



What Separates Big and Little Cottonwood Canyons

by Dan Giesin | Feb 12, 2019 | Ski Industry News | 0 Comments



Cleaving the mighty Wasatch range on the southeastern outskirts of Salt Lake City are two drainage systems that every skier and snowboarder should be familiar with: Big Cottonwood and Little Cottonwood canyons.

And although the two canyons are separated by a common ridge, they are, in many respects, worlds apart.

For instance, Big Cottonwood Canyon for the most part is a deep, narrow cleft 15 miles long and was formed by the eponymous creek that cut impressive rock formations near the entrance to the canyon, while Little Cottonwood Canyon, which is about half the length of its neighbor, has the familiar U-shape contours of a glacial trough. These geological aspects define the look and feel of each canyon.

Another aspect of dissimilarity are the winter resorts that occupy the heads of the respective canyons. They are as different as night and day.

Iconic Resorts

Little Cottonwood Canyon is the site of two world-renowned, bucket-list resorts: [Alta](#) and [Snowbird](#). Both mountains are iconic in their own right, with Alta laying claim as an old-school (i.e., no boarders) powder-hound Mecca while Snowbird is a true big-mountain resort that has churned out a number of top notch skiers and snowboarders.

Both resorts have the impressive stats that put them up there with big boys: Alta is spread out over 2,614 acres and 2,538 feet of vertical accessed by six lifts, three of the high-speed variety, while Snowbird is similar in size (2,500 acres) but towers over its next-door neighbor with 3,240 feet of vert served by 10 lifts (six of them high-speed quads) and a tram.

And both are also well-known and well-regarded for their super-extensive and uber-expert hike-to terrain.

Fun Resorts

Big Cottonwood Canyon, meanwhile, is the home of two less testosterone-fueled but no less fun resorts: [Brighton](#) and [Solitude](#).

Though the two pale, somewhat, in comparison to the size of the giants to the immediate south — Brighton has 1,050 acres and 1,745 feet of vertical accessed by six lifts and Solitude's numbers are 1,200 acres and 2,494 feet of vert served

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family-oriented resort that often lives up to its name (i.e., it's rarely crowded).

The Common Denominator

But as much as these two canyons are distinctive by their dissimilarities, they do have one thing in common: Snow. And tons of it.

Each of the four resorts receives at least 500 inches annually of Utah's famed lake-effect powder, the kind of fluff that makes skiing and snowboarding worth the time and effort.

It's what makes many people want to go canyoneering: Some 48 percent of Utah's skier days, which averages out to around 4.5 million annually, takes place in Big and Little Cottonwood canyons.

Vive le difference.

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Dan Giesin

Dan Giesin has spent most of his life poking around the mountains of the American West, especially in his backyard Sierra Nevada range. It has been -- and still is -- an uplifting experience

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skicolorado — Nice catch Bob! We've adjusted that to Nevada. Have you had the chance to ski Mt. Rose under 639 inches!?

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