

Multi-Mountain Passes Have Upended the American Ski Trip. 9 Rules You Need to Know.

The passes have encouraged snowsports fans to visit more than one mountain on a vacation. Here's how to navigate the new landscape.



By Elisabeth Vincentelli

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For decades, ski vacations followed a predictable pattern, and it went a little like this: pick a mountain, book accommodations, fly or drive to the resort, buy lift tickets, ski a few days, return home. Repeat cycle the following year.

Things have changed.

The past few years have seen an explosion in passes that let holders ski and ride multiple mountains across North America (and beyond) for free or at discounted rates. In turn, they have encouraged a new kind of ski trip in which people sample several hills in a single season.

In February, for instance, I flew west from my Brooklyn home on two separate occasions and skied for 10 days. On seven of them I used a \$409 Mountain Collective pass that let me ski free at Alta, Utah; Jackson Hole, Wyo.; and Big Sky, Mont. The walk-up rates for lift tickets would have run more than \$1,000.

And I was a light user. During the 2018-2019 season, MeiMei Ma, a Raleigh, N.C., resident who is “over 60,” as she put it, combined a Mountain Collective and a \$599 Ikon Base pass for 42 days at 9 resorts, while Mary Ellen Charles, 62, from the southern Adirondacks in New York, logged 70 days at 18 resorts, most of them using either an Ikon or a Mountain Collective pass.

“The passes make it like a numbers game: How many days can we get in now?” said Leah Hoffer, of Orange County, Calif. Using “Costco tickets or something like that,” Ms. Hoffer and her family used to take a single weeklong ski trip a year. Ikon passes in hand, they now do two of those plus several extended weekends.

Those lucky enough to live in or near a ski town have the luxury of being able to jump in their car and hit the slopes with minimal forethought. For the rest of us, here are some tips to make the most of the new American ski trip.



Skiers around the fire pit at Alpine Meadows. Jim Wilson/The New York Times

1. Think in clusters

Focusing your trip on properties on a pass that are close to each other means you can maximize your skiing and minimize your driving. In Utah, the Ikon resorts of Alta, Snowbird, Solitude and Brighton sit on the adjacent Big and Little Cottonwood Canyons, just outside Salt Lake City, so it's easy to ski them all in one trip.

The Tahoe area, in Northern California, is an appealing destination for Epic pass holders because Northstar is an hour from its brethren Heavenly, which itself is an hour from Kirkwood, which is also on the Epic pass. Squaw Valley/Alpine Meadows, the area's biggest resort, is on Ikon.

By far the most efficient state when it comes to clusters is Colorado. Epic's Vail, Beaver Creek, Keystone and Breckenridge resorts are within an hour's drive of each other; Ikon's Copper Mountain, Arapahoe Basin and Winter Park are within an hour of each other; you can even tag a half-day at Eldora, a smaller mountain close to Boulder, before or after a flight at the Denver airport.

2. Let go of the condo-on-the-slopes dream

Stephen Davis, 38, liked Breckenridge so much when he skied it using his Epic pass that he ended up buying a slopeside timeshare there. The York, Pa., resident continues to resort-hop, though, and projects he will ski 35 days in 2019-2020 with a combination of Epic and Ikon passes, using his timeshare and other assorted lodgings.

But as convenient as slopeside lodging is when you are skiing one mountain, it's pricey and may not make sense if you're driving between mountains. You're better off at a midpoint that allows easy access to each resort. "We look for the sweet price spot between affordability and access," said Ms. Hoffer, 34, who travels with her husband, David, 52, and their 6-year-old daughter, Lily. They stay less than 30 minutes from the lifts. "But that can be just five miles — we're talking mountain roads in winter time after all," she said.

In Utah, when skiing the resorts in the Cottonwood canyons, I stay in the valley, on the edge of Salt Lake, 15 to 20 miles from the base areas. In Colorado, the towns of Frisco and Dillon, on either side of the Dillon Reservoir along I-70, are good options when skiing the Vail-Keystone-Breckenridge or Copper Mountain-Arapahoe Basin clusters.

One bonus: Resort employees tend to live off-mountain, and towns like those are where you'll meet them, ready to dispense helpful tips if you ask nicely. On my first visit to Aspen Snowmass, I shared an Airbnb in nearby, affordable Basalt with an instructor who advised me to leave my car at the public lot and take the free shuttle to the base areas in order to avoid the resorts' exorbitant parking fees.



Skiers at Big Sky in Montana, which is part of the Ikon and Mountain Collective passes. Lynn Donaldson for The New York Times

3. Plan your drives

A skiing road trip requires some advance planning because accommodations near resorts can book up fast. You also need to factor in the general constraints of winter travel.

When going from one resort to the next, try not to schedule too much driving after a ski day. Not only will you be tired but it's not a great idea to negotiate possibly icy, possibly unfamiliar roads in the dark.

In February I drove solo from Jackson Hole to Big Sky after a day of skiing. In normal conditions this takes just under four hours but I decided to spend the night in West Yellowstone, Mont., on the way. That turned out to be a good move because that evening a whiteout in negative-digit temperatures hit the area. The less time spent on a frigid mountain road with no cell reception, the better.

Google Maps' estimated drive times are a great tool to devise itineraries, but look at the fine print, and then check again right before getting behind the wheel: Will you have to go over potentially dicey passes? Has there just been an accident on I-70 which gets incredibly congested during ski season?

