



Deer Valley rises above the Jordanelle Reservoir.

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At Deer Valley, Utah, a One-Size-Fits-All Vacation

By NANCY M. BETTER

OVER the last decade, my family has traveled to ski resorts throughout the United States and Canada — from Beaver Creek, Colo., to Mont Tremblant, Quebec — determinedly in search of kid-friendly surroundings. We wanted it all: first-rate instruction for the three kids, challenging terrain for the adults and plenty of fresh powder for everyone.

What we got all too often resembled an episode of “Survivor.”

First the 10-hour trip, including the plane flight and the tortuous mountain drive in a rented minivan. Then the teeming lift lines, the overpriced mediocre food and the jammed ski classes. Plus the endless wait for just about everything, from lockers at the base lodge to tables in the local restaurants. And the credit card bill a month later that earned nearly enough miles for next year’s holiday.

Last spring, we ignored the come-ons from “family-friendly” resorts (“Kids ski for free!” “Snow cone parties!” “Igloo contests!”) and discovered the distinct charms of Deer Valley. When Deer Valley was founded in 1981, the Utah resort was aimed at affluent, middle-age skiers looking for perfectly groomed slopes and gold-plated service. Lately, the area has added both more expert-level terrain and more pint-sized amenities, making it an increasingly popular destination for families.

It’s also easy to get to — just 36 miles from the Salt Lake City airport — and you do not need a car, since regular shuttle buses run to the airport (\$19 to \$32) and to downtown Park City.

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The only downside to this highly civilized ski vacation: the cost. Lodgings and lift tickets (generally \$77 a day, \$45 for ages 4 to 12, and \$20 for 3 and younger) don't come cheap at Deer Valley. But many restaurants offer flat-rate \$5.99 kids' menus, and some attractions — like sleigh rides and dog sled treks — discount children's prices by 50 percent.

The real value at Deer Valley, however, lies in the amount of skiing you can get for your money: if you take a flight from New York City by 7:30 a.m., you can be on the slopes by noon local time. When you arrive, you can even convert your boarding pass into a free same-day lift ticket at any Deer Valley sales window. Given the vast amount of terrain (21 lifts serving 91 runs) and the lack of lines (ticket sales are limited to 6,500 a day), skiers might squeeze in twice as many runs during a weekend at Deer Valley as at another resort.

Deer Valley comprises five peaks nestled in the Wasatch Mountain range, overlooking the Jordanelle Reservoir. For families with small children, Bald Eagle Mountain (8,400 feet) and Little Baldy Peak (7,950 feet) in the Deercreek area provide plenty of wide-open beginner trails. Favorite cruising runs include Navigator and Success.

The Snow Park Lodge is the base for the Deer Valley Ski School, among the country's largest, with more than 500 instructors. Reservations are recommended for the Ski School (888-754-8477) as well as for the Children's Center, a state-licensed day care facility serving infants as young as 3 months. Prices start at \$150 for a program of lessons, lift tickets, lunch and snacks from 10 a.m. to 3:45 p.m., as well as a daily progress report.

Among many little touches borrowed from the luxury hospitality industry are free pagers for parents worried about cellphone coverage on the mountain, free ski storage, midmountain restrooms and uniformed "ski hosts" who serve as guides and conduct free tours four times daily.

Families with intermediate to advanced skiers flock to Flagstaff Mountain (9,100 feet), Bald Mountain (9,400 feet) and Deer Valley's highest peak, Empire Canyon (9,570 feet). Single and double black diamond runs abound; try Know You Don't (site of the 2002 Olympic slalom events) for narrow rock-lined chutes and Champion (site of the 2002 Olympic freestyle events) for steep mogul fields. Speed lovers can race against the clock or challenge a friend on the National Standard race course halfway up Bald Mountain.

Daredevils adore the TNT (Tricks and Turns) Park, off the Little Chief lift. Since Deer Park has a no-snowboarders rule, young skiers are free to ride the double-barrel rails and soar off the tabletop jumps — without their parents fretting about out-of-control collisions.

