

1.

Deer Valley, Utah»

+ The good life, base to summit. Untracked glades.
 - Limited expert acres. Boarder ban.

IT'S UNCLEAR whether the reader was applauding or shaming Deer Valley with his comment that a vacation here is like "skiing in the lap of luxury." No matter. Because it is clear that Deer Valley's faithful fully embrace the resort's pampering ethos, which is the basis of its repeat no. 1 ranking. Its consistent success is built from the bottom up, as "these guys understand how important it is to manage the details." To that end, the mountain crew coddles the snow as if each flake were a Fabergé egg. Not surprisingly, ripping down groomers is "like driving a Ferrari." And more often than not, dining out is akin to visiting a four-star hotel. However, Deer Valley's particular insight isn't that

service matters—that's no secret—nor is it the fresh dill chèvre, nor the army of smiling ambassadors perpetually at the ready. The difference here is the sincere business belief that attitude and effort trump all. Yes, that's the president of the resort stopping to reunite you with your skis after a tumble in the Centennial glades. To be sure, Deer Valley's top ranking—fueled by setting the standard in Grooming, Service, Dining and Lodging—peevs alpine purists, who would rather measure a mountain's success in vertical feet skied and toenails blackened. Fair enough. On the other hand, "this is a resort that perfectly knows its niche." There's no shame in that.

—Greg Ditrinco

Off-the-Map Trail »

Venture into the unmarked X-Files glades. Go left off the Empire Express and follow Orion as it slides by Daly Bowl and the Daly Chutes. The trees—and the conspiracies—thicken on your left. Drop in.

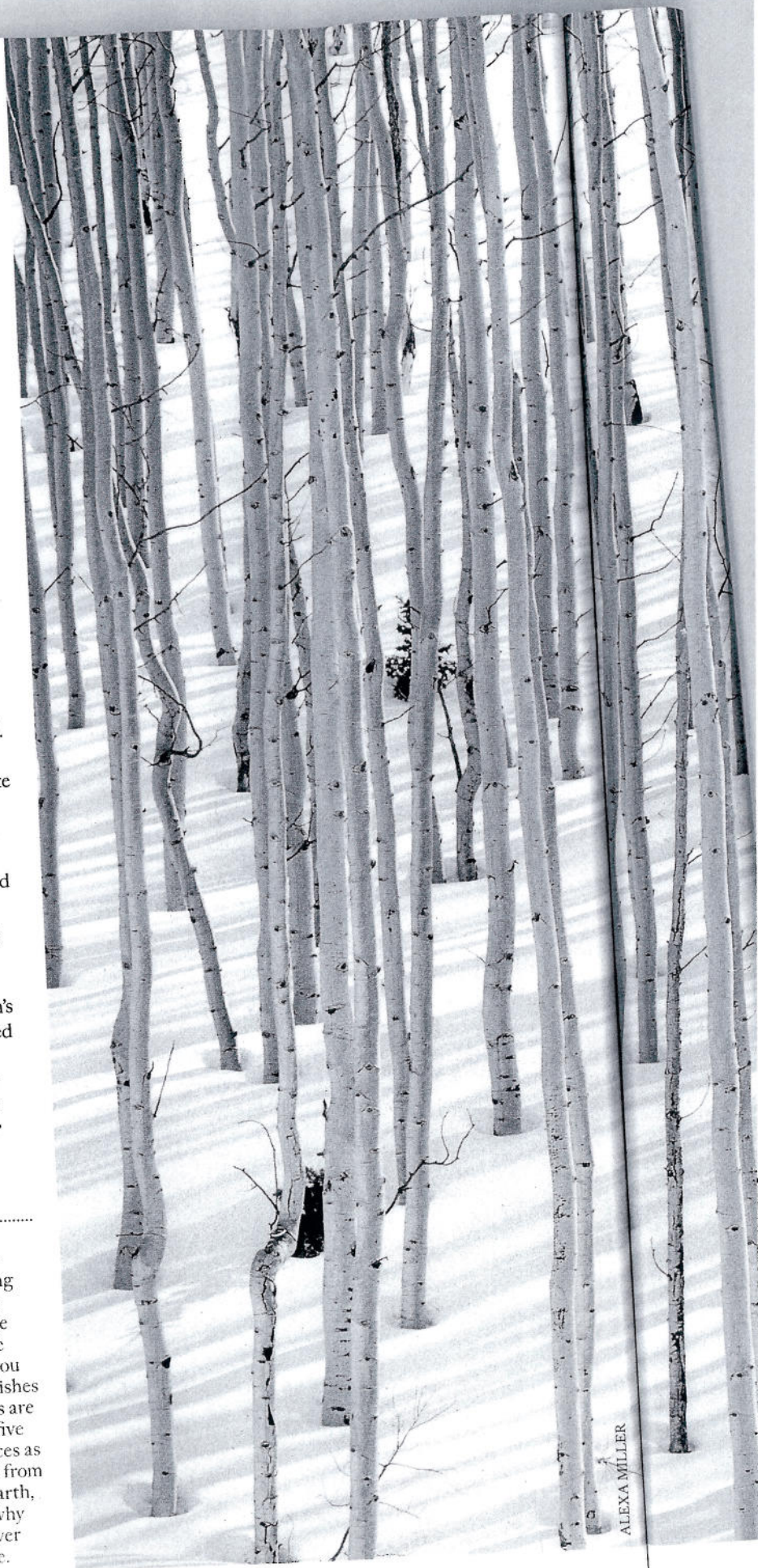
Après Spot »