4. But be ready to improvise

Because you don't have to buy lift tickets ahead of time to lock in advance-booking discounts, having a pass can free you up to make changes without paying a steep penalty.

In the winter of 2018, I had booked a trip from New York to Salt Lake City to ski Utah with my wife and a friend. As our departure date approached, we realized that the state had little snow but that Wyoming, a five-hour drive away, looked encouraging. A week before we were due to leave, we canceled our Utah lodgings (which had a flexible cancellation policy, so we only lost the Airbnb fee of about \$50) and rebooked in Driggs, Idaho — a good base from which to ski Jackson Hole (which was on our Mountain Collective pass) and Grand Targhee (which was not but where lift tickets are relatively cheap). Heading north, we sacrificed a ski day to check out some idiosyncratic Idaho destinations — Pocatello's Museum of Clean and the Idaho Potato Museum in Blackfoot. We also wolfed down textbook burgers and fries at Ole's Diner in Sugar City, which belongs on any road trip worth its sodium and American cheese.

5. Go for the S.U.V.

Snow is great when skiing and terrible when driving, so don't skimp: rent an S.U.V. Being able to pull down a back seat also means that if you have your own gear, it will fit in the vehicle — no need to rent a roof rack.

Sometimes you don't want to retrace your steps at the end of the trip, so flying into one airport and out of another makes sense — that is, if you can find a deal on a one-way rental. In February, I was able to get an S.U.V. from Budget in Jackson and return it in Bozeman, Mont., without a penalty. The catch was that I didn't have unlimited mileage, but after mapping out the trip on Google, it was clear the cost would be minimal. I ended up paying less than \$400 for five days, which is not bad for a one-way S.U.V.

No matter what, take a photo of the dashboard to get evidence of mileage and gas both when you pick up the car and when you return it.

6. And the road-assistance coverage

Like many New Yorkers, I don't own a car — yet each year I renew my AAA membership. I mostly use it for various discounts but it came in handy when my rental wouldn't start on my first morning in Jackson. AAA dispatched a tow truck that got me to the Budget office (which, luckily, was less than five miles away, the maximum distance for free towing on my plan). I was given new wheels and took off for the Jackson Hole slopes. The very next day, I was calling AAA again after locking myself out of the car — something I had not done in 30 years — in the resort's parking lot.

7. Think about your impact

In a number of places in the West, the passes have been blamed for overcrowding at resorts and traffic jams on the roads and slopes. By the Jackson Hole tram I saw a sticker with a red slash through the word “Ikon” and in Colorado there were reports of “Stop Ikonizing Aspen” stickers.

Western resorts claimed record attendance last year, which was also a good one for snowfall, as they have noted, so it can be difficult to tease out the total impact of the passes. But visitors can also try to limit their footprint by making better choices.

For one, in many places you can resist adding to traffic by using public transportation. The Ski Utah app helps navigate the buses that service the Cottonwood resorts and ensure that you actually make it to the lifts — last season, several resorts turned away individual cars because the parking lots were full by midmorning. Some of the fancier mountains, like Aspen Snowmass, Vail and Park City, in Utah, offer excellent and free shuttle systems. Several bus options link Frisco and Dillon to nearby resorts.

Ms. Charles, the Adirondacks resident, happily recalls a trip with a friend that included Copper Mountain on the Ikon pass. Traffic getting to the mountain was terrible one morning so the women instead took the bus three stops to the nearby Keystone, to which she had discounted access through Vermont’s Okemo, which had just joined the Epic group. The weather was so bad that part of I-70 closed down. “It snowed six inches so we had a private powder day because nobody else made it to the resort,” Ms. Charles said.

8. B.Y.O.G. — Bring Your Own Gear

If you plan to hop from one resort to another, bringing your own skis or snowboard is much more convenient because it means less time in rental shops — a hassle that can be compounded if you’re not staying near the shop and something turns out to be defective.

Lisa Sebastiano, 54, from Upton, Mass., has used an Ikon pass near her home in New England, and at farther-flung mountains. But even when flying west, solo or with her family, she takes her gear. As her traveling and her total number of ski days have gone up thanks to her pass, avoiding rentals costs is cost-effective.

“It’s far, far less expensive to bring our skis out and back, and we have skis that we know and that are appropriate,” she said, echoing a common sentiment among fellow winter trippers.

You can keep the luggage fees under control by flying Southwest (two free bags!), using an airline credit card or packing efficiently — I cram my clothes, a pair of skis and a pair of poles into a padded, wheeled double bag; boots and helmet go in the carry-on.

9. Most important, make new friends

Sadly, my spouse and most of my friends do not share my newfound passion for winter trips, but luckily I have connected with fellow devotees on ski forums. I took that solo trip to Big Sky specifically to join the hundred or so skiers attending a national meetup organized by Pugski.com, an active online community owned by Phil and Tricia Pugliese, a Tahoe-based couple.

“We try to schedule these annual gatherings around some kind of multi-resort pass, like Epic when we hit five resorts in Summit/Eagle Counties in Colorado,” Ms. Pugliese, 53, said in an email. “The year we were in Salt Lake City we skied Snowbasin, Snowbird and Alta because they were on the Mountain Collective Pass. Our current rotation of resorts is all on Ikon: Big Sky, Jackson Hole, Aspen mountains, Utah (Snowbird, Alta, Deer Valley).”

If passes help foster new explorations and new friendships among snowsports fans, perhaps we can handle the occasional traffic jam.

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