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Off

BY ELAINE ROGERS

the BEATEN SLOPES

Skip the crowds but hoard the fun at these "best-kept secret" ski resorts

FOR THE LEISURE TRAVELER, IT'S A QUINTESSENTIAL QUANDARY: finding suitable and stylish amenities while avoiding the crush of other like-minded vacationers. And when skiing tops the agenda, this uphill battle may seem particularly slippery, since it's harder to enjoy spectacular scenery or keep a firm footing on a mountain packed with people.

When ski season arrives, church groups, college clubs and various other organizations routinely seek out fun on the slopes in clusters, hopping on tour buses and heading for the hills, but long lines and claustrophobic crowds leave most of us longing for home. Meanwhile, a little-known getaway destination may come up short as well if it lacks the attractions and luxury offerings you tend to expect from a holiday.

Whether your ski destination caters more to the expert and adventure skiing crowds or family vacationers seeking gentler hills and soothing spa treatments, nothing beats a wintry wonderland that makes visitors feel it's theirs for the taking, *sans* that two-hour wait at either the gondola station or the hot chocolate concession.

Kristen Cherry of Moguls.com, a travel wholesaler specializing in ski trips for groups, says travelers who band together for ski trips typically want to go to places that are large enough to offer them plenty of entertainment both on and off the slopes, yet small enough "that they can practically take over the whole town." With that in mind, *Destinations* tracked a few road-less-traveled options to help you take a miss on crowds without scrimping on the fun.

◆ Schweitzer Mountain, Idaho

In northern Idaho, just 45 miles south of the Canadian border, Schweitzer Mountain is said to be the namesake of an old Swiss hermit who took up residence at the base of the scenic, out-of-the-way summit in an effort to get away from it all. Despite considerable development since, the destination still holds that allure. With the largest acreage in Idaho and a vertical drop of 2,400 feet that places it second to the state's prestigious Sun Valley, its slopes consistently earn accolades from sports magazines that wax poetic about the pure powder and unsullied terrain to be found there. *Powder* magazine touts Schweitzer's "unmatched tree skiing," for instance, and *Skiing* magazine praises its "1,200 acres of tamarack glades and curvy bowls." Even though it has larger acreage than Sun Valley and offers the additional surprise of

receiving 100 more inches of annual snowfall, crowds are sparse, and Schweitzer Mountain remains a largely undiscovered peak. Spokesperson Jennifer Elkind says current attendance figures average about one person per acre, making lines and wait times nonexistent. Part of the reason for the lack of visitors is a history of minimal accommodations that lasted through the '90s, but new management and recent renovations have remedied that, adding the accoutrements necessary for happy travelers and earning additional glowing reviews.

"The scenery is just incredible, and they've done a really good job with the accommodations," says Mitch Knothe of the Idaho Division of Tourism Development.

Located 90 minutes by car or bus from the hub of Spokane, Wash., Schweitzer Mountain Resort boasts 82 named runs and open bowls that stretch across an expanse of 2,900 skiable acres. Stella, Idaho's only six-person, high-speed lift, draws visitors to the top of its peak and offers views of three mountain ranges spanning three states and Canada. Two high-speed quads, one triple chairlift, three doubles, one handle tow, a T-bar and a conveyer lift also help skiers get where they need to be, while Schweitzer

(background) Schweitzer Mountain in Idaho.

(below) Powder Mountain in Utah is referred to as Pow Mow by locals.



offers a mix of difficulty levels, rating its terrain as 40 percent intermediate and 20 percent beginner, as well as 35 percent advanced and 5 percent expert.

The resort has two ski-in/ski-out lodges plus some newer condominiums. In nearby Sandpoint, a picturesque alpine village, additional accommodations supplement the options and are more modestly priced.

Other attractions in this out-of-the-limelight treasure include tubing via Hermit's Hollow Tubing Center, spa treatments at Selkirk Lodge's Heaven, The Spa, and visits to Sandpoint's Litehouse Bleu Cheese Factory and Pend d'Oreille Winery. For a different kind of sightseeing, an extra attraction that appeals

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to rail fans is “the funnel,” where Burlington Northern, Union Pacific and Montana Rail Link tracks converge, and an estimate of 50 trains funnel through the town’s main track.

● **More resort info:** www.schweitzer.com; 800-831-8810.
(Group travel services: ext. 2820.)