Ride the Funicular from Snow Park Lodge up to the St. Regis Deer Valley and head to the Terrace Café's outdoor patio. The views are spectacular, and we'll let you see for yourself how the Garden of Fire got its name.

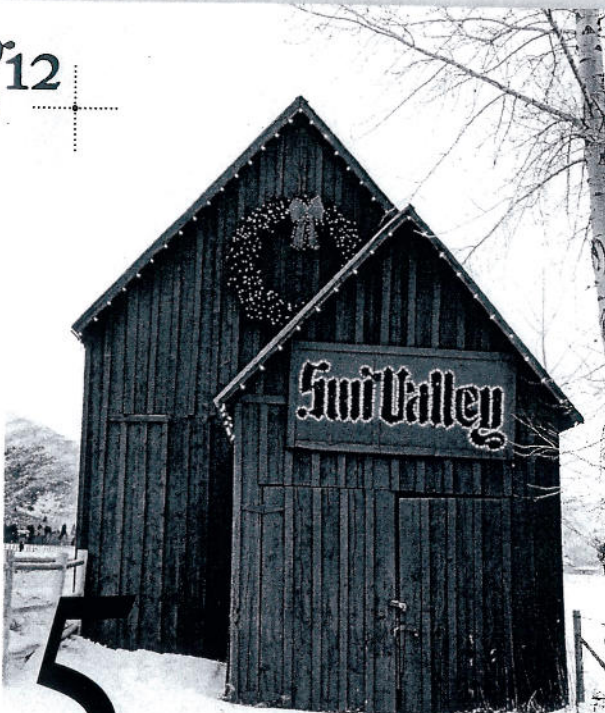
Don't Miss »

Fireside Dining at the Empire Canyon Lodge is one of those experiences you take home. Dishes from the Alps are served from five stone fireplaces as you circulate from hearth to hearth, wondering why you would ever want to leave.

Beautiful, and often under-skied, glades on Deer Valley's Flagstaff Mountain.



ALEXA MILLER



5.

Sun Valley, Idaho»

