

What to expect from this winter's ski season, Washington Post

A skier goes down a freshly groomed slope in Vail. To limit crowds, Vail Resorts, one of the world's largest ski companies, is using a reservation system. (Jack Affleck)

By **Janet O'Grady**

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With snowflakes already falling at high elevations, and lifts scheduled to open just weeks from now, many of us are dreaming of mountain escapes, imagining that first run of the season.

During normal times, the biggest uncertainty in booking ski vacations is whether there will be powder. When the novel coronavirus caused resorts to shutter abruptly in March, it was unclear whether there would even be a ski season this winter. Now the burning question is how safe ski country will be.

Despite the ongoing uncertainty, many resorts report that business exceeded expectations during their first coronavirus summer/fall season. Local and regional visitors — and some, like myself, who flew from the East Coast to Colorado — sought solace and fun in nature with responsible, distanced activities such as mountain biking, wilderness hikes and scenic lift rides.

[*How a middle-aged beginning skier learned to take on black diamond runs*](#)

“There’s a strong appetite, a high intention, to go skiing and boarding this year,” says Dave Belin, of market research company RRC Associates, based on a national survey conducted by the company this summer. “Ninety-three percent said they felt safe doing dispersed outdoor recreation during the pandemic.” While the logistics of winter sports are more complicated than warm-weather activities, the resorts gleaned valuable experience for planning this ski season’s day-to-day operations.

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Safety and risk awareness have always been top priorities for ski resorts, from advocating wearing helmets to strictly enforcing rules against reckless skiing. This year, resorts will be welcoming skiers and riders with protocols that balance safety, virus prevention and enjoyment.

Skiing and boarding already offer advantages. The sports occur outdoors in fresh alpine air. Spreading out from others on open slopes is part of the sports’ DNA. Participants are already accustomed to covering their faces from sun or cold, and wearing goggles and gloves.

The National Ski Areas Association’s [Ski Well, Be Well](#) campaign offers best practices for resort operators and guests this winter, emphasizing, “People must be flexible and honor the social contract for skiing and boarding that requires you to take precautions to protect yourself and others,” says spokesperson Adrienne Saia Isaac.

While opening plans vary for each resort from Oregon to Maine, there are common coronavirus protocols. You will see increased signage reminding guests that face coverings are mandatory and will be strictly enforced by resort employees in public spaces — including chairlifts, gondolas and trams — and indoor spaces such as

restaurants and shops. Patrons will be distanced in lines at gondolas and chairlifts, with contact minimized by seating only related parties (families or skiing groups) together. Unrelated others will be seated in configurations to maximize distancing.

Skiers on Snowmass Mountain in Aspen. The resort is managing capacity with new passes and pricing to anticipate peak weekends and incentivize nonpeak times such as weekdays. (Jordan Curet)

Ski lessons will either be eliminated (at Vermont's [Sugarbush](#), for example) or class sizes limited. This is the year to splurge on private lessons if you can.

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Food and wine can be an essential part of a great ski vacation. Prepare your taste buds for more grab-and-go meals as one safe way to eat on the mountain. Many resorts will also offer indoor dining at their mountain eateries, which often feature outdoor decks, but expect interiors to be arranged spaciouly to accommodate fewer diners. Stringent disinfection procedures will be used in restrooms.

In Colorado, [Aspen Highlands](#)' legendary ski-in ski-out Cloud Nine Alpine Bistro will have sit-down lunches (by reservation only) at distanced tables. But guests will be expected to eschew its beloved post-lunch custom of spraying bubbly while tabletop dancing in ski boots.

Some resorts, such as California's [Squaw Valley/Alpine Meadows](#), are expanding outside seating. Others, such as Aspen's Sundeck restaurant, are installing tents outdoors with heaters. Pop-ups will prevail on some slopes — such as Colorado's [Steamboat](#)'s mobile Pizza Ranger and Taco Beast, a Mexican joint on a snowcat that sets up tables on the mountain.

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Since bars have been identified by health experts as breeding grounds for virus spread, tippers can say goodbye this year to crowded, boozy après ski. [Vail Resorts](#) will not offer full-service bars but will sell packaged beer and wine. Others, such as [Aspen/Snowmass](#), will offer full-service bars with table service only.

This season you will find that touchless technology accelerates. Lift tickets on zippers, for instance, continue to be a thing of the past, replaced with RFID (radio-frequency identification) tickets in pockets, letting you move through gates contactless. “Most resorts, even smaller ones, are trying to shift everything online and go cashless — from pre-arrival reserving and transportation to paying in advance for accommodations, tickets, rentals, lessons, food and beverage,” says Rob Clark, CEO of Denver-based Aspenware Internet Solutions. “The technology exists so you can check in at resorts like you do for a flight on your smartphone. This enables guests to skip the ticket window and go straight to the lift or their activity.”

