

## Is Jackson Hole the perfect American ski resort?

While Europe has experienced something of a lean winter, a snow-dumping La Niña has swept through North America. Many resorts have even extended their seasons as they deal with a constant cycle of digging out chairlifts and breaking snow-depth records.

Disheartened by rain, queues and dwindling cover in the Alps, I lost no time in packing a bag and heading across the pond in search of ski holiday nirvana. The idea: to ski some serious kilometres, tackle some serious terrain, and make up for lost turns. There was only one place to go.

While most big North American ski resorts have grown out of old mining settlements, there's no denying that Jackson Hole in Wyoming, which has roots in ranching, is a cowboy town. In the 1960s, long, snowy winters made turning the area into an adventure sports hub a more lucrative option, and so Jackson, with its distinctively Western look and feel, was put on the map for those in search of everything steep and deep.

### Wild tales

At first light on my debut day in Jackson Hole's Teton Village, I was woken by the sweet sound of bombs blasting on the mountain – triggering any impending avalanches before skiers hit the slopes. I pulled on my gear and stepped outside into boot-deep fresh powder.

Resisting the temptation to head immediately up hill, I met Lee the naturalist in a luxury SUV (complete with coffee and breakfast) outside my hotel, and headed off on a pre-booked 6.30am wildlife tour – an early start that chimed perfectly with my jet lag.

Heading north out of town towards Grand Teton National Park, we stopped almost immediately across from an elk refuge, where what I'd thought was a forest of dense trees turned out to be a thousands-strong herd. Lee set up his scope and soon spotted a carcass – the work of a wolf, long gone – on which a coyote was feasting. As I watched, a bald eagle landed, scaring off the dog, and started on the elk, watched with interest by a tiny chickadee. It was all so close – a real-life wildlife documentary unfolding on America's answer to a winter Serengeti.

Lee enthralled me with Wyoming's history, beginning at Abraham Lincoln and spinning tales that I'd happily give up a morning's skiing to hear again, punctuated all the while by sightings of snowy bison, moose, more elk, mule deer, bear-claw graffiti, prickly pears, bighorn sheep, and even a roadside porcupine.

He told me that, 100 years after wolves were culled here, the apex predator is being reintroduced to restore order to the Yellowstone ecosystem, a kilter for over a century – his daughter had even watched an elk be successfully tackled by wolves from her classroom window the week before. By the time he dropped me back at the hotel to begin my day on the slopes, I was utterly dazed – in awe of this wild-west wilderness.

In a winter that's gone on and on, I had no worries about getting my piece of the day's powder skiing. By the end of January, Jackson Hole had pulled in more than 9 meters of snow – the same amount which had fallen the entirety of the previous winter – and it just keeps on falling. I gleefully clipped into my skis at 11.15am at the top of Bridger Gondola and skied until 4pm, before finally succumbing to jetlag and jelly legs.

The next day, I met guide Mike Janssen, who came to the resort 30 years ago after studying in Switzerland, hunting for big mountains and challenging terrain that could rival Verbier's. There are certainly similarities: steep, rugged terrain with big descents and plenty of cliffs – but that's far from the only draw. The calibre of skiers is high here (you might think yourself a good skier, but come to Jackson Hole and be humbled), and there's 1,260m of vertical descent, with the longest run 4.5 miles, meaning you can ski for days on end without having to repeat a run. There's little chance of having to share a run either. Just metres off the lift, skiers and snowboarders fan out and disappear into the white haze.

Then there's the fact that every part of the mountain is skiable, with no need to share a line. Highlights include first tracks (by way of an early uplift) with several inches of "cowboy" powder - light, weightless stuff - on top of a groomed blue piste. Sitting under the skirt of notorious Corbet's Couloir are the Expert Chutes. I'd nailed these descents and thought myself to be moving up in the ratings, until Mike told me locals call it "Expert Bowl" now that the excess snow has mellowed its features. A short boot-pack hike and you can access Headwall, an open, perfectly pitched face, leading into some exceptional, not-too-gnarly off-piste.



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It's hard to find a bad turn in Jackson Hole. From the base, looking up at the mountain, the left side of the ski area promises the expert terrain I lost myself in for two days. Looker's right, equal in size, it's cruisers galore – more pistes, intermediate-friendly, beautiful groomer skiing. Visiting in March, I'd not expected conditions to be tiptop, but even the south-facing sun-baked pistes were like skiing on velvet.

And it's not just about the skiing: the views from anywhere on the mountain are exceptional. Look north and you'll see Grand Teton, the iconic Wyoming peak catching the last of the sun to glow pink at dusk – beyond lies Yellowstone National Park. Look the other way and it's Cody Bowl, accessed through a backcountry gate, where you occasionally see the tiny silhouettes of skiers hiking along the ridge. Eastwards, it's flat snowy plains that couldn't look less Alpine, without deep valleys or high cathedral peaks. If, like me, you're lucky to catch a break in the snow, you'll see these vistas framed by blue sky, while beautiful glittering dust floats in the air. It's orographic – the mountain's producing its own snow. What a welcome to winter in the Tetons.

And the magic doesn't stop once you're off the slopes. On-mountain restaurants include the new Piste Mountain Bistro (for sit-down sophistication) and the rudimentary Corbet's Cabin – the mountain's original patrol cabin – which serves waffles at 3,185m. Skiers and snowboarders can be found loosening up at the ski-boot-table-dancing Handle Bar, and at Mangy Moose saloon, where there's après beer and live music. But it's the revelry down in the main town of Jackson that really elevates the resort to a world-class ski destination, with steak houses, taquerias, sushi restaurants, grills (try Snake River), brew houses, wine bars and the legendary Million Dollar Cowboy Bar – established in 1937 and boasting celebrities, presidents and royalty among its patrons.

So, why visit now? Jackson Hole is a place of legend – and the word is definitely out. This cowboy town is hitting its prime, with developments and investment elevating it from maverick ski mountain to the ultimate resort; holding strong to its roots and indie spirit while taking a tourism boom in its stride. Such rapid growth in popularity often results in a divide between locals and visitors – but you won't see that here. In Jackson Hole's spas, on its chairlifts, in its bars and around town, you'll hear people sharing tips and stories, explaining how they came to be here and why they've stayed – and why, of anywhere, Jackson Hole is the place to ski in America right now.

Ski Independence offers seven nights at Four Seasons Jackson Hole from £7,725 per person, based on two sharing. An IKON lift pass costs from £607 in low season, for six days and covers multiple resorts (see box). Early gondola add-on to a private lesson cost \$35. Early tram add-on costs \$85. Jackson Hole Wildlife Safaris half-day Wildlife Tour cost from \$165 per person. For more information about Jackson Hole, visit Jackson Hole Mountain Resort

Katie was a guest of Jackson Hole

Discover the best places to stay, eat, drink and ski in Jackson Hole in our expert resort guide

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