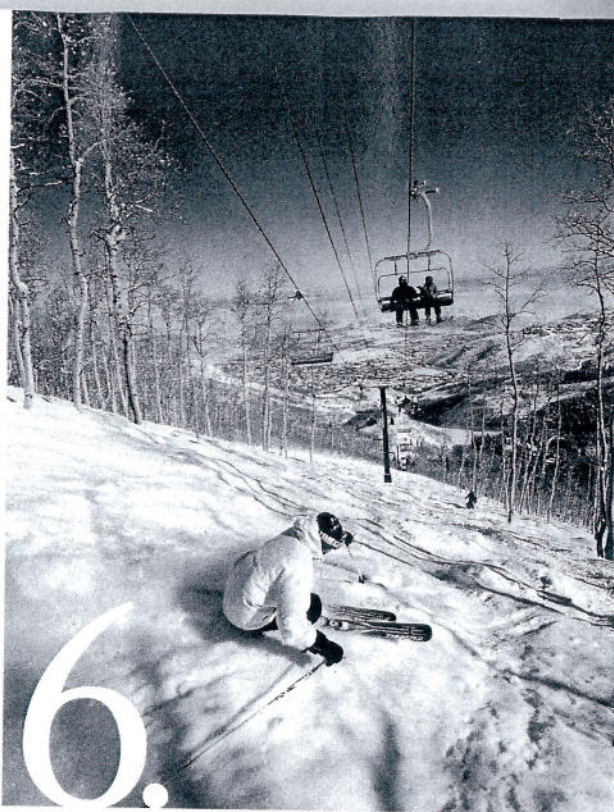
- + Cool, quirky town. Cruiser playground.
- Remote. Resort isn't at the hill.

WITH ITS LAURELS DEEPLY ROOTED IN HISTORY, beautiful scenery (ranked no. 10) and impeccable service (no. 2), people forget that Sun Valley has great skiing. Indeed, corduroy descents of over 3,000 vertical feet served by high-speed lifts with nary a lifeline in sight are Sun Valley hallmarks. An on-mountain face-lift that began two years ago continues with terrain park expansions and kids' adventure zones. Off-slope, enjoy Sun Valley's no. 2 rank in Dining: Lunch in the sun on the deck of the Seattle Ridge Lodge on a rotisserie rib-eye sandwich on cumin flatbread. Or hang out in Ketchum, the original funky ski town. (The Goldmine is the ski world's best thrift shop.) Readers bemoan the isolation, but that's how Sun Valley keeps its character (no. 2). "This is utopia," says a reader. "I measure every other resort against this one." —*Kevin Luby*

Must Do » Take a soak in the pools of Frenchman's Bend hot springs in Warm Springs Creek, 10 miles west of Ketchum. Keep an eye out for deer and elk.

Family Activity » Grab sleds and head to Penny Hill, just past Sun Valley Lodge. The lower half is kid friendly. The upper half is just plain fun.

Après Spot » It's a no-brainer: Apples in Warm Springs or Lefty's in Ketchum, but only if you're still sporting your ski socks.



6.

Park City Mountain Resort, Utah»

- + Great family programs. Diverse terrain.
- Confusing mountain layout.

IN THIS AGE OF MODERN RESORTS, LUXE comforts, though welcomed by many, can kill authenticity. PCMR has managed to strike the balance between modern and homey. The historic town at the base is connected by a ski bridge to the Town Lift. Within minutes, you're delivered to a state-of-the-art six-pack accessing 3,300 acres of high-speed groomers and aspen-dappled back bowls. In fact, PCMR has spent more than \$10 million in the last two years upgrading lifts, terrain parks and snowmaking without bleaching out the local color. Ripping through ancient glades in Thaynes Canyon or dropping into powdery steeps in Jupiter Bowl, you'll speed by vestiges of the area's mining past. This blend of old and new has a comforting appeal. As a reader sums up, "great vibe on the mountain and a fabulous town." —*Carrie Sheinberg*

Don't Miss » Unless you ski in the East, chances are you haven't skied at night. Go ahead and postpone bedtime. Your kids will enjoy the nocturnal adventure.

Family Activity » Sorry, hardcore ski parents, but the one thing your children will talk about after your vacation is the alpine coaster.

Best Family Trail » Crews groom a different Signature Run daily, allowing young skiers to earn bragging rights—and increased confidence—by conquering new terrain.

FROM LEFT: ROB HOWARD/CORBIS; SCOTT MARKEWITZ
FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF VAIL RESORTS/JACK AFFLECK; WILL WISSMAN



Canyons Resort, Utah»

