

Mega-passes hit slopes



CAPTIONS

Directional ski signs in Telluride

(Bob Ecker)

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By Bob Ecker, Special to Tribune Newspapers

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The ski resort world seems to be mirroring the American corporate landscape, with the "big boys" buying up smaller resorts through mergers and acquisitions. But before you bemoan the loss of "your" independent ski hill, keep in mind that such corporate purchases can be a good thing.

Vail Resorts, KSL Capital Partners and Powdr Corp. are among corporations that have bought chunks of the ski world. One upside is that they have the resources to pour investments into their new holdings, such as state-of-the-art snow-making equipment, faster chairlifts and new dining options. Another gain: passes that let skiers sample several resorts.

Thus, there are superb values out there this year. Plus, the western side of the continent already has seen a good amount of snow, and a few resorts, such as Colorado's Copper Mountain, opened Nov. 1. Many others plan to open in November, a good omen for the industry.

Get a pass

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Make it Epic: The popular Epic Pass (epicpass.com) offered by Vail Resorts has expanded, so you can now ski at a whopping 26 resorts worldwide. The full Epic Pass, \$729, allows unlimited access to all Vail Resorts properties in the United States, plus five days of skiing at selected resorts in Austria, France and Switzerland.



A star in the East

The U.S. resorts are Arapahoe Basin, Beaver Creek, Breckenridge, Eldora, Keystone and Vail in Colorado; Canyons in Park City, Utah; Heavenly, Kirkwood and Northstar at Lake Tahoe, Calif.; Afton Alps in Minnesota; and Mount Brighton in Michigan. The European skiing is in Arlberg, Austria; Les 3 Vallees, France; and Verbier, Switzerland. Starting Nov. 22, there is a race for the first person to ski at all 26 resorts (epicrace.epicpass.com). The prize for the first 10: a lifetime Epic Pass. All in all, the pass is an amazing deal for people with a healthy ski appetite and a passport that needs new European stamps.

MAPS

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The Mountain Collective: Back and better than ever, this pass is a great deal if you want to experience some of the finest resorts in North America this season. The Mountain Collective, currently \$379, includes two ski days at Squaw Valley/Alpine Meadows in the Lake Tahoe area of California, two days at Alta/Snowbird in Utah, two days at Aspen/Snowmass in Colorado, two days at the impressive Jackson Hole in Wyoming, two days at Mammoth in California and two days at Whistler/Blackcomb in British Columbia. More details: mountaincollective.com.

Powder Alliance: All resorts aren't run by mega-corporations just yet. Twelve plucky independent ski resorts have banded together to form the Powder Alliance (powderalliance.com). This is the inaugural season for this skier's dozen group of smaller powder havens throughout the American West. The resorts are Crested Butte in Colorado; Snowbasin in Utah; Angel Fire in New Mexico; Arizona Snowbowl in Arizona; Sierra-at-Tahoe, China Peak and Mountain High in California; Timberline and Mount Hood Skibowl in Oregon; Stevens Pass in Washington; Schweitzer in Idaho; and Bridger Bowl in Montana. After buying a premium pass to one of the Powder Alliance resorts, guests then can have three free ski days at each of the other resorts.

More pass love: With any full-season pass to Utah's Alta Ski Area (alta.com), Deer Valley Resort (deervalley.com), Park City Mountain Resort (parkcitymountain.com) or Snowbird Resort (snowbird.com), pass holders will get three free days of lift access at the other three mountains this season. And the Lake Tahoe area's Sugarbowl (sugarbowl.com) has teamed up with Sun Valley, Idaho (sunvalley.com), to combine higher-end passes between two of America's oldest ski resorts. Ask for the Sweet Deal package.

Lake Tahoe news

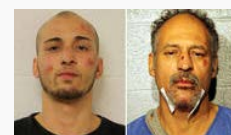
Lake Tahoe area resorts (nine within a short drive of the Reno/Tahoe airport) together have invested more than \$100 million in capital improvements intended to enhance the guest experience with new lifts (Crow's Peak at Sugar Bowl), base renovations (Sierra-at-Tahoe), new restaurants and more. The region as a whole is gearing up in a bid to host the 2026 Winter Olympics.

