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Swoosh: Sampling the slopes of Alta

Utah venture crisscrosses skiing and history

By LEE JUILLERAT For the Herald and News Feb 8, 2019

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It's all downhill from here, at Alta, Utah.

Photo by Larry Turner

ALTA, Utah o Some magical days just don't last long enough.

A downhill ski day at Alta Ski Resort last week was one that ended way too soon. The plentiful snow was perfectly groomed, the mid-week lift lines were nearly non-existent and, under bluebird skies, the forever views of the rugged, snow-capped mountains matched or bettered those seen in the Canadian Rockies and Switzerland.

Alta is one of four downhill ski areas in the Wasatch Range, a region promoted as Ski Salt Lake and is one of two ski resorts in Little Cottonwood Canyon. Making the access easy are public buses that shuttle to the ski area from designated stops and park-and-ride lots. Two other Ski Salt Lake areas, Brighton and Solitude, likewise have bus service to neighboring Big Cottonwood Canyon.

Like neighboring Snowbird, located just up the canyon, Alta is an international destination for skiers o and skiers only. Unlike other areas that rescinded bans against snowboards, Alta remains a self-described Oskiers mountain.o

Crisscrossing

It had been years since a previous Alta visit, but here's hoping another long hiatus doesn't happen again. With a group of skiers from NASJA o North American Snowsports Journalist Association o the too brief day was spent crisscrossing the mountain, beginning from the Collins lift near the Wildcat Base. A guide showed the way during the morning, leading us on corduroy groomed cruiser runs. Favorites from the Sugarloaf included Devil's Elbow, Devil's Way, Razor Back, Gravy Boat, and Roller Coaster while Big and Upper Big Dipper, No. 9 Express, Sleepy Hollow, Rock 'n' Roll, Sunnyside, and Bluebell were prime runs from the Supreme chair.

Alta's a huge mountain with more than 116 runs over its 2,614 skiable acres, which is 55 percent geared for advanced skiers. We didn't ski everything, but we sampled blue and not too seriously black runs from its six chairlifts.

Before and after a well-earned lunch break, we explored runs on the Sunnyside, Wildcat and Collins chairs, including Main Street, Mambo, Aggie's Alley, Sunnyside, Race Hill and Home Run.

For truly advanced skiers, including ski-film stars, Alta offers daredevil challenges, both off chairlifts and others reached only by hiking and climbing to powder run under toweringly dramatic Sugarloaf Peak, Devil's Castle and Mount Baldy.

What makes Alta tempt-delicious is its varied terrain. While some runs are zippity-doo-dah adrenaline-rush steep downhill, more twist and turn through forested runs with undulating dips and curves.

By the time a trio of us ski-until-closing diehards took the Transfer Tow from the Albion Base back to Wildcat Base, our legs were fried. It was the kind of day that left us with broad grins and tired legs and thighs, a day that reminds me of I consider myself an advanced intermediate/quasi-advanced skier of why downhill skiing is so addictive. We were pooped when the last lifts closed, but still wishing for more.

Just up the road

A few days earlier our group visited Snowbird, just up the road from Alta. Even during a long day, we barely sampled its more than 2,500 acres of skiable terrain. With 10 lifts and a 125-passenger aerial tram, Snowbird is a mountain for strong expert skiers and snowboarders. There's a reason black and double-black diamond runs have names like Thanks for the Memories, Oh My God and Barry-Barry Steep. While better skiers tried some of those, we lesser daredevils found excellent skiing, especially in the Mineral Basin.

What truly fascinates is Snowbird's history.

Its mining history is reflected in runs with names like High Stakes and Big Emma. In 1869, an Army soldier prospecting for silver in Little Cottonwood Canyon literally struck gold and founded the Emma Mine, one of the largest producers of silver ore in the Wasatch Range. Likewise, the resort is named after the Snowbird mining claim. At its peak, 8,000 people

lived and worked in Little Cottonwood Canyon, which boasted two smelters, 138 homes, hotels, boarding houses and a railroad and 26 saloons and an uncounted number of brothels. The original town was later destroyed by a series of avalanches.

Bassackwards

Other runs honoring one of Snowbird's founders, Dick Bass, including Bassackwards. Bass is also famous for being the first person to complete the Seven Summits, the highest peaks on each continent, including Mount Everest.

Unique, too, is a nearly 600-foot-long tunnel carved through the mountain that connects Gad Valley and Peruvian Gulch with the Mineral Basin. The conveyor belt, the Peruvian Tunnel, was opened in 2005 and is unique in North America. The one-way four-minute ride, made more interesting because of its collection of mining gear and interpretive signs, accesses a variety of beginner, intermediate and expert runs in the 500-acre Mineral Basin.

Spectacular is the view from Hidden Peak and the Summit Restaurant, an elevation of 11,000 feet and most easily accessed by the Aerial Tram at the Snowbird Center. Because the restaurant's walls are almost entirely made of glass, on clear days the sights are endless. Our lunch was fine, but easily eclipsed by the Wasatch, Uintah and Timpanogos mountain ranges. And, in answer to the oft-asked question, the restaurant and tram are available to non-skiers and boarders during the winter, and for summer tourists who can either ride or hike back down to the base village.

Coming next week: Downhill skiing in Big Cottonwood Canyon at Brighton and Solitude Ski Resorts.

Holly Owens