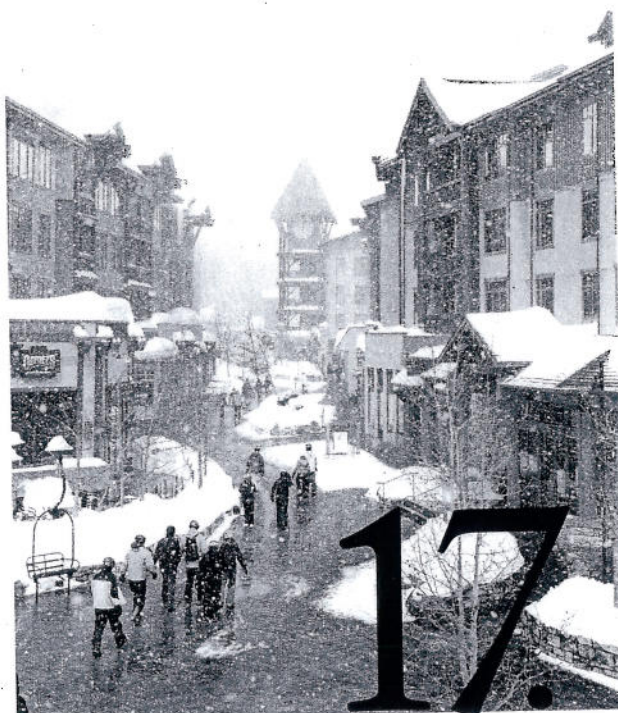
- + Immense resort that's quickly adding amenities.
- Can be overwhelming. Best for cruisers.

UTAH'S LARGEST SKI AREA AND THE UNITED States' third-largest somehow remains a mystery to many. Yet this 4,000-acre "hidden gem" stands in easy reach and plain sight, sprawling across nine mountaintops just north of Park City. Well funded and smartly buffed with \$50 million in upgrades to date by luxury developer Talisker Corp., this master-planned resort delivers wide-open cruising, slopeside lodgings, swift lifts and delicious eats. Add easy access to all Salt Lake skiing, enough off-hill diversions to keep you fully engaged and coordinates that put the good times of downtown Park City and hip Kimball Junction a short drive away, and smart ski travelers won't be saying "Where?" for long. Says a forward-looking reader: "Watch out, Deer Valley!" —S.R.

Après Spot » Build a cocoa creation at Chocolate Bar, located at the new Ski Beach, then kick back in a lounge chair while a band plays.

Family Activity » Ten-pin it at Kimball Junction's Jupiter Bowl, with glowing bowling balls, live music and lane-side dining.

On-Hill Lunch » Reserve ahead at Lookout Cabin to savor poblano and goat-cheese rellenos, decadent Alpine Mac 'n' Cheese and Kobe burgers—all with Wasatch views.



Mammoth Mountain, Calif.»

- + The best terrain park in North America.
- Getting there. It's a six-hour drive from L.A.

YES, MAMMOTH IS THE NEAREST "TRUE BIG mountain" to Los Angeles. But snow-loving Californians migrate to this windswept and view-blessed knob in the eastern Sierra for reasons beyond the obvious. Mammoth's natural terrain variety (no. 4) is among North America's best, delivering quality and abundance across the spectrum: broad beginner boulevards, corduroy fall-line carvers, piney glades, radical steeps. Its 3,500-plus scenic and open acres are sun-kissed yet get hammered with more than 33 feet of mostly dry high-altitude snow annually. Lifts (no. 7) are swift and well laid out. Off-slope, the Village at Mammoth has matured into the amenity the diffuse Town of Mammoth Lakes needs. "The biggest weakness at Mammoth" according to one reader: "You can't ski between Fourth of July and Halloween." —S.R.

Must Do » Sample the best of Mammoth Brewing Company's 17 years of award-winning craft creations in its tasting room.

Bragging Rights » The Paranoids, steep, narrow and technical chutes, drop precipitously off of Mammoth's crest. Yikes.

What's New » A high-speed quad replaces Chair 5; direct flights from San Diego and Orange County bring the number of cities connecting to Mammoth Lakes Airport up to five.



