

Disabled people no longer left off the slopes

By Carrie Jung, NPR

March means spring break is just around the corner, and for New Mexico it means mild temperatures and fresh snow – perfect conditions for visiting area ski resorts.

A growing number of resorts are now offering programs that cater to vacationers with disabilities, and resort owners say it has proved to be a boost for business.

At a Taos Ski Valley chairlift, Barbara and Philip Logan prepare their son, Tilghman, for his first day of ski lessons.



Tilghman Logan and instructor Craig Stagg practice turns using sit skis. Photo/NPR

The Logans traveled from New York City to Taos, N.M., for a winter vacation, and Tilghman can't wait to begin his ski lesson.

Tilghman has a severe form of cerebral palsy that limits much of his physical movement and some of his eyesight. But that's not stopping him and his father from experiencing the snow. With some careful planning and specialized equipment, the duo

hopes to be tearing up the slopes together in no time.

Ski instructor Craig Stagg takes the group up the lift to demonstrate a few sit ski basics. A sit ski is a specially made sled developed for people with limited use of their lower limbs, allowing them to slide down a mountain much like an able-bodied skier.

"They really are a lot of fun once you get the hang of them," Stagg says.

Peter Donahue, the resort's ski school director, says the snow can be a great equalizer for people with disabilities. "It gives them a great sense of freedom and accomplishment," he says.

"Snow sports is a venue where a child or an individual with a disability can actually stand up and glide and move over the surface of the ground in a way that only able-bodied people can," Donahue says.

The resort must offer adaptive ski lessons under the Americans with Disabilities Act because it sits on Forest Service land. The resort takes the program very seriously because it helps serve the needs of all guests, which, Donahue says, is just good business.

"The ability for families to come and the money that they bring to the community and to the resort certainly helps us to continue to provide those services," he says. "It's a benefit for everyone."

Eric Lipp, executive director of the Open Doors Organization, an advocacy group helping people with disabilities get access to travel and other consumer opportunities, says people with disabilities are extremely vocal, and they're a large group with significant buying power.

A recent market study shows that the disabled community now

spends more than \$13 billion each year on travel. As the general population continues to age, Lipp says, that number is only expected to grow.

"The likelihood of having a disability the older that you get increases greatly, and it doesn't stop people from going out and wanting to go on vacation," he says.

When it comes to adventure tourism, this demographic should be considered a viable and competitive market, he adds.

Back at Taos Ski Valley, Philip and Tilghman head over to the lodge to discuss their first day on the slopes.

"I think after today it's just a question of maybe getting the right equipment, running it and getting nice conditions. And if Tilghman's up for it, you want to do some skiing next year?" Philip asks his son.

Tilghman responds with a "yeah."

And with a trip to the resort, some training and appropriate ski equipment, two new ski enthusiasts have been made.