◆ **Fernie, British Columbia**

Canada attracts adventure skiers from around the globe with famed ski destinations like Whistler Blackcomb, but experts say it’s possible to avail yourself of spectacular terrain and magical snow in lesser known venues. Josh Miller, a consultant with Vancouver tour operator, Fresh Tracks Inc., claims that nothing compares to the offerings of Fernie Alpine Resort in British Columbia. Tucked amid a zone called the Lizard Range in the Canadian Rockies, Fernie doesn’t have much marketing support, Miller notes, and he says that’s “because it doesn’t have to.”

“Quite frankly, the snow there is the best I’ve ever

ous dog-sledding, ice fishing, and snowmobiling tours. While recent improvements have added more groomed trails, many in-bound slopes still retain their natural beauty, which makes avalanches a real possibility and keeps 60 professional patrollers on hand at all times to ensure skier safety.

Base camp is an updated mountainside village frequently described by visitors as intimate and casual, but it has a selection of restaurants, bars, coffee shops and even a grocery store nestled amid four lodges, an inn, a chalet and townhouses. Three miles away, Fernie, a turn-of-the-century coal-mining town, was rebuilt in brick and stone after it burned down twice in the early part of the century. Today, it attracts travelers with a comfortable blend of shops, clubs and dining opportunities in addition to five more lodges and hotels, plus two hostels.

● **More information:** www.skifernie.com; 250-423-4655.

Fernie in British Columbia is a charming, turn-of-the-century town with an annual snowfall of 350 inches.



seen,” Miller explains. “When other resorts have grass peeping through, Fernie will still be getting fresh snowfalls, and it has a ton of terrain to make everybody happy.”

Fernie’s mountain statistics list 350 inches of snow per year on 2,404 skiable acres, and the skiing mecca boasts a summit elevation of 6,316 and a vertical drop of 2,816 feet. Ten lifts service 111 trails, and diehard powderhounds cherish the resort’s five alpine bowls with numerous glades and chutes. Three cat-skiing operations promise adventure along with vari-

◆ **Powder Mountain and Snowbasin, Ogden, Utah**

Ski experts say it’s a testament to the wealth of noteworthy slopes and ski resorts found in Utah that a well-known favorite of residents — conveniently situated within an hour of Salt Lake City, the state’s capital and a major travel hub — could remain so clear of crowds, yet Powder Mountain, fondly referred to as Pow Mow by those-in-the-know, has managed it. The resort’s rustic charm exemplifies skiing the way it used to be, with three surface lifts and four chairs serving its expansive terrain. Based 20 miles from the small community of Ogden and boasting an impressive 500 inches of snowfall each year, Pow Mow sprawls across 5,500 acres on three mountains, and this year, management has added all-day snow-

cat excursions on an extra 2,000 acres of out-of-bounds slopes.

Untracked powder is the order of the day throughout the massive site as most of the 124 runs are ungroomed, but 20 miles of manicured trails accommodate other tastes, and a variety of trails are groomed nightly for the snowboarder set. Public relations director Carolyn Daniels reports the happy news that, for the third year in a row, *Ski* magazine has ranked the aptly-named Powder Mountain third for the quality of its snow, then gave the resort top

billing this fall for value and “getting more bang for your buck.”

As an added bonus, Ogden presents a rare two-in-one ski opportunity with Snowbasin, a competing resort, situated just a stone’s throw away. Snowbasin enjoys the status of being one of the oldest continuously-operating ski resorts in America, and was the site of several races during the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics. It is smaller than Pow Mow but boasts similar merits. Situated in the Wasatch-Cache National Forest, its highest peak, Mt. Ogden, reaches 9,570-foot skyward, and the resort boasts 104 runs and 2,650 skiable acres.

Snowbasin has two massive log building lodges on-site, while Powder Mountain has cozier quarters on-site and easy access to accommodations in Eden, just five miles away. Meanwhile, shuttles run daily between both resorts and picturesque Ogden City and the Upper Valley area’s varied hotel and condominiums options. Heliskiing powder tours, snowmobile outings and night skiing add variety to the slopes, while off-the-mountain, leisure time is well spent on spa services, carriage rides and at a small selection of après-ski saloons and beer gardens. Union Station in Ogden houses four separate museums, including the Railroad Museum and the Browning Firearms Museum, and art galleries and restaurants line historic 25th Street, one of the last remaining historic districts of the Rail Era.