[Why 'uphill skiing' is gaining ground among winter sports enthusiasts](#)

Social distancing will be enforced at ski resorts. To limit crowds, Vail Resorts, one of the world's largest ski companies, is using a reservation system. Its top-tier Priority level Epic Pass (\$999) offers exclusive early-bird booking at its 34 North American properties, including Vermont's [Stowe](#); Utah's [Park City](#); and Colorado's [Beaver Creek](#), [Breckenridge](#), [Crested Butte](#) and [Keystone](#), which opens early on Nov. 6. From Nov. 6 to Dec. 7, priority pass holders can reserve seven “Priority Days,” and later as

many week-of reservations as they want. Day lift tickets will go on sale Dec. 8. “This reservation system is a tool to help us manage the unpredictable peak days,” says Vail Resorts CEO Rob Katz.

Visitors on a ski lift at the Vail Resorts in Colorado. The company’s Epic Pass offers early-bird booking at its 34 North American properties. (Vail Resorts)

The Priority Pass also provides a week at one of its 41 partners, including Colorado’s [Telluride](#). Another partner, [Sun Valley](#) in Idaho, debuts more terrain this season — 380-plus acres on Bald Mountain. And a new high-speed quad lift opens up a wide new bowl and tree skiing on Baldy. Epic’s Northeast Value Pass (\$619) gives access to 18 resorts, with 10 restricted days at Vermont’s Stowe and limited access to New York’s [Hunter Mountain](#) and Vermont’s [Okemo](#) and [Mount Snow](#).

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Denver-based competitor [Alterra Mountain Co.](#) consists of 15 bucket-list destinations, including Vermont’s [Stratton](#); Utah’s [Deer Valley](#), California’s Squaw Valley/Alpine Meadows and [Mammoth Mountain](#); Colorado’s Steamboat and [Winter Park](#); and West Virginia’s [Snowshoe](#).

Alterra doesn’t require reservations, but it is prioritizing season-pass holders and eliminating walk-up ticket sales. The number of day tickets will be tightly controlled and available by advance purchase only. The Ikon Pass offers three price points, with the highest at \$1,049, providing unlimited skiing and snowboarding at 44 destinations. It includes limited seven-day access to iconic U.S. resorts such as Wyoming’s [Jackson Hole](#), where lift tickets will be limited and thermal imaging cameras will check guests’ temperatures this season; Montana’s [Big Sky](#), with its massive 5,850 acres to meander and schuss on; and Aspen/Snowmass.

“Skiing is different from a sporting event or an amusement park in that there are multiple points of entry and unlimited points of exit and thousands of acres to spread out on once on the mountain,” says Aspen/Snowmass CEO Mike Kaplan. “A total number of unique individuals who access the mountain during an entire day does not accurately indicate whether you have a pinch point or social distancing problem.”

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The resort, which boasts four separate mountains — [Aspen Mountain](#), [Buttermilk](#), Aspen Highlands and [Snowmass](#) — is managing capacity with new passes and pricing to anticipate peak weekends and incentivize nonpeak times such as weekdays. Its top-tier Premiere Pass, good all season and priced at \$2,399 Oct. 7-Nov. 13 and then \$2,849, provides access to all four mountains, and includes a complimentary Ikon Base Pass — a \$749 value with unlimited access at 14 destinations and up to five days at 27 resorts. (Pricing for individual tickets won’t be announced until the end of October.)

However, the company hasn’t ruled out a reservation system if infection rates should rise. This season the resort presents new snow-making, including extending to the top of Aspen Mountain, and a new six-passenger chairlift at Snowmass’s Big Burn.

Overall, insiders expect the 2020-2021 season to be quieter because of the reduction of international and corporate travelers. It remains to be seen if skiers and boarders will be mostly locals and regional travelers.

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This could also be the year of discovering or reappreciating the small local ski mountain, gems like Vermont's [Jay Peak](#); Colorado's [Monarch Mountain](#); and Idaho's [Tamarack](#). But questions remain. With many working remotely and feeling cooped up in cities, will skiers and riders take longer vacations, as they did this summer and fall? While the well-heeled continue to fly private aviation, will other winter sports fans be willing to fly commercial to a ski destination?

Uncertainty is the new normal. There's no guarantee about opening and closing dates or season length or even that mountains will be open every day. Before reserving, check with individual resorts on refund policies, and consider buying travel insurance.

"Resorts are preparing for the unknown by taking steps to pivot quickly if things change, such as a resurgence of covid-19 or lockdowns, and technology is helping with that," says Aspenware's Clark.

Just as resorts need to be resilient, so do skiers and boarders. Meanwhile, hope for lots of snow, and get your skis and boards ready.

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