

Snowbird Village; previous page, Bryce Phillips on a powder day at Snowbird



WINTERHOTLIST

## 1. Alta/Snowbird, Utah

So what makes these two connected resorts, perched at the top of a sleepy Utah canyon, the best skiing destination in North America? The snow. Sitting on the bull's-eye of the

**Snowfall:** 500 inches  
**Area:** 4,700 acres  
**Vertical Drop:** 3,240 feet  
**Web:** [alta.com](http://alta.com); [snowbird.com](http://snowbird.com)

Wasatch Range's freakishly powerful storm track, Alta/Snowbird consistently offers up more of the deep, light,

and dry than any resort on the continent. This is where Ski Utah gets its 500-inch snowfall number—in a weather-dependent sport, AltaBird is the closest you can get to a sure thing. But deep snow ain't fun if you don't have the terrain to go with it. You'll find steep and direct skiing off nearly every lift, with six high-speed quads and Snowbird's famous tram to get you there. Learn the ins and outs of the many traverses and hikes (try Alta's Devil's Castle and the 'Bird's Thunder Bowl) and you'll ski soft snow on new lines for weeks. The resorts' vibes differ—laid-back Alta is dotted with old-school wooden lodges, while Snowbird is shiny and loud, concrete and glass. But what both

places share, other than a dearth of nightlife, is a lack of pretense. Everyone is here for powder. And they get it. Last winter was so stormy, the Wasatch Powderbird Guides' heli-ski operation barely got off the ground before February. A whopping 88 inches fell in April alone. At the time, I happened to be there doing some "reporting." Here's what I found out: If it's dumping all winter, book a spring trip. The locals had long since packed it in, and our crew skied untracked powder for two solid days.

## 2. Whistler Blackcomb, British Columbia

OK, the base village was designed by committee and the lower mountain can get milk-bottle foggy. But since you probably can't afford Europe this year, Whistler Blackcomb is the next best thing. Why? Big vertical.

Like Yao Ming big. It's the largest resort in North America, and the terrain sustains some of the world's best skiers for a lifetime. Although a few U.S. resorts, such as Jackson Hole and Big Sky, claim more than 4,000 vertical feet, the truth

### Readers Speak

When choosing a resort, you care most about: snow quality (78%). You care least about: nightlife (1%). Your favorite resort is: Alta/Snowbird (17%). Your second-favorite resort is: Whistler Blackcomb—great minds think alike (13%). Your favorite place to party is: Whistler Blackcomb (32%). You'd most like to own a ski condo in: Jackson Hole (18%).



## SKI HOT LIST

is much of that drop gets broken up by topography. Whistler Blackcomb's 5,280-foot vertical descent, like those in the Alps, drops directly from top to bottom. Your legs will know the difference. (It also feels like a European resort at night: Men, women, cougars, and manthers all dance goonishly in ski boots until 2 A.M.) For years, the only gripe was the difficulty of moving between the two peaks. No longer: This season, the resort links Blackcomb and Whistler via the much anticipated, \$48.6

Vail's Outer Mongolia Bowl



million Peak-2-Peak Gondola, a 1,430-foot-high thrill ride that covers 2.7 miles—a distance nearly twice as long as the Golden Gate Bridge—in just 11 minutes.

## 3. Vail, Colorado

The state of Vermont offers about 6,200 acres of skiing at 20 resorts. Vail, all by its lonesome, serves up 5,289 skiable acres—most of them in the wide-open, seemingly endless Back Bowls. All that un-groomed snow used to beat up even the best skiers, but today's fat skis let you ride screaming sweeper turns as if you were on a buffed-out groomer (1,600 acres of which Vail offers). The hill's ski school is unmatched, which will keep the kids happy. Meanwhile, the pub-crawl scene through Vail village—recently renovated to the tune of more than \$1 billion—should keep you busy at night. Bonus: You can catch a frequent and free bus ride home, so there's no need to rent a car.

**Snowfall:** 348  
**Area:** 5,289  
**Vert:** 3,450  
**Web:** [vail.com](http://vail.com)

**>THE SEASON'S BEST... AIRLIFT** Silverton, Colorado's year-old à la carte heli-drops, which deposit you on 13,000-foot peaks for \$150 a pop. [silvertonmountain.com](http://silvertonmountain.com) **WEATHER REPORT** El Niño's and La Niña's decision to take a break from scrambling winter weather in the Northern Hemisphere, meaning everyone will get some powder some of the time (we hope). **SCREEN TEST** Skier Robb Gaffney's Squallywood clinic, at Squaw Valley, California, which teaches Warren Miller wannabes how to look good on film—though not how to become