

COX ON SKIING: 'Beast' surely worth stop if in the East

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DailyBreeze.com

KILLINGTON, Vt. - They proudly call themselves The Beast of the East, and it's a designation the folks who ski at Killington can appreciate on a lot of levels.

For starters, it is the biggest of the New England resorts with about 750 acres of skiable terrain spread over about 3,000 acres. Additionally, it attracts numbers of skiers and boarders that put it in the big leagues nationally.

The acreage compares with Aspen, and is considerably larger than anything in the local mountains. But it does not compare with the 3,500 skiable acres at Mammoth. And on an annual basis, it draws about three-quarters of a million skiers and boarders to the slopes of the Green Mountains.

But comparisons are unfair anyway and most skiers approach new areas with the half-full attitude: We're here and we're skiing. What's bad about that? And that was the way our group of skiers and boarders looked at things this week.

Granted, if you are a Southern California skier, you are unlikely to fly over the states of Colorado, Utah, Idaho, Wyoming and Montana to reach your ski destination. But so many of us find ourselves on business in other parts of the country, that a chance for a day of skiing in the middle of the trip is difficult to ignore.

And Killington, aka The Beast of The East, is reachable from all the major population centers in the East. It's a three- to four-hour drive for many easterners. Flying from Southern California, we landed in Burlington, which necessitates about a 90-minute shuttle ride.

Once at Killington, you appreciate the amenities right away. The Grand Lodge at the main base of the ski area would be a top attraction at any of the other major resorts. It's slopeside, although a recent warm spell evaporated the feasibility to ski back to the hotel across the bridge. But that is expected to change in a day or two as weather is expected. In the meantime, it was cold enough on Tuesday to start the snowmaking guns over much of the mountain.

So we skied in a snowstorm. Sort of. Skiing in the East is always an adjustment for western skiers on at least two levels. The snow is often a little firmer and more challenging, requiring edging skis that we tend to let get rusty during our days at Mammoth or Lake Tahoe.

The second adjustment is the noise factor. Most of us have skied around snowmaking machines in the local mountains and are aware that the compressed air and water blown into the air do not do so without a noise quotient. If you are skiing in a group, and stopping to talk, there is a need to raise the volume.

A day later, natural snow was falling and the snowmaking guns were blowing, enhancing the

experience markedly. Soft snow, even stashes of powder, were available for those on the hill Wednesday.

Beyond that, it's skiing and there is enough steep and challenging terrain to keep any of us focused.

On our first day here, we saw several of the so-called "pods" where skiers tend to congregate and ski in a group of lifts over a specific area.

"Skiers tend to stick to a pod for a while, then move on to another area," said Rob Megnin, director of sales and marketing. "We have six different distinct areas where they can start out, and they tend to gravitate to the pods that fit their skiing ability."

What we experienced this trip was a chance to ski adjacent runs that covered the ability levels of all in a group. Some are steep enough to get your attention - especially when they are firm snow and hard-packed - while there are adjacent cruisers that allow everyone to reunite back at the same line. Killington has 18 lifts, including two gondolas, one of which is a two-stage gondola that stretches 13,000 feet and covers a vertical drop of 2,500 feet. There are also five high-speed quad lifts, which helps spread the crowd around the mountain.

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