



SKI HILL GUIDEBOOK THE WEST

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FORWARD

By Mark Bliss

I often get asked “What is the best ski hill you’ve been to?” or, “Where should I go?” There is not an easy answer - it really depends on what type of experience you are looking for, your willingness of travel, and resilience to crowds and altitude.

- Do you want to head out west, or east?
- When is your trip? Early-season, mid-season, or spring?
- Does altitude make you sick?
- What is your experience level? Beginner, intermediate, or advanced?
- Are you OK waiting in lift lines, or want to ski laps?
- Do you want high end resort amenities and an après experience? Or a local’s hangout with a more chill vibe?
- Do you want to be close to a major city and airport, or are you willing to drive a little?

Based on the answer(s) above, the best “choice” changes dramatically!

I live in Minnesota. If I’m going to get on an airplane or drive 12hours+ with the family and all our gear, I’m heading west towards the Rocky Mountains. But what to choose? This guide will help YOU figure out how to best answer that question. I call this: Ski Hill Guidebook: The West.

This is a work in progress from 25+ years of trips I’ve taken, starting in the Midwest as a teenager, years of UMN-SSC college ski club trips and couch crashing out west, then as a young adult chasing steeper and more challenging terrain, and now introducing my young children to the sport. I’ve personally been to 43 in the USA, and 6 internationally. For this guidebook, I’ve only selected the resorts west of Missouri River, with at least 400 acres and 400-foot vertical. For the resorts I haven’t visited yet, I spoke with people who have actually skied them for their opinion, tips and advice. And lastly, I’ve scoured the internet, resort webpages, blogs, Reddit posts, and used AI to fill in some of the glaring gaps and inconsistencies. I try to tell the good and the bad, all with candid honesty.

I’ve skied dozens of the well-known, big name resorts. I’ve also skied dozens of the smaller, independent off-the-beaten-track hills. I can tell you - hands down - I prefer the small hill vibe, where you can ski laps, spend under \$100 a day for a ticket, and avoid everything that massive crowds entail. I’m OK with a peaceful ride on a slower chairlift at a local’s mountain - all surrounded by amazing scenery of open gladed tree runs with untracked snow waiting to be explored.

Sugar Bowl Ski Resort

California

- Summit Elevation: 8,383 feet
- Base Elevation: 6,883 feet
- Vertical Drop: 1,500 feet
- Longest Run: 2 miles
- Skiable Acres: 1,680 acres
- Average Annual Snowfall: 500 inches
- Best For: Multiday

Sugar Bowl Ski Resort sits atop Donner Summit in the Sierra Nevada, a tucked-away treasure 45 miles west of Reno just outside of Truckee that oozes old-school charm and delivers consistently deep, incredible snow. This place gets BURIED in powder, turning it into a haven for skiers who live for fresh tracks. The mountain keeps things chill with its 1,600 acres and 1,500-foot vertical drop with terrain that swings from mellow groomers to steep chutes and gladed tree runs (though the groomers tend to roll with a mix of steep pitches and flat stretches, crisscrossed by intersections). Compared to Tahoe's busier giants, Sugar Bowl feels quiet, letting you carve turns without the chaos. It's also the closest big hill to the Bay Area, and one of the last family-owned resorts in the Lake Tahoe area - the homeowners of its base village hold the voting rights. Kicking off in the 1930s with Walt Disney funding California's first chairlift - yep, the Mickey Mouse guy who now has the 7,953-foot Mt. Disney peak named after him - Sugar Bowl claims a slice of ski history and still rocks that vintage mountain soul, offering a classic mountain experience with modern amenities. Its summit sits a touch lower than its neighbors, but the snow quality makes up for it, allowing a season that stretches mid-November to late April. It's a breeze to reach for a day trip, and the vibe suits everyone from families wanting a laid-back outing to hardcore skiers hunting powder. The backcountry around here is a playground if you're geared up for it, with wild terrain just past the boundary fence. Watch out for the flatter runouts that can slow you down, but pick a run like "Silver Belt" off Mt. Lincoln - a steep, scenic chute with hidden pockets of snow - and you'll see why this place keeps its loyal crowd coming back year after year.

Silverton Mountain Resort

Colorado

- Summit Elevation: 12,300 feet
- Base Elevation: 10,400 feet
- Vertical Drop: 1,900 feet
- Longest Run: 4 miles
- Skiable Acres: 1,819 acres
- Average Annual Snowfall: 400 inches
- Best For: Multiday

