

USA

Skiing the Wild West

Is Jackson Hole really America's most extreme snow resort? Rowena Ryan finds out



A hot spring at Yellowstone National Park. Above: On top of the world at Jackson Hole. Below: The powdery slopes.



“We spy the hardcore riders hiking a ridge in the back-country to get fresh powdery tracks and we hear the whoops of spectators cheering on a skier dropping off a cliff.”



I'd heard the rumours about skiing in Jackson Hole, the Wild West resort that attracts equally wild skiers and snowboarders who “send it” on the famously steep terrain.

This is a mountain with attitude, where gondola chat revolves around how many days you've had on the mountain this season and the best strategy for nailing first tracks (or “early ups” as the locals call it). It's a little bit badass but don't let that deter you. It may be legend among advanced riders, but there's enough for families, intermediates and beginners, too. And after a week you just might find your skiing levels remarkably improved.

On the edge of Grand Teton and Yellowstone national parks in Wyoming, Jackson Hole overlooks a wilderness expanse in the least-populated state of the US. Unlike most American ski resorts that had their beginnings as old mining towns, its roots are in ranching, so prepare your swagger for the town's wooden sidewalks.

Here's what to know about the resort dubbed “America's most extreme place to ski” that's firmly on the map for Aussie powder hounds and revered as one of the best snow resorts in the world.

On the slopes

“Rusty Hall does it all” is our ski instructor's slogan. Rusty originally hailed from Oregon before becoming a Jackson lifer but it's his wild handlebar moustache I'm most intrigued by. Flakes of the famous “cowboy powder” stick to his face as we careen down the black diamond South Hoback run.

Not mucking around, we've headed straight up the legendary aerial tram known as “Big Red” which takes you to the top – 1261m – in nine minutes, making it the longest continuous vertical descent of any ski area in the US. Like sardines, 100 riders pack into the tram and as we near the top, the liftie launches into the mandatory safety briefing, the crowd ending in unison with him, “if you don't know, don't go”.

Rusty knows, though. And after joining the waffle eaters at the top in Corbet's Cabin to fuel up on a peanut butter and bacon waffle, we hit Rendezvous Bowl including a quick pit stop to peer down the legendary chute known as Corbet's Couloir – the most famed and gnarly in North America.

We spy the hardcore riders hiking a ridge in the back-country to get fresh powdery tracks down Cody Bowl. Hear the whoops of spectators cheering on a skier dropping off a cliff before joining the line for Casper Quad Chair for blue runs galore. It's not all steeps and deeps, though – the right side of the mountain, called *Après Vous*, is a much mellower option for beginners and intermediates.

The resort has 130 runs and an annual average snowfall of 11m, and that snow is incredible. It's dry and can get cold but there are



ESCAPE ROUTE

GETTING THERE

Flights to Jackson connect through Los Angeles, San Francisco and Dallas. From Jackson, it's a 20-minute drive to Teton Village.

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Jackson starts from \$710 per night. Teton Mountain Lodge starts from \$800 a night.

hoteljackson.com;
tetonlodge.com

SKI PASS

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two gondolas from the base of the mountain to warm up in and excellent Aussie-style flat whites at Overview Coffee. At the top of the Bridger Gondola is Piste Mountain Bistro with floor-to-ceiling windows framing the wilderness beyond. It's table service, so loosen your boots and unfold your napkin for dishes like sliced elk fillet and crab salad.

Top right: Corbet's Cabin (also below) and its waffles (inset).

Where to stay

You can stay on-mountain in Teton Village or in Jackson, 19km away. It's a hard toss-up as to where is best. The village gives you ski-in, ski-out access, but the town of Jackson is a charming country-and-western time warp of a place, with wooden boardwalks and shops selling Pendleton towels and Stetson hats at Kemo Sabe – the celebrity-famous store from Aspen.

The best après on the mountain has to be at the Mangy Moose saloon, where riders peel off their helmets and order jugs of beer with live music amping up the already amped crowd. Teton Mountain Lodge is a good accommodation option; its in-house restaurant, Spur, does a tasty buffalo quesabirria.

Down in Jackson, we get a photo under the highly Instagrammed elk antler arch before a mandatory drink at the Million Dollar Cowboy Bar where we take a seat in a saddle at the bar. Its vibe is infectious – there's swing dancing by the stage and cowboy memorabilia throughout. We soak up our whiskey afterwards at trendy Teton Tiger pan-Asian restaurant.

The boutique Hotel Jackson in town blends Old West with modern touches. A gas fireplace warms up my king room next to a lounge area cushioned with bison-patterned cushions. A Mercedes-Benz ski shuttle whisks us to the ski hill daily and its in-house restaurant, FIGS, offers the only Lebanese cuisine in town. Opposite the hotel, The Kitchen offers an Asian-influenced raw bar with mains like duck breast and smoked miso.

Off the slopes

Take advantage of the fewer crowds in winter and book a snowmobile tour into Yellowstone National Park, including a visit to the still-erupting geyser Old Faithful. scenic-safaris.com

The writer was a guest of Jackson Hole Mountain Resort.



Escape digital editor Rowena Ryan has always said the best way to improve your skiing is to ski with those who push you. "Caution" is French for "good run", her instructor jokes.



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