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Utah's Solitude offers variety in a small package

By LEE JUILLERAT For the Herald and News Feb 15, 2019

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Views of the Wasatch Mountains of Utah, and more distant peaks, are part of the allure from runs at Brighton.

Photo courtesy of Larry Turner

SALT LAKE CITY, Utah o It had been a day to celebrate, a day of exploring and discovering fun yippie-ki-yay challenging downhill ski runs at the Solitude Mountain Resort, sometimes with others and, appropriately, sometimes in personal solitude.

But it was one run that put the exclamation mark on four days of skiing at four downhill ski areas near Salt Lake City, a run that generated a sense of satisfaction and gee-whiz delight.

After exceptionally sunny, windless days at Snowbird, Brighton and Alta, our group's final fling was at the Solitude in Big Cottonwood Canyon. In the morning we sampled Solitude's various chairlifts before moving to the Summit Express, itself an amazing ride that climbs, abruptly dips rollercoaster-like before finally surging up to a drop-off elevation of 10,035-feet. As Shawn Stinson of Ski City/Visit Salt Lake, who guided our group, confessed, the Summit Express is one of the few chairs where he uses the safety bar.



A skier makes her way through fluffy powder snow at Solitude.

Photo courtesy of Larry Turner

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Experts only

On our first round from Summitoēs summit we whizzed down steep, swift intermediate runs back to the launching site. But on our second swoop, Stinson led us through a gate into Honeycomb Canyon, an area with only expert runs. In my experience, expert o or black diamond o runs at most Utah ski areas equate to double-black diamond daredevils at areas like Willamette Pass, Bachelor and Mount Hood.

Off we went, swooping and dipping through Honeycomb Canyon. The run, Woodlawn, weaves through a cozy, tree-lined canyon. Some locals passed us, confidently carving turns until they disappeared from sight. Our group paused, looked at the waterfall-like

drop, then one-by-one dropped into the void. Although sunny days had left Utah's fabled fresh powder semi-packed, the snow was deep and forgiving. Our skis sliced turns. It was wonderful.

Then came more dips and climbs weaving through the canyon. Confident, we barely hesitated to scout a second steep drop. Swoosh!

Too soon we arrived at the Honeycomb Return chair for a short lift to an area served by the Eagle Express and Powderhorn II. Because it was time for lunch, we skied to the Roundhouse, a mid-mountain restaurant for what became the most delectable meal of a scrumptious bowl of lamb curry of a week-long journey for me, skiing buddy/photographer Larry Turner and other ski journalists.

Solo runs

Afterward, we split into smaller groups or, like me, headed out individually. After traversing lifts and ski runs it was back to the Summit Express chair. The first run down Honeycomb Canyon had been about learning the route and what to expect. The second and third times were pure pleasure, let-æer-fly delights, aggressively attacking the deep drops and savoring the sights along the steep-sided canyon walls.

Thoughts of returning to the base area and catching the transit bus back to the hotel were put on hold by yielding to temptations not tasted earlier. One last run was multiplied many times over skiing side-by-side Rumble, Stumble and Grumble, and turns on Challenger, Halæ's Hollow, Last Run and, finally, Home Run.

The skiing was delicious, and there was an added bonus. We shared the mountain with skiers and boarders in the World Championship in Border Cross and Skier Cross, demolition derby-like events that will be part of upcoming Winter Olympics.



A quartet of skiers fly over the slopes during the 2019 Freestyle World Championships Skier/Bordercross qualifying round at Solitude.

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Photo courtesy of Larry Turner

Variety of terrain

Solitude, like its Big Cottonwood Canyon neighbor, Brighton, is a smaller lesser-known ski area than the mammoth sized Alta and Snowbird ski areas in nearby Little Cottonwood Canyon. But locals know bigger isn't necessarily better because Solitude and Brighton offer a variety of terrain for all levels of skiers and snowboarders with challenging slopes and beautifully groomed runs.

Two days before we skied Solitude, our group savored Brighton's pleasures with top-to-bottom, tree-lined runs off the Crest Express, Snake Creek Express and Great Western chairs. After a late lunch, friends and I crossed over to the Milly Express chair. None of the morning runs had been crowded, but from Milly we had slopes nearly to ourselves, slicing

down a combination of intermediate and forgiving expert runs. Like crazed gerbils anxious for more, we kept hopping aboard the Milly Express for more downward explorations on the corduroy-groomed runs.

The runs at Solitude offer chances to experience the solitude of the dramatic Wasatch Mountains. And, appropriately, the pleasures of Brighton are enough to brighten any skier's day.

Before you go

For information on Ski Salt Lake, which promotes downhill skiing and snowboarding at four resorts accessed by buses from the Salt Lake City area by public transit, visit the website at www.skicity.com. If staying for more than a day, consider a super pass that provides discounted lift tickets to the four areas and includes public transit and rental shop discounts.

Holly Owens