." The

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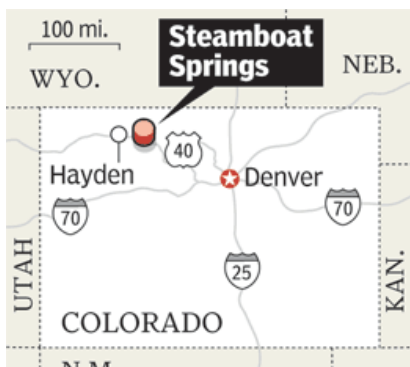
**Lessons and lifts:** Prices can vary according to the date, weather and availability, and often change as the season continues. Discounts are offered in early and late season. The "Kids Ski Free" program provides free lift tickets to kids 12 and younger whose parents or grandparents purchase at least a five-day lift ticket. Visit [www.steamboat.com](http://www.steamboat.com).

**Performance camp:** For Billy Kidd's two- and three-day Performance Camps, call the Ski & Snowboard School at 800-299-5017.

**Transportation:** Free ski shuttles run between all accommodations and the ski base, and between the resort and Steamboat Springs.

**Lodging:** Call Central Reservations at 800-922-2722 or visit [www.steamboat.com](http://www.steamboat.com) for condos and hotels. We stayed at Bear Claw luxury condominiums, which have one-, two- and three-bedroom units on the slopes. Five-day stays start at \$425 per night. Call 800-232-7252 or visit [www.bear-claw.com](http://www.bear-claw.com).

**Getting there:** The ski area is one mile from Steamboat Springs, 22 miles from Yampa Valley Regional Airport in Hayden and 160 miles west of Denver.



coaches emphasize positive attitudes and winning strategies. They also carry video cams and use them liberally, to help you do your own visualization.

Equally popular is the "Kids Ski Free" program. The best deal in the country, it's designed to make it affordable for parents or grandparents who ski to bring the kids along, too.

A recent face-lift, part of a five-year \$40 million renewal project, has transformed the look of the base area. But Steamboat Springs, a ranch town settled long before skiing came along, is as friendly and unpretentious as ever. U.S. 40, running down the center of town, still has the original diagonal parking spaces, without meters, for a real-time back-to-the-future look. The brick buildings are old-timers, too, and so are many of the homes built on adjacent streets. For a touch of history, visit the Tread of the Pioneers Museum, in a vintage house on Oak Street.

"I guess we won't see any gongs for sale," quipped our son, Paul, a reference to the oriental gong priced at \$15,000 that we'd seen in an art gallery in Aspen. More typical here is F.M. Light & Sons, a century old and still doing a land-office business selling jeans, work overalls, leather belts, gloves and jackknives. It sells Billy's signature Stetson, too, a chocolate-brown model with a slightly rolled brim.

For a rollicking good time and great food, book a reservation for the Western BBQ dinner served at the top of the gondola on Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights. Staggered reservation times move everyone past a buffet laden with rare roast beef, chicken, pork ribs, a half-dozen vegetables, potatoes, rolls, salads and dessert.

A country and bluegrass band tunes up at 9 p.m. to play favorites ranging from Patsy Cline classics to Rocky Top and the Orange Blossom Special. Many adults, teenagers and kids jump up to dance; the rest, imagining they're dancing, tap their toes.

To really enhance your ski vacation, consider renting a condominium on or near the slopes. Not having to ride the shuttle bus makes the entire day go more easily. We stayed at a unit in the Bear Claw Condominiums, 100 yards up the slope from the base, and loved the convenience. We also skied more but in shorter spurts.

One of the resort's original properties, each unit is privately owned, but all are updated regularly. One- to three-bedroom units are available, all with rustic décor and contemporary amenities, from TV and entertainment center to fireplaces and fully equipped kitchens. Ours had games, puzzles, a DVD player and books. The complex has an outdoor heated pool, game room, après-ski bar, ski lockers, 24-hour front-desk service and a film library with a couple of Warren Miller ski titles.

All the better to try a little "visualization."

Anne Cooke and Steve Haggerty ski with family at Steamboat. Contact them at [TravelsWithAnne@cs.com](mailto:TravelsWithAnne@cs.com).

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