This season, Squaw Valley (squaw.com) and Alpine Meadows (skialpine.com) have invested more than \$2 million in state-of-the-art snow-making guns, new piping and system upgrades. They also have spent nearly \$ 1.5 million on five state-of-the-art snow cats.

Mount Rose (skirose.com), an outstanding family-friendly resort less than half an hour from the Reno airport, has begun a \$23.5 million expansion and this year added almost 100 acres of terrain, expanded snow-making capabilities and built a new restaurant up top. The resort



Wet and windy today



Mugs in the news

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has partnered with various Reno casino properties, such as the Eldorado Hotel (eldoradoreno.com), to offer some attractive ski/stay packages.

Sierra-at-Tahoe (sierraattahoe.com) has invested \$4.5 million in a new 9,000-square-foot plaza in front of the South Lake resort. The plaza includes a large open deck area with fire pits, live music and lounge chairs, plus a new restaurant and retail shops. Additionally, Sierra pass holders can receive free early- and late-season lift tickets at Squaw Valley and Alpine Meadows. The premier hotel in the region, the Ritz-Carlton, Lake Tahoe (ritzcarlton.com/laketahoe), located midmountain at Northstar, is debuting Backyard Bar & Barbecue on its patio, serving St. Louis-style ribs and other goodies.

Ski Mammoth

Celebrating its 60th anniversary, the huge Mammoth Mountain ski resort (mammothmountain.com) has a number of new temptations this season. The charming Lakefront Restaurant is going to a seasonal and organic menu, while fixture Chef Fred is opening the Underground Lounge below the Village Gondola. Live music will be featured at Underground, along with a bar and VIP area. But there won't be only dancing and drinking; chef Frederic Pierrel will be dishing out his "tapatizers," his unique take on tapas and appetizers. There also are added flights into the Mammoth Yosemite Airport this season on United and Alaska airlines.

Kids ski free

Colorado's Keystone resort (keystoneresort.com), which also opened Nov. 1, has a great deal aimed at families. Every day this season, children 12 or younger ski or snowboard for free at Keystone when staying two or more nights in one of Keystone's numerous accommodations. There are no blackout dates. "Keystone has pulled out all the stops when it comes to the best family ski experience," said John Buhler, vice president and general manager of Keystone. Keystone is about an hour from Denver International Airport.

More ski tips

For something different but well worth the trip, try visiting Schweitzer Mountain Resort (schweitzer.com). Located in the Selkirk Mountains outside of Sandpoint, Idaho, this lovely resort is about an hour from Spokane and about 45 minutes from the luxurious Coeur d'Alene Resort. Schweitzer is a hidden mountaintop jewel with a couple of big bowls offering serious skiing without the crowds.

And if you've never skied Colorado's Telluride, put it on your list. For serious skiers, there's nothing like that rugged box canyon.

Oh, Canada

Whistler/Blackcomb (whistlerblackcomb.com), the largest ski resort in North America, is replacing its older Harmony high-speed quad chairlift with a new Doppelmayr high-speed six-pack, increasing the speed up to the Harmony area by 50 percent. And the Blackcomb side's new Crystal Ridge Express high-speed quad will be 65 percent faster than the existing triple chair. Besides the Crystal Ridge Express itself, the placement of this lift has changed, and the new alignment will make it quicker to return to the Glacier Express chair, accessing areas such as Blackcomb Glacier, Horstman Glacier and Spanky's.

The resort also hosts one of the biggest and best lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender ski weeks in the world: Whistler WinterPRIDE, Jan. 26-Feb. 2. When in the Whistler Village, don't miss dining at Araxi, a serious fine-dining restaurant specializing in seafood.

Big White (bigwhite.com), on the inland side of British Columbia, is celebrating its 50th anniversary and offering fun ideas, such as the Groomers and Grapes package, which brings together a fine mountain experience with wine tastings in the nearby Okanagan Valley.

Whether purchasing a great pass deal or just hitting the slopes for a couple of days, act soon because the prices go up as the snow comes down.

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