

# Sun Valley ski resort – a mountain of history

By Kathryn Reed

SUN VALLEY, Idaho – In this era of corporate consolidation in the ski industry, Sun Valley ski resort stands out as being independent. But the area also stands out as being a company town.

The Holding family owns Sun Valley in Idaho and Snowbasin in Utah through their company Sinclair Oil. So, while their ski portfolio is not large, the family and affiliates know quite a bit about the corporate world.

The 220-room Sun Valley Lodge, Sun Valley Inn, restaurants, stores, three golf courses – and ski resort – are all under the same ownership. It's diversification and control in a limited space. It seems to be working.

Like Lake Tahoe, Sun Valley is boasting about its incredible snowfall. Skier visits have hit record numbers on some days.



Sun Valley has 3,400 vertical feet of skiing. Photo/Pamala

Ward

In early January they were getting pummeled by snow, no rain. One day the fog was so heavy Pam and I had no idea where we were. Oh, but, the smiles we had on our faces when we met the rest of the gang for lunch. The powder was simply glorious – thigh deep at times, light and bountiful.

The groomers seemed to go on forever. Bald Mountain tops out at 9,150 feet, with the base being 5,750 feet.

The mountain has two distinct sides – River Run and Warm Springs. The latter is where things started, the former is where most now begin their ski day.



The hot tub at Sun Valley Lodge is larger than some hotel pools. Photo/Pamala Ward

It was in 1936 that Sun Valley first opened. One claim to fame is that it had the country's first ski lift.

Notable Olympians from the area are Kaitlyn Farrington who in 2014 won gold in halfpipe. Kaitlyn's Bowl is named after her. Picabo's Street is named after Picabo Street, who won multiple Olympic medals for ski racing. Gretchen's Gold is for Gretchen Fraser who in 1948 became the first American to win an Olympic gold in skiing.

The mountain has plenty of terrain for those who will never even make the Olympic team, let alone medal.



Sun Valley has produced multiple Olympic athletes.  
Photo/Kathryn Reed

On our third day of skiing the sun finally came out – making me understand why it's called Sun Valley. It really is a valley of sun.

Finally, I see the Sawtooth range – so craggily it's understandable how it got its name. In a more populous area I'm sure those other mountains would be developed.

What helps this resort in the middle of Idaho survive despite being so remote is in part its location. People have to want to go there. There is no drive-up market to tap into like Tahoe does. It was built by railroad tycoon Averell Harriman as the country's first destination ski resort and remains a destination today.



A full moon shines upon the historic Sun Valley Lodge.  
Photo/Pamala Ward

“I think one of the things about Sun Valley is that we are very iconic,” resort spokesman Mike Fitzgerald told *Lake Tahoe News*. “It is more of a year-round resort. We are a busy in summertime as we are in winter.”

People return year after year.

“Of our guests, about 76 percent are return visitors. We have incredible loyalty,” Fitzgerald said.

I’m one of those returnees, only it had been 35 years since I was last at Sun Valley. I don’t remember much about the mountain. What stands out from that trip with my parents, and my best friend and her parents was the sleigh ride to dinner. It’s still offered.

The free bus system through Sun Valley-Ketchum operates efficiently. We used it to get to and from the slopes each day. Stops are clearly marked and times given when the next

bus will arrive. It was refreshing coming from a city that doesn't even have a bus as a symbol at its stops.



Tom Ward pedals on the multi-use trails at the Nordic center. Photo/Pamala Ward

In 2007 three bus systems were consolidated into what is known today as Mountain Rides. "Mountain Rides operates as a public agency under a joint powers Agreement partnership that includes the cities of Bellevue, Hailey, Ketchum, Sun Valley and Blaine County. Mountain Rides' funding comes from local option sales tax and general funds from its local funding partners, as well as from the Federal Transit Administration and revenue from fares," the bus system's website says.

In casually speaking with a variety of Sun Valley employees they raved about working for the company. Full-time workers

get health and retirement benefits. Dorm style lodging is available for many employees.

One man used to live in Truckee. He's happier in Idaho. It's not as expensive to live. He boasts about the trail network being right in town and not needing to drive anywhere.

Still, others spoke of how it is expensive to live in this mountain area. Some drive more than hour to get go work.

Nonetheless, if the workers' jovialness was an act, they've been trained well. Customer service is reminiscent of Deer Valley, only more authentic in the sense there wasn't anything pretentious about Sun Valley.

The lodge was renovated a year ago, and the inn will be in the coming year.

I was there for a week in January with eight others. Three of us were in the same condo owned by Sun Valley. While it was adequate, it clearly was not on the most recent renovation schedule. We were under the impression going in that it was going to be a little higher end than it was.

We had access to the hot tub which is pool-size. It was an easy walk. But one of the best things about the lodge is the shuttle service. Perfect for getting a ride back to the condo after soaking. Drivers took us into town, to the Nordic center where Pam, Tom and I tried fat bike tires for the first time. (Fun, but no need to add another sport to my repertoire.) The center, though, would be worth exploring further because of the myriad snowshoe and cross country trails. In summer this is where golfers flock.

While the Sun Valley-Ketchum area has a bit of a rugged feel, it is also modern. The restaurants offer a variety of fare – from local trout to wild game to plenty of potatoes. Being a vegetarian was not a problem.