

TWIN PEAKS

Venture across cowboy country to experience all facets of the secret gem that is Montana's ski scene.

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Too many runs to choose from the summit of Whitefish.



Dogsledding through a marshmallow world.



The warm glow of one of Lone Mountain Ranch's cabins.



The sparkling Whitefish Lake.



ou wanna know something?" Donnie asks in a smoky mid-western drawl. "I'm only gonna tell you this once, so pay attention. Where you are now, right now, this place here, is the best ski mountain in the USA if not the whole damn world!"

I'm propped up at the bar at the Hellroaring Saloon & Eatery on Montana's Whitefish Mountain. In front of me is a pint of Moose Drool Brown Ale and to my left is Donnie, a local skier with an amazing ability to fit twice as many words into a sentence than is necessary. The bar itself is decorated with an eclectic mix of ski paraphernalia and the odd stuffed animal. There are three guys in cowboy hats downing shots of whiskey at the end of the bar. If not for everyone dressed in ski gear we could be in a scene from a classic Clint Eastwood western.

"This place ain't like them fancy pancy nancy Colorado reezorts," Donnie drawls. "Oh, no sir! I skied down there before I got up this way and I ain't never ever even thought once about heading back on down." "Why?" I ask.

"Coz we're different, man. We're the real deal in these parts." Then he stands, shakes my hand and wanders out onto the powdered slopes of Whitefish leaving me grinning.

"Donnie," I say to myself channelling his linguistic trait, "that is simply, without a doubt, the main exact reason we're here."

We had landed at Bozeman Airport a week earlier to make our way to Montana's most famous ski field, Big Sky Resort. Embracing the Wild West, we eschew the ski-in, ski-out chalets and instead choose to stay at Lone Mountain Ranch, one of National Geographic's Unique Lodges of the World. Picture the quintessential American log cabin surrounded by trees slouching with the weight of a fresh snowfall. The 27 log cabins are spaced well enough away from each other to ensure privacy and a feeling of isolation, yet all are within walking distance of the main ranch where the renowned Horn & Cattle Restaurant serves award-winning nosh and its saloon bar pours American whiskies and craft beer. It's all rustic wood, open fires and low lighting. I feel like I need to buy a cowboy hat just to fit in.

The snow when we arrive is waist deep. The stars light our way and the glow of the open fire in our cabin – named Lame Deer – beckons through the windows. There's a record player with a selection of vinyl. I choose *The Best of John Denver* (nice touch) and climb into the deep warmth of our bed to the strains of 'Rocky Mountain High'. This is America.



The treehouse on the slopes.

It's a short drive from Lone Mountain to Big Sky Resort. As we approach the base there's a flurry of activity as a few skiers and boarders jostle for the lifts. Claiming to have the "Biggest Skiing in America", Big Sky has more than 20 square kilometres of ski terrain with runs for all levels. It is astonishing that there are not more people here. There are no lines for the lifts. None. Not one. Perhaps that is why the likes of Justin Timberlake and Ben Affleck choose to ski here.

Big Sky has only recently opened the Ramcharger 8, one of the most technologically advanced chairlifts in the world. Built to carry eight people, it is high speed, heated and comes with a weather-protecting hood. Unless word begins to get out, I struggle to see how they will fill it given the lack of crowds.

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We ski all day, only stopping for lunch at Headwaters Grille on the mountain. Big Sky lives up to its name and for a couple of hours in the afternoon I have no idea where we are. It is a great way to ski knowing there are new runs after every lift. Thankfully the mountain is well signposted and we don't find ourselves staring down a double black diamond run to get home.

It's not all skiing here though, and on our second day we join the team from Spirit of the North for a dog sled through the Moonlight Basin in Big Sky's backcountry. With the imposing Lone Mountain

and the Spanish Peaks as a backdrop dogsledding through fresh snow is a serious adrenaline rush. My team of Alaskan huskies barks with excitement and, even before we have taken off, pulls hard on the sled.

"Foot down!" Jim yells at me to ensure I weigh heavily on the foot brake. "If they take off without you we'll never get your wife back!" My wife shifts uncomfortably in the sled.

Jim gives me the thumbs-up, so I lift my foot and step onto the sled. It lurches forward and for a split second I fear I'll be a bachelor again.

It is not easy controlling a dog sled. Push the brake going downhill. Jump off and run with the dogs going uphill. Lean to the left when turning right. Lean to the right when turning left. I curse myself for not paying enough attention to Jim's briefing, especially when we take a sharp turn and hit a tree branch heavy with powdery snow.

"Having fun?" I ask my wife as she clears the snow from her head. The views are astonishing though. There is so much deep snow that it feels like we're sledding through a world made of marshmallow.

The drive from Big Sky to Whitefish is a seven-hour cruise through middle America. We pass small towns with houses decorated with American flags, like something out of a 1980s Tom Cruise movie. There's a church with a sign out front proclaiming "All Pasties Welcome". I assume it means pastors, but out here who would really know? There seems to be more pick-up trucks than people in these parts.

Fifteen minutes after Donnie has departed the Hellroaring Saloon I am back up on the summit of Whitefish. We're in luck with the weather today. With not a cloud in the sky, the views are endless. The peaks of Glacier National Park run all the way to the Canadian border to the north; to the south Whitefish Lake sparkles in the afternoon sunshine. Donnie had told me of the inversion days that happen here, where the warm air pushes the cloud cover low over the lake and town of Whitefish. "Can you like imagine, just for one minute, what it would be like to ski above the clouds? Man,

Staring out over Glacier National Park.



Preparing to sled the backcountry of Big Sky.



that’s what it is like. I’m serious. It’s like being in heaven.”

We are staying on the mountain this time in the wonderfully unique Ponderosa Chalet, a treehouse literally a ski length from Tenderfoot chairlift. I learn the first morning to make sure I’m dressed for breakfast after a chairlift of eager snowboarders laugh hysterically at me through the window.

While Ponderosa is set up for self-catering we make the most of the mountain resort’s restaurants. We fine dine on buffalo tenderloin at the renowned Cafe Kandahar and gorge on burgers and beer at Ed & Mully’s where the après ski scene tends to kick off each day. It ends at The Bierstube with a great selection of local craft beers and retro video games. On our last evening it is karaoke night and, as I look through the song list, I hear a familiar voice from the stage. It’s Donnie and he’s trying to sing ‘The Gambler’ while flashing a beaming smile my way. He beckons me to join him and I spend my last night in Montana singing “You gotta know when to hold ‘em, know when to fold ‘em” arm in arm with a guy I’d only met a day earlier. It’s the real deal out here alright. ☒

GET PLANNING



GET THERE

United Airlines flies from major Australian cities to Los Angeles with connections through to Bozeman Yellowstone International Airport in Montana.
united.com



STAY THERE

Lone Mountain Ranch is a historic property that lies between Big Sky Resort and Yellowstone National Park. It has 27 cabins, restored in 2016, ranging from one to six bedrooms. Prices start at about AU\$450 a night, but packages that include skiing and meals are also available.

Ponderosa Chalet is one of three ski-in, ski-out treehouses run by Snow Bear Chalets on Whitefish Mountain. Each has great views and a large balcony complete with hot tub. Prices start at AU\$500 a night, with a two-night minimum.

lonemountainranch.com
snowbearchalets.com



GET INFORMED

Whether you’re heading there for the uncrowded slopes during the winter season or summer adventures – mountain biking, horse riding, hiking – you can find information on the Visit Montana and resort websites.

visitmt.com
skiwhitefish.com



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