Silverton Mountain Resort, buried deep in Colorado's San Juan Mountains (6.5 hours southwest of Denver) isn't your typical ski hill - it's a raw, expert-only beast that dishes out some of North America's hardest terrain. Think steep relentless pitches, claustrophobic chutes, and deep, untouched powder - no groomed highways or bunny slopes here, just 1,800 acres of pure, unfiltered challenge everywhere you look. The resort opened in 2002 with a lone double chairlift (acquired from CA's Mammoth Mountain) that hauls you up to 12,300 feet - but that's just the start - most runs demand a hike along windswept ridgelines to unlock its real goods. This was the intent from day one - an all-expert ski area with no easy way down, no clearcut trails, no grooming, and no real estate development. Silverton also offers heli-skiing packages or single-run drops for those ready to splurge and explore its surrounding 22,000 acres. The iconic "No Name" plunges you into a steep, powdery abyss with jaw-dropping views of the rugged San Juans, setting the tone for a day that's equal parts thrill and test. It's a skier's proving ground, averaging 400 inches of snow that sticks to its wild, ungroomed slopes. This place doesn't mess around - lines snake out the ticket window daily, where you'll have to show your beacon, shovel, and probe just to score a pass - avalanche gear isn't optional, it's your lifeline. The vibe's intense yet electric, drawing hardcore skiers who live for the rush of staring down a line that might just push their limits. Silverton's not about comfort - it's about scaring yourself silly in the best way, finding your limit, and maybe blowing past it. With a no hand-holding and DIY ethos, it's a pilgrimage for those who crave the real, untamed pulse of big mountain skiing, heli-drops and all.

Bogus Basin

Idaho

- Summit Elevation: 7,582 feet
- Base Elevation: 5,800 feet
- Vertical Drop: 1,782 feet
- Longest Run: 1.5 miles
- Skiable Acres: 2,600 acres
- Average Annual Snowfall: 150 inches
- Best For: Multiday

Bogus Basin, perched just outside Boise, Idaho, is a local's favorite that's been a ski staple since 1942, run by the non-profit Bogus Basin Recreation Association with a mission to keep its slopes affordable and fun. A 16-mile twisty and windy road snakes up from downtown Boise - echoing the vibe of Ski Santa Fe. Its 2,600 acres has two personalities: the front side rolls out sunny, gentle runs perfect for beginners and terrain park shredders, while the back side dives into cold, shady steeps that'll wake you up fast. "Wildcat" and "Mary's Ridge" on the back half stretch long and wild, carving through pines with knockout views of the Treasure Valley region. The backside's long, untamed runs and explore-worthy gladed pockets give you that hidden-gem thrill, while the front keeps it chill for casual cruisers. It's usually a ghost town crowd-wise, offering heaps of tree-skiing nooks - if the snow's deep enough - though spotty snowfall (averaging 150 inches) can leave those glades rocky and thin. Temps often hover in the teens, keeping it crisp but biting. Don't sleep on Bogus though - it's got the goods to hang with bigger-name resorts like Sun Valley or Tamarack, especially when the snow gods cooperate. The base area can buzz with Boise day-trippers making a quick escape - but once you are up top, the crowds thin out. Snow's the wildcard - when it dumps, the trees and steeps sing, but lean years can dull the edge. Fun Fact: Bogus Basin is named after a gold swindling scheme in the 1880s where crooks sprayed fake gold dust on cave walls to sell shares to unsuspecting prospectors. Still, for a low-key, wallet-friendly shred with a local soul, Bogus is a sneaky win that shines bright when timing and powder align.

Red Lodge Mountain

Montana

- Summit Elevation: 9,416 feet
- Base Elevation: 7,016 feet
- Vertical Drop: 2,400 feet
- Longest Run: 2.5 miles
- Skiable Acres: 1,600 acres
- Average Annual Snowfall: 250 inches
- Best For: Multiday

Red Lodge Mountain, a quick 15-minute haul from the town of Red Lodge, is a laid-back, family-friendly spot that's been dishing out honest skiing since its first chairs spun in 1960. Sprawling across 1,600 acres with a respectable 2,400-foot vertical drop from its Grizzly Peak, it's a no-nonsense playground packing wide-open beginner stretches, groomed cruisers, and steep, tree-choked runs that'll keep the adrenaline junkies grinning. Billed as Montana skiing "pure and simple," it has a throwback vibe - empty lift lines with regular folks shredding on a layout that's easy to navigate. From its summit, you're peering over forests and the charming mining town below, with pickup trucks and family mini vans jamming its parking lot, a testament to its blue-collar charm. Snowfall's a roll of the dice - some seasons the lower stuff stays thin 'til late, but when the storms hit, it's as good as it gets, with powdery shots through the widely spaced pines that feel like a secret stash on every run down. The hill is perched just outside town, a winding climb through silent woods that are pretty as hell when the snow's flying. Down in Red Lodge, you've got bars slinging drinks, grub that sticks to your ribs, and a candy store straight out of a history book to raid. Red Lodge Mountain isn't perfect - the slog from the parking lot to the base chairlift is a decently long, leg-burning uphill hike that'll have you cursing your ski boots before you even clip in (dump your gear, then go park!). And the snow can flake out, leaving the low spots patchy. But when the conditions align, this place rips with a raw, unpolished edge that's pure Montana - affordable, laid-back, and built for skiers who'd rather carve turns than chase frills. It's a family hill with bite - perfect for a first-time trip out west, and that's exactly why it sticks.