● More info: www.powdermountain.com; 801-745-3772; www.snowbasin.com; 801-620-1013. Group lodgings: 801-745-3787.

◆ Crested Butte, Colorado

In Colorado, a state that defines North American skiing with 26 resorts to call its own, white powder is plentiful, albeit tougher to find *sans* crowds and commercialism. On an ever-shrinking list of resorts that have altitude without the attitude, the name Crested Butte almost always appears. Moguls.com sends skiers there by the busload, and Cherry says it’s one of the last bastions of anti-glitz—a funky, laid-back resort town with the kind of amenities and breathtaking beauty that does Colorado proud. “It’s a little bit off the beaten tracks,” she explains, “but it’s great because it’s a smaller town that has lots of things to do. It’s rustic with cute shops in a quaint place,


and it still gives you that great ski experience. That’s harder to find these days.”

Tucked away in the Colorado Rockies’ Elk Mountain Range, 150 miles east of Grand Junction and 230 miles from Denver, Crested Butte mixes Victorian charm with Everest-steep inclines and is marketed as “the last great Colorado ski town.”



Spectator opportunities on the 1,167-acre resort abound with frequent winter events and competi-

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tions, and supplemental activities include tubing, dog sledding, ice skating, sleigh rides and sledding. The resort's base camp, dubbed Mountaineer Village, lies just three miles from the town's historical district and includes a conference center and aquatic/civic center as well as seven lodges and hotels.

New management took over in 2004, bringing with it a \$57.3 million dollar improvement project geared toward remodeling on-site facilities, expanding snowmaking, updating lifts—now numbering 16—and adding three new trails and 15 intermediate acres. With a generous supply of extreme terrain, Crested Butte is credited with some of the best snowboarding terrain in North America, and resort officials are quick to boast of the area's 300 inches of annual snowfall, a vertical drop of 3,062 feet and a mix of 20 percent advanced slopes and 57 percent intermediate.

● More info: www.skicb.com; 970-349-2382.

◆ Jackson Hole, Wyoming

It might seem strange to list a resort situated in the shade of Wyoming's Grand Teton National Park and within the awesome wilderness of the 1.7-million-acre Bridger-Teton National Forest on a roster of undiscovered ski getaways, but a rather remote location and the magnificence of its surroundings gives Jackson Hole its unpopulated and best-kept-secret status. Spanning 2,500 acres and requiring a five-hour drive from Salt Lake City, the rustic resort

(right) Jackson Hole by day and by night (below).



demonstrates what Wyoming residents mean when they sing about wide open spaces. Jackson Hole's national sales manager, Spencer Long, says the scenic site averages about 6,500 visitors a week, a number that computes to about three people per acre. "There aren't any worries here about fighting the crowds or standing in lines," he says.

A summit elevation rises to 10,500 feet and



offers a 4,139-foot drop to Teton Village, its base camp. An annual snowfall average of 459 inches keeps adventure skiers happy, and last year, the region recorded a record high of 605 inches. In addition, Jackson Hole offers steep in-bound terrain on Rendezvous Mountain, where half of the expansive acreage is designated for expert skiers. Lower elevations plus gentler slopes on adjacent Apres Vous Mountain accommodate intermediate skiing, and the resort includes a reputable learning area.

Lodging is generous in Teton Village, with condos and several posh retreats, among them, a Bavarian-style Alpenhof, a newly-renovated Snake River Lodge & Spa, and Four Seasons Resort Jackson Hole.

Teton Village is self-contained and promotes a fairly consistent rugged theme with restaurants and rowdy bars bearing names like The Mangy Moose, Million Dollar Cowboy Bar and Log Cabin Saloon. Although there's plenty to do on-site, expect to do some driving to capture the local color of this destination's authentic Western frontier town and the monumental surroundings. Twelve miles away, Jackson Hole's classic town square is marked by elk antler gateway arches and features mercantile stores and bordellos revamped as gourmet restaurants, boutiques and coffeehouses. Outdoors, choices range from sleigh rides on the National Elk Refuge to dogsled adventures in the Targhee National Forest and snowmobile excursions to Yellowstone and Grand Teton.

● More information: www.jacksonhole.com;
Jackson Hole Central Reservations, 800-443-6931;
Groups, 307-739-2635. ■