

Don't get fleeced spending time on slopes

By Beth J. Harpaz, AP

Want to bust your winter vacation budget? Buy a one-day lift ticket at a ski resort on a holiday weekend.

That's "the most expensive way to go skiing. And that's what people hear about – the \$140 lift tickets," said Mary Jo Tarallo, executive director of Learn to Ski and Snowboard Month.

Don't get fleeced wearing your fleece. Here are six ways to score deals and discounts on ski trips.

- Online deals – Buy tickets online, not at the window. Check out ticket prices and deals at GetSkiTickets.com, Liftopia.com and Ski.com. Consider renting gear and clothing from GetOutfitted.com.

- Programs with benefits – January is Learn to Ski and Snowboard Month, when many resorts offer deals that typically include a lesson, gear rental and a lift ticket to the beginner slopes. Another program, Bring A Friend, offers incentives to pass-holders and other frequent skiers for introducing newcomers to the sport. Together, Learn to Ski and Bring A Friend programs have more than 200 resort partners in 34 states, according to Tarallo.

Some states also have "ski passport" programs that offer bargains at participating ski areas for kids in fourth, fifth and sixth grades.

- Coupons and discounts – Many regional ski areas distribute coupons through grocery stores, sporting goods stores, chains such as Costco.

And don't forget the usual discounts offered at many resorts for AAA, kids, students, members of the military and seniors.

- Passes – If you have a favorite resort, season passes save a bundle. But they're cheapest when purchased in spring.

If you like to vary your ski destinations, consider passes that offer access to different resorts. The MaxPass can be used at 39 mountains in North America. The Epic Pass can be used at 44 ski resorts around the world, from Colorado and Utah to the European Alps.

- Destination strategies – Drive-to regional ski areas are usually cheaper than big-name resorts. And if you can drive or take a bus to the slopes, you'll save on food by packing lunch and snacks. At Caberfae Peaks in Michigan, skiers bring slow-cookers and let their meals cook indoors while they're on the slopes.

If you're flying to major ski regions like the Rockies, be flexible on destinations and timing for best deals, according to Ski.com. Flights to small mountain airports fill quickly, especially at peak times such as holiday weekends. Consider flying into big airports such as Denver and driving from there. But be sure to check car rental rates, which can be steep, and weigh the potential downside of snowy roads if your drive is far.

Among the most affordable ski destinations in the Western U.S., according to Ski.com, are:

- Winter Park, Colo., with January lodging under \$100 a night.
- Salt Lake City, where the Salt Lake Super Pass offers a choice of skiing at Alta, Brighton, Snowbird, and Solitude.
- Heavenly, (fly into Reno and stay in a casino-hotel off-hill for under \$100 a night).
- Banff and Lake Louise, Alberta, Canada, where the U.S.

dollar is worth \$1.35 Canadian.

- Schweitzer Mountain in Idaho, which offers free skiing on arrival day if you show a boarding pass from flights into nearby Spokane.

Ski.com also advises comparing ski rental fees with airline baggage fees for transporting your equipment. Some package deals include equipment rentals.

- Timing is everything – Midweek is cheaper than weekend skiing. Holidays are expensive and crowded.

Ski.com analyzed weather data, costs and arrivals using 25,000 reservations, and came up with Jan. 9-14, as the best week for a ski or snowboard trip. Crowds are down, snow conditions are likely good and costs are 45 percent cheaper at top resorts compared to Christmas week, spring break or Presidents Day week, Ski.com found.