Deciding where to eat on the mountain can be difficult, since excellent choices abound. Silver Lake Restaurant (open 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.) offers multiple stations with freshly prepared sandwiches, salads, soups and pastas. Snowshoe Tommy's and Cushing's Cabin (both 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.) serve simple snacks and drinks. The mountain's newest place to eat, the Empire Canyon Grill (9:15 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.), has a full menu along with an outdoor seating and picture-perfect views.

Deer Valley's après-ski action centers on "the beach," the snow-covered lawn just outside the Silver Lake Lodge on Bald Eagle Mountain. On warm days, rows of chairs are set up facing the slopes. Adults enjoy fireside cocktails in the elegant lounge of the Stein Ericksen Lodge (800-453-1302, www.steinelodge.com), while families favor the cozy Goldener Hirsch Inn (800-252-3373, www.goldenerhirschinn.com) for chocolate fondue.

If time permits, don't miss a visit to nearby Utah Olympic Park about five miles north of Deer Valley (435-658-4200 or www.olymparks.com). Take a self-guided walking tour of the grounds, including the ski jumps and the bobsled, luge and skeleton tracks, where aspiring Olympians can be seen training.

While at the park, spend an hour at the new Joe Quinney Winter Sports Center with its exhibits on Utah ski history and the 2002 Olympic Winter Games. Try skiing a virtual reality slalom course, or hoisting a 45-pound curling stone. Science buffs can learn about the chemistry that creates Utah's cloudlike powder (hint: 10 inches of "Sierra cement" in California equals 1 inch of water, while 35 inches of Utah powder equals 1 inch of water.) Thrill-seekers can pay to ride the Xtreme Zipline (\$22), which travels downhill at up to 55 miles an hour.

At night, Park City's lively Main Street is the place to be. A turn-of-the-century mining town with a gutsy frontier feeling, Park City offers everything from upscale boutiques to touristy T-shirt stores. Family dining favorites include Bandits' Grill and Bar (440 Main Street, 435-649-7337), where the \$49.99 Outlaw special for four includes a pound of steak, a whole chicken, a rack of baby back ribs, a quart of baked beans and a loaf of garlic bread.

For dessert, visit Cows Ice Cream (402 Main Street) or the Rocky Mountain Chocolate Factory (510 Main Street). If your trip includes a grownup night out (the Children's Center can recommend a babysitter), enjoy the shrimp scampi (\$23) or veal marsala (\$25) in the Tuscan-inspired dining room at Cisero's (306 Main Street, 435-649-5044).

For the 2006-7 season, Deer Valley has invested \$7 million in improvements. The existing Sterling triple chairlift on Bald Mountain has been replaced with a high-speed detachable quad; the glade terrain off the Sultan chairlift has been expanded by 65 acres. The Snow Park Lodge, dating from the resort's 1981 opening, has been expanded to include new restrooms accessible from the slopes.

As more families vacation at Deer Valley, management plans to expand the resort's lodging inventory. But Bob Wheaton, the resort's president and general manager, said: "Our goal is not to get more and more people on the mountain. Rather than provide a less than optimal experience for 7,000 people, we would rather provide an excellent experience for 6,500 people."

VISITOR INFORMATION

Deer Valley (800-424-3337; www.deervalley.com) lies 36 miles east of Salt Lake City International Airport in Park City. Lodgings include hotels, condominiums and town homes, many with ski-in, ski-out locations. Hotel rooms closest to Deer Valley start at \$265 a night in regular season, and a two-bedroom condominium can range from \$3,000 to \$20,000 a week. Deer Valley Resort Central Reservations (800-558-3337) handles bookings throughout the area, including lower priced offerings.

If you are staying several days, you can buy a Silver Passport, which provides privileges to the Park City and the Canyons resorts, as well as Deer Valley. If you want to fly in the morning and be on the mountain by lunch, try the Quick Start program (redemption vouchers available at www.parkcityinfo.com/skiing/quickstart).