Mt Bachelor Ski Resort

Oregon

- Summit Elevation: 9,065 feet
- Base Elevation: 6,300 feet
- Vertical Drop: 3,365 feet
- Longest Run: 4 miles
- Skiable Acres: 4,323 acres
- Average Annual Snowfall: 460 inches
- Best For: Multiday

Mt. Bachelor Ski Resort, sprawled across a volcanic cone in central Oregon's Cascade Range, is a high-desert shredder's paradise with the state's loftiest skiable perch at 9,065 feet. Blanketing 4,300 acres with 101 runs, it's a beast of a mountain - raking in an astounding 460 inches of dry, fluffy snow a year. It caters to everyone; gentle groomers for rookies, flowing intermediates, and steep, powdery bowls like the Northwest Territory for the pros. The iconic "Beverly Hills" run cruises long and smooth from the summit, dishing out 360-degree stunners - think Three Sisters, Broken Top, and the Deschutes Valley sprawling below. At Mt. Bachelor you can ride off the summit 360° in all directions due to the volcano's shape, with the vast, open bowls funneling you back down to one of the mountain's catchlines. With a 3,365-foot vertical drop and a modern lift lineup (11 chairs, mostly high-speed), it's got flow, plus terrain parks that ramp from mellow to wild for the freestyle crowd. This isn't some sleepy hill - Mt. Bachelor's a heavy hitter 22 miles from Bend, drawing shredders with its vast, varied terrain and a season that stretches from November to May thanks to its high base at 6,300 feet. The east side's sheltered glades hold snow like a champ, while the west can get wind-whipped; still, the dry powder's a dream when it dumps. No slopeside village here - just a handful of lodges slinging hearty grub and a vibe that's more about skiing than schmoozing. Crowds can swell on weekends, but the sheer size swallows them up. It's raw, volcanic, and packed with Cascade soul - perfect for anyone seeking big runs, big views, and a big-time Oregon ski fix.

Deer Valley Resort

Utah

- Summit Elevation: 9,570 feet
- Base Elevation: 6,570 feet
- Vertical Drop: 3,000 feet
- Longest Run: 2.5 miles
- Skiable Acres: 2,026 acres
- Average Annual Snowfall: 400 inches
- Best For: Multiday

Deer Valley Resort, positioned in the heart of Park City, Utah, is a plush skier's paradise that redefines mountain luxury in the Wasatch Range. Sprawling across 2,000 acres with a 3,000-foot vertical drop from its 9,570-foot summit, it dishes out 400 inches of snow a year over 103 runs - silky groomers for cruisers, steep chutes off Empire Peak for the bold, and gentle slopes for newbies - all kept flawless by top-tier snowmaking and grooming that's practically an art form. And the resort has BIG expansion plans in the years to come. The iconic "Jordanelle" run sweeps down a long, pristine ribbon with postcard views of the Jordanelle Reservoir, but it's the service that steals the show: complimentary ski valets haul your gear from lot to lift, a North American exclusive that screams VIP. With 27 lifts, including a slick gondola, lines vanish, letting you rack up laps fast. This isn't your gritty backcountry hill - Deer Valley's all about indulgence, with gourmet dining (think seared elk and sushi), luxe lodges dripping in wood-and-stone charm, and high-end shopping that could outfit a runway. The vibe's upscale but warm, a skier-only haven like Alta (no snowboards are allowed) and just 40 minutes from Salt Lake City, though the price tag matches the polish - expect to shell out for the privilege. Its terrain has everything - glades, moguls, and bowls that mix with flawless groomers. The resort's pampering still sets it apart from other SLC destinations: ski-in/ski-out digs, attentive staff, and a base village that hums with sophistication. For those chasing a world-class ski escape where every detail's dialed, Deer Valley's a plush, powdery dream that's worth every penny, err, twenty.

About the Authors



Mark Bliss and family make their home in Excelsior, Minnesota, a western Minneapolis suburb situated just south of Lake Minnetonka. Mark, his wife, and their daughters, Arden and Willa - ages 9 and 8 - love the outdoors. For Mark, a lifelong skier, nothing beats hitting the slopes with his family and passing down his enthusiasm for the mountains. His

daughters, who've been carving turns since age 3, are key contributors to this guidebook, tagging along to explore ski resorts across the Western USA, noting their likes and dislikes, creating artwork, and tossing out creative ideas that make this a genuine family project.

This guidebook is a living work, set to be refreshed yearly to keep its insights current and useful. Mark, with his pint-sized assistants, has poured effort into gathering spot-on details about each resort, weighing their pros and cons from personal visits and tapping into AI to bridge any gaps. A surprising hurdle along the way was the patchy data from resorts themselves - stats vary widely depending on who's reporting. Still, the goal holds firm: to deliver a trustworthy, lively rundown of top ski spots in the West, fueled by a family's deep-rooted passion for skiing and discovery. We hope this helps with planning your next great adventure! For more information or to purchase a printed copy, visit <http://www.2rengineering.com/skibook.html>



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