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ADVENTURE & TRAVEL

### **Hush-Hush Places to Schuss**

With ski season descending swiftly, America’s most hyped mountains are booking up. An alternative: These under-the-radar, uncrowded resorts with ample room to wipe out and old-school charm.

BY ELISABETH VINCENTELLI

OVER THE PAST couple of years, the corporate mammoths of the ski industry have been on a buying spree. Vail Resorts added Vermont’s Stowe and British Columbia’s Whistler Blackcomb to a portfolio that already included Colorado’s Vail, Beaver Creek and Breckenridge, for a total of 11 ski areas; the consortium of Aspen Skiing Company and KSL Capital Partners purchased such top-shelf destinations as Steamboat, Colo., Mammoth, Calif. and Deer Valley, Utah. But for many skiers and snowboarders, bigger operations aren’t necessarily better—especially when resorts trade their individuality and quirks for slick personas and sticker shock. Fortunately, an old-school spirit endures at several spots across the country. “We want a ski experience that’s reminiscent of a golden age,” said Geoff Hatheway, founder of Vermont’s Magic Mountain, voicing a widely shared sentiment among indie resorts. Then again, “resort” doesn’t quite accurately describe the under-the-radar favorites listed here. The on-mountain accommodations tend to be bare-bones, when they exist at all. You won’t find fancy spas or buzzy restaurants, and visitors in fur-trimmed puffers are a rarity. What these ski areas offer are relief from crowds, a community-minded attitude and friendly service. “It makes a big difference when skiers are running the mountain, and not a board of directors,” said Rosanne Haidorfer-Pitcher of Wolf Creek, Colo.

#### **Powder Play** Wolf Creek, Colo.

Owned and operated by the Pitcher family since the late 1970s, Wolf Creek epitomizes the mom-and-pop resort—if you ski or snowboard there, you’re likely to run into a Pitcher. Nestled in the southern San Juan Mountains, at a quiet remove from the state’s major population centers, Wolf Creek typically gets more snow than other Colorado resorts, averaging 430 inches a year. And you can still find powder stashes days after a storm, when more popular places get skied out and slushy in mere hours. Snow addicts from New Mexico, Texas and Oklahoma seek out Wolf Creek, but it also makes a good playground for first-timers, thanks to affordable beginner lesson-and-lift packages. For more seasoned skiers, terrain that’s only accessible by hiking is well worth the effort. As for where to bunk down, the nearest hotels are a 30-minute drive away in either Pagosa Springs, with its many hot mineral-water pools, or South Fork, at the confluence of the Rio Grande and South Fork rivers ([wolfcreekski.com](http://wolfcreekski.com)).

