

Vail the mountain could swallow several Tahoe resorts

Publisher's note: *This is the third of four days of stories about issues pertaining to Vail.*

By Susan Wood

VAIL – If the belief is skiing here is only about the snow conditions, you're only scratching the surface.

That's because finding the balance between feeling a sense of solitude and being embraced can be a tricky one. But it's one that can be had at Vail, one of the largest U.S. ski area at a staggering 5,289 acres.

For skiers and boarders seeking fluffy snow stashes, exceptional hospitality and room to breathe, this is the mountain that stands alone. After summiting the 11,250-foot ridge from the front side off the Mountaintop Express chairlift to the back, the jaw-dropping view makes it obvious you have arrived to a ski land like no other. Two express lifts from Vail Village, and you're on the top.

Seven back bowls stretching 7-miles wide drum up terrain to last a week or a season depending how creative one is. The terrain is so massive on the backside that powder can be found days after snow falls. And Colorado does provide some of the best of the flakes in the world. Giggling on a run is commonplace.



Susan Wood
needs another
week to ski
all of Vail.
Photos/Kathryn
Reed

“Almost everything is a bowl here,” Adventure Session tour leader David Lockhart explained. Lockhart, who showed up at Vail 28 years ago for the season and stayed, took out a group eager to experience the mountain one January morning with fellow guide Nancy Sherowski, a transplant from Maine.

The group kept growing for the comprehensive, daylong tour. In its second year, adventure sessions team up one guide each with no more than four skiers or boarders to show off the terrain and provide pointers along the way. It costs \$129 on top of the \$102 adult day lift ticket. It’s worth every penny for Vail newcomers. Free mountain tours are also available.

“Pretty amazing,” Sam Travis of Scotland summed up his first-time experience off the Swingsville run from the mountaintop. And that’s just the front side – respectable, fun and the gateway to the backside. He joined Lockhart in the Game Creek area on the long, windy Lost Boy run. This is aptly named because a youngster got lost and spent the night in a tree well and survived.

To a guide like Sherowski, though, the mountain has not been touched without spending a blue sky day at Blue Sky Basin – which lauds Earl’s and Pete’s bowls, the latter named after a founder of Vail who was a member of the 10th Mountain Division. Soldier and mountaineer Pete Siebert created the ski area with road engineer Charlie Vail in 1962, four years prior to the town’s incorporation.

Next year, Vail will celebrate 50 years under its belt.

One of its major accomplishments would surely be the development of Blue Sky Basin, a rugged wilderness area that represents a hard-won agreement and compromise between the ski resort company, environmental groups and the state wildlife department.

The farthest backside terrain has some of the finest ski acreage in North America. The variety is astounding. There are plenty of tame groomers for the plow drivers to comb over. There are also gullies that make skiing a fun teeter-totter. And tree skiing is a thing of beauty at Big Rock Park, where powder stashes are common and abundant. Grand Review, a ski area boundary run located on the perimeter of Pete's, is a photo opportunity at every turn for camera hounds wanting to get an unobstructed view.

The terrain off the new High Noon Express chairlift brings out the advanced skier in everyone. The Never run is a quad burner that rewards the skier and rider with spectacular vistas from the Ptarmigan ridge.

Sundown, Sunup, China – all the bowls have their own sense of character. In the latter, Dragon's teeth rock formations greet the skier looking for a challenge. As far as the former, the bowl's triple chair where High Noon went in had an unsanctioned "underwear-donning" tree underneath. Replacing it with the new high-speed lift took out the tree, but opened up more views.

"I'm sure one will re-grow itself. But we're not planting one," resort spokeswoman Liz Biebl joked.

There are few things the Vail crews won't summon for their customers. Smiles from the lifties set the scenario for a great run. Signs remind skiers to alternate. Environmentally, recycling bins can be found all over the mountain and solar panels reduce the carbon footprint.

Groomers log at least 20 hours a day to open up the mountain

to a wide variety of ski clientele. For the evening, one such snowcat serves the dining crowd seeking an extraordinary experience. The Game Creek Lodge at mid-mountain opens its menu to diners who catch the Eagle Bahn Gondola at the Lionshead Village. From the top, a cozy snowcat takes them the rest of the way.

Vail's special creative task force is always at work conjuring up new ways to make the experience better. These include discount days, lunch specials and cooperative airline advertising to help frugal types manage the vacation during economic challenges.

Events with free entertainment also drive the destination visitor seeking more than ways to float over snow. There's Holidaze in December. And there's CarniVail during Mardi Gras March.

"When the economy took a dive, what we saw at first was that people bought a commitment (to Vail). Now how they spend that time is something we need to be flexible in looking at – things like the Adventure Sessions," Biebl said.

Epic Mix is a computer tracking program that allows skiers and riders who sign up a chance to monitor what runs they take and vertical feet they add up. Then, the results can be sent to friends for "a little friendly competition," she explained. "It gives you a better sense of where you've been."

And at Vail – in the family of six areas including Heavenly Mountain Resort and Northstar-at-Tahoe – snowsports enthusiasts can use all the help they can get to cover the massive terrain with a 3,100-foot drop to the 8,120-foot base served by 193 runs and 31 lifts. The mountain reports a 57-inch snow depth. Go online for more detail.

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