

Skiing lesser-known resorts has advantages

By Karen Schwartz, AP

Big-name ski resorts might give you bragging rights when you go back to the office, but lesser-known mountains can give you something else: less crowded slopes, shorter lift lines and even outlets for Crock Pots.

Some of these hidden gems are located near their famous rivals, so visitors can enjoy the same choice of lodging, restaurants and off-the-slope activities.

Suzanne Greenwood, 49, an experienced skier from Nashville, happened upon one of these satellite resorts last March.

Although she'd skied the big resorts in Colorado and Utah with her husband for years, this trip was different. They were introducing their two children, ages 14 and 25, and their two friends, to skiing.

Their plan for spring break was to use the home they'd rented in Breckenridge as a base for the week while visiting several mountains in the area: Breckenridge, Vail, Beaver Creek, Keystone and Arapahoe. They'd even bought a type of pass good at multiple areas.

The first three days they skied Breckenridge, dropping \$1,000 on private lessons. Then they headed 20 minutes down the road to Arapahoe Basin.

"The kids got there and loved it," she said.

Her discovery wasn't unusual. Smaller resorts are often favored by families and beginners who don't mind having less terrain to choose from.

Greenwood's children felt more comfortable on slopes that weren't crowded. They also found the people friendlier.

She said Breckenridge had better apres ski, but, "The fact is that the kids felt they were getting skiing that was just as good" at Arapahoe.

The two resorts are about equal in the makeup of beginner, intermediate and advanced slopes, but without a doubt, there are differences.

Arapahoe has 109 trails on 960 skiable acres (388 hectares), while Breckenridge has 187 trails on 2,900 acres (1,173 hectares). The lift capacity at Arapahoe is 10,700 people per hour on six chairlifts, while Breckenridge carries four times as many people on 19 chairlifts and a gondola.

In addition, Breckenridge has more vertical: 3,400 feet compared to Arapahoe's 2,270 feet.

Nonetheless, Greenwood and her family were so happy at Arapahoe that they didn't bother skiing anywhere else, writing off the higher-priced lift pass they'd purchased.

Greg Ditrinco, editor of *Ski* magazine, said the savings on lift tickets can vary from good to nonexistent depending on the resort and how savvy the purchaser is. Still, lessons at satellite resorts generally cost less and the food isn't as pricey, though there are fewer options.

And, "No one gives a fig about what you wear, how you ski or what you're skiing on. It's an authentic experience," he said. "There's a real value to that."

Colorado has a wealth of smaller resorts, sometimes marketed as the "Gems," but so do other ski states.

In Vermont, Mad River Glen is a half-hour away from Stowe and 10 minutes away from the Sugarbush Ski Complex.

In Utah, Solitude is about 45 minutes from Deer Valley, which recently announced plans to purchase the smaller resort. The locals' resort of Brighton is also nearby.

The Mount Rose Ski Tahoe resort near Reno is within 45 minutes of both Squaw Valley and Northstar.

During the holidays, it attracts skiers from the Bay Area, who bring their rice cookers, electric kettles and occasional Crock Pot to make noodles or soup in the lodge.

"We're a lot more lax with folks doing that," than some of the big resorts, said Mount Rose spokesman Murray Blaney.

In the Canadian Rockies, Mount Norquay is just 15 minutes from the town of Banff, Alberta, far closer than Sunshine or Lake Louise.

"Because the resort is small, it only really provides enough terrain to keep people interested for a day or two, unless they are beginners, are taking lessons or race training," said Banff resident Diane Volkens, 58.

But even advanced recreational skiers enjoy it if they are mixing their time with other activities.

"You can ski an incredible amount of groomed vertical in an hour," said Volkens. "It's very handy to go for a partial day."

Visitors can shop, cross-country ski or do some work in the afternoon.

Greenwood's group enjoyed Arapahoe so much they are planning on returning this season. And this time, it's the only place they plan to ski.

"At the end of the day for the kids it's the snow and the lifts," she said. "They are less interested in the glitz."