



MOONLIGHT'S NEW PHASE The lodge at Montana's Moonlight Basin resort, which shares a mountain — and now a lift ticket — with Big Sky.

# BIG SKY DELIGHT

Two Montana resorts working together: a haven for skiers in search of fresh tracks



ROOM AT THE TOP Skiers assemble at Big Sky's Summit Hotel.

BRIAN SCHOTT

It was a Saturday morning last January when I emerged from the Huntley Lodge in the alpine ski village of Big Sky, Mont. I walked across the quiet, snow-trampled plaza as the late-rising sun lit up Lone Peak like a candle. A woman sat by a fire pit that was still smoldering from the previous night, and couples walked together with skis on their shoulders.

I had traveled here with my wife and 9-month old son to report on a mountain that boasts the most skiable acres in America. After teaming up with nearby Moonlight Basin, Big Sky offers a single lift ticket to 23 lifts and more than 220 runs on 4,350 vertical feet and 5,500 skiable acres — just edging out massive Vail for sheer size.

The buzz about it is so hot, I could barely wait to strap on my skis. With mother and baby still snuggled in bed, it was time to see what Big Sky was all about.

Resort skiing began here when NBC newscaster Chet Huntley opened Big Sky Resort in 1973. The resort is now halfway through a 10-year plan that includes \$400 million in improvements to the village and ski terrain.

We began our visit in Bozeman, where we stayed at Montana's only Hilton (from \$99), then drove the winding road along the Gallatin River to Big Sky Village, an hour away. Checking in at the Huntley Lodge, we were greeted by doormen in cowboy hats.

While Lone Peak dominates the view, most of the skiing at Big Sky sprawls out below it. That first morning, I left the village on the Ramcharger lift to take some high-speed cruisers under the Southern Comfort lift. I made wide, arcing turns down the soft, groomed snow of the beginner-ranked slopes. After a morning of laps, I returned to the village, which now bustled with ski teams getting ready for training.

### THE HIGH POINT: LONE PEAK

The resort's Snowsports School director, Hans Scherthner, has been at Big Sky for 21 years. Asked about the soul of the place, he simply pointed to Lone Peak. "This peak beckons people, calls to people," he said. "It's one of a kind. A lot of other resorts have good runs, but no Lone Peak. Any European resort is left behind by its majesty." Big Sky has added 13 lifts in the last 10 years, but of 17 total, the tram ride to the top of Lone Peak is the pinnacle.

While the tram only services expert terrain, many people take the ride up and back simply for the view. From the summit, I gazed out across three states; squinting, I could even make out the Grand Tetons in Wyoming. The wind was blowing so hard



A WARM WELCOME The outdoor pool at Moonlight Basin lodge.

that it supported me as I leaned into it. As dark clouds began to build, I clicked into my bindings and poked my way across the wind-scoured face, then dove into the 45-degree pitch of the South Face. After catching my breath, I wrapped around through the Duck Walk, then headed into Rice Bowl, finding deep snow.

Then came a lunch of seared ahi tuna salad at the Peaks restaurant in the Summit Hotel. I was eager to investigate Moonlight Basin, and after looking in on my boy, mama told me to get back to "work."

Moonlight Basin was born as a real-estate venture 14 years ago. Three years ago, it jumped into the ski business and opened the first U.S. destination resort in 20 years. Before last winter, Moonlight and Big Sky were in a battle that left skiers wishing they'd kiss and make up, since they occupy different sides of Lone Peak. But separate lift tickets were required for each. Luckily, the resorts announced in 2005 that they'd be working together. I took a series of lifts over to Moonlight. While the rocky Headwaters chutes

on the north face of Lone Peak are the calling card of this young resort, there's also more peaceful terrain. The Six Shooter lift, the only six-passenger chair in Montana, services classic, playful intermediate runs. The North Summit Snow Fields provide a lift-served back-country experience for those with the proper gear — and guts.

"This is better than any day I've had in Colorado," said Pat Hughes in the Moonlight Lodge bar after a day on the resorts' slopes. "The snow conditions were fabulous, and the lift lines were zero."

The après-ski scene is good here, but veteran ski bums may find it a little sleepy. The resort does offer more than 30 restaurants and bars, serving up everything from sushi to wood-fired pizza to live poker. On

the evening I was there, Big Sky hosted a Snow Ball, an outdoor party with music, drinks and fireworks.

On Sunday, snow was quietly falling. I directed my skis to the Challenger lift, hugging the border with Moonlight Basin. I found waist-deep snow along the Big Rock Tongue, then moved on to the new Headwaters chair at Moonlight.

After a weekend, I'd only scratched the surface. The mountain is more about skiing (and snowboarding) than anything else, with terrain variety that's hard to match.

A ski resort's soul can come in many forms: the skiers, a rowdy village, the layout of the lifts or a certain run. Big Sky's soul spreads out in all directions from the tip of a lone peak.

### GETTING THERE ...

Northwest Airlines serves Bozeman Airport (45 miles north of Big Sky Resort) with connections through Minneapolis. Other airlines include Delta and United. Big Sky guests get contracted airline rates by booking through the resort's Central Reservations Air Department, 1-800-548-4486.

### WHERE TO STAY

The Huntley Lodge's rooms have been updated with Solace beds, there's free Wi-Fi throughout the building, and an all-you-can-eat breakfast buffet is included with any stay. Packages start at \$135 per person, double occupancy, for a stay of two

nights or more, including lift tickets. 1-800-548-4486; www.bigskyresort.com.

The Summit Hotel in the Mountain Village has 213 luxury rooms and suites. Enjoy dinner in the Peaks Restaurant with an extensive wine list or settle in for a nightcap in the laid-back Carabiner bar. Nightly rates start at \$199 per night; two bedrooms with hot tub start at \$484 per night. 1-800-548-4486; www.bigskyresort.com.

### ON THE SLOPES

Get access to Big Sky Resort and Moonlight Basin with a Lone Peak ticket for \$79. At both resorts, children 10 and under ski for free. 1-800-548-4486 (Big Sky), 1-877-822-0430 (Moonlight Basin); www.lonepeakpass.com.



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