Aspen Highlands, Colo. »

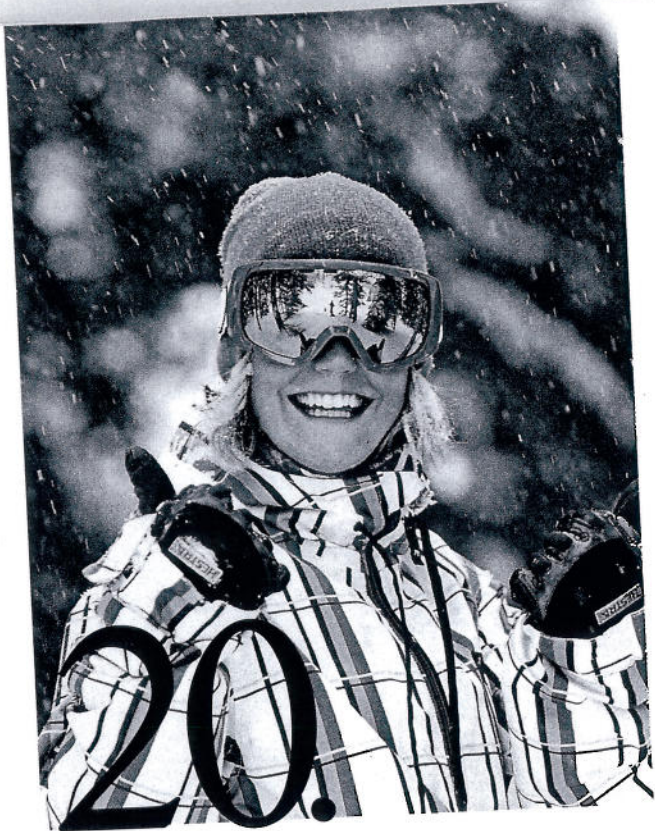
- + Some of the country's best steeps.
- No slopeside lodging or true village.

IF ASPEN MOUNTAIN IS A CADILLAC ESCALADE, then Highlands is a Toyota Tacoma: genuine, badass and, yes, expensive, but not on account of frills like plush leather seats. Highlands is a skier's hill, with blood-rushing steeps (nearly 50-degree, no-fall zones in hike-to Highland Bowl), yee-haw trees (Boomerang Woods and Steeplechase) and eye-watering groomers (Gunbarrel and Golden Horn) so deliciously pitched, readers wonder why no one's skiing them. And then there's the laid-back vibe. Where else can you get a free hot dog, grilled by lifties, as you swing through the empty chair maze on a spring afternoon? That's not to say Highlands lacks sophistication—it's just the friendly, worn-in kind. Cloud 9 Bistro, for example, is one of the coziest dining spots this side of the Alps. Readers complain about a lack of, well, everything, at the base. (There's a reason we don't call it a "village.") But hey, if it's shopping you want, drive that Cadillac over to Aspen. —*Kimberly Beekman*

What's New » The midmountain Merry Go Round restaurant has received a much-needed remodeling—in Highlands' duct-tape-chic style.

On-Hill Lunch » Warm your hands around a mug of glühwein and share a platter of sizzling raclette at Cloud 9 Bistro.

Must Do » Hike the Bowl. It's 45 minutes for mortals, and the views are divine.



Snowbird, Utah »

- + Snow. Killer terrain. More snow.
- Little nightlife. Not the prettiest base.

HERE ARE THE COLD, HARD FACTS: SNOWBIRD'S après options are basically limited to beer and billiards at the Tram Club, there are barely any off-hill activities, and its few dining options won't put Deer Valley out of business. But none of that stops throngs of serious skiers from invading the resort each year. Why? "Perfect in everything that matters: consistent snow, steep, easy-to-access terrain," a reader explains. The mountain boasts 3,240 feet of vertical and an average 500 inches (783 inches last season) of "light, fluffy, *Utabbbb* powder!" And all that fluff falls on some of the most amazing lines in North America, including the new Zone 5, a trail with are-you-kidding-me pitches. That adds up to some impressive rankings (no. 4 for Snow and no. 2 for Challenge) and a real ski vacation. Complaints? Readers had a few: "The sun has to set." And, of course, "There's not enough vacation time to stay here long enough." —*Gordy Megroz*

Must Do » Stuff a beer in your pocket and hit The Beach, skier's left 30 yards down Mach Schnell. It gets the last rays of sun and is a nice return to your ski-bum days.

Signature Run » When it dumps, the long, steep Tiger Tail terrain usually opens late, so keep checking with ski patrol to get first dibs.

Off-Hill Restaurant » Order the charbroiled elk tenderloin at the award-winning Tiburon in Sandy.