

Pursuit of powder requires a strategy

By Cindy Hirschfeld, New York Times

It's every skier's dream: to arrive at a resort just after a good storm, take one of the first lifts up and ply delightfully fresh, powdery tracks. The reality, though, is that most of us can't drop everything to chase storms. We have to plan a ski trip in advance. That means the odds of finding good snow, let alone a powder day (often defined as six or more inches of new snow), requires some strategizing.

The simplest trick (other than forking over a lot of money for a snowcat or heli-skiing trip, and even that's no guarantee) is to pick a resort known for receiving prodigious amounts of snow.

But start talking to meteorologists and others who track snowfall, and it turns out it's not so simple. The vagaries of mountain weather mean that snow conditions in a couple of months are nearly impossible to predict accurately.

"I really hate planning trips too far in the future, because you never know what's going to happen," said Joel Gratz, a Boulder, Colo.-based meteorologist and co-founder of the opensnow.com website, which specializes in ski-targeted forecasting. "Hope isn't in my vocabulary."

Short-term forecasting isn't much easier. The craggy topography of mountainous terrain is partly to blame, as is the difficulty of measuring atmospheric moisture at mountain-top elevations and in the upper atmosphere. "A lot of the tricks of mountain forecasting come down to terrain and wind direction," Gratz added. "To learn these local effects, you need to live there and have observed the weather for a few years."

There is an elite club of American resorts that average 500 or more inches of snow annually. They include Mount Baker in Washington (655); Alyeska in Alaska (650); Kirkwood (600) and Sugar Bowl (500) in California; Alta (560), Snowbird, Brighton and Solitude (500 each) in Utah; and Grand Targhee in Wyoming (500).

Read the whole story