



*Where the*  
**SNOW** NEVER ENDS

Even after a decade of trips to Big Sky, **BRIAN SCHOTT** discovers that "The Biggest Skiing in America" can still push him to the edge.

## That first morning

at Big Sky a decade ago, when I climbed out of bed in the Shoshone Hotel and slid open the curtains, I literally stumbled back, awestruck. I had seen photos of this ancient pyramid of snow-covered rock, but to behold Lone Peak fully for the first time, as if the snow was actually ignited by the morning sun – now this was finally a glimpse of a ski mountain with possibilities beyond boundaries.

Wisps of blowing snow curled off her sharp 11,166-foot summit as the sky moved from deep purple to cobalt blue. Beneath her noble crown, spilling from the steep snowfields that are the peak of her beauty, lay run after run of undulating terrain, twisting down her more moderate curves toward this cozy room in Mountain Village where I stood before the window, mouth agape.

I knew the skiing here was big. What I didn't know then was that this mountain would become home to the biggest contiguous expanse of skiable terrain in the U.S.

Since that first glimpse out the window, I've returned again and again, exploring Big Sky's seemingly endless terrain. I've whipped along Crazy Horse, picked through the trees of the Bavarian Forest, and held my breath when dropping into the face of Marx. In the process, I've developed what I think is a pretty good plan of attack for covering a good chunk of what Big Sky offers.

Yet after all these years I had never skied the Big Couloir. Ever since that first day when



I'd drawn the shades and spied that snowy scar cutting down the east-facing aspect of the peak's brow through a battalion of menacing rock, it had been like a friendly rival nagging me. Poking at me; prodding me to ski it. Did I have the guts? So a decade later, on this trip with a friend of equally ambitious ski dreams, I wondered if I'd get the chance to finally make my Big Couloir acquaintance.



The first skiers in the Big Sky area were horse packers who saddled skis and trekked into the mountains for winter adventure in the 1960s. The resort experience began when the late NBC newscaster Chet Huntley started Big Sky Resort in 1973. In those early years, Big Sky was known for its intermediate terrain and light lift lines. But the true history of big mountain skiing here began in 1995 with the opening of the tram to the summit, expanding the resort's overall size by 50 percent and increasing the vertical to 4,350 feet.

Then in 2005, Moonlight Basin and Big Sky, which share different sides of Lone Peak, began offering one lift ticket to access the entire 5,512 acres. The joint pass became the

Reliving the moment with friends; (top) terrain is eaten in huge vertical bites on the steeps of Lone Peak; (opposite) a fresh layer blankets all 5,512 acres.



golden ticket to accessing the largest expanse of terrain available in the country without clicking out of your bindings.

Yet the attraction of Big Sky goes beyond the swath of terrain. The mountain has long focused on keeping lift capacity comfortably higher than the demand, now boasting an uphill lift capacity of 23,000 riders per hour with an average of 2,000 skiers and riders on the mountain each day. On a typical ski day, that means you have more than an acre all to yourself.

And even though Big Sky continues to add direct air service every year, you could unload jumbo jets full of rabid skiers and my guess is that you wouldn't even notice. There's so much skiing here, it would be like adding drops of sand to the ocean floor.



Over the years, I've developed something of a Big Sky plan of attack. Even though steeps are my favorite, I start by loading the Ramcharger lift from the village and warm up with some high-speed cruising under the Southern Comfort lift. I make big, wide, arcing turns down the beginner-ranked slopes, which always produce an even wider upturned arc on my face.

Andesite Mountain (elevation: 8,800 feet) is underrated in my book, offering a mix of runs that will please all abilities. After my warm-up, I like to dive into the intermediate Madison Avenue into the Elk Park Meadows. It always reminds me of the wide-open spaces of Vail's back bowls where I cut my Rocky Mountain ski teeth after college.

Feeling frisky now, it's time to dive into the trees. Once ski patrol has opened the gates, I head for the expert Snake Pit and enjoy this rolling, cascading, playful tree run that feeds me onto Big Horn where I "point 'em" back to the Thunder Wolf Quad.

## Even after skiing bell to bell, a look at the trail map reveals that you haven't even scratched the surface.

If there's fresh snow, you'll find me on War Dance or Coulter's Hell for another few laps in these steep, shaded trees.

One secret I recently learned is to not ignore the Lone Moose triple – a lift accessing classic cut runs like Bobcat and Grizzly Bear. Often forgotten, I've found powder stashes still lingering here four days after the last major storm.

The Challenger lift that hugs the border with Moonlight Basin is a must-ski for any expert and is next up for me. I always seem to find deep snow along the Big Rock Tongue and never miss gliding through the whisper-quiet trees of Magic Meadows. After another ride up Challenger, I cross over into Moonlight Basin and test the rocky Headwaters chutes using my Lone Peak ticket. I make jump turns down Cold Spring, then rip up the short, advanced glades of Broken Heart and Shaftway off the Lone Tree Quad. Then I cruise down the playful intermediate Merriweather run to the Six Shooter lift. Back over to Big Sky, and I'm ready for the top.

Of course, riding the Lone Peak tram is the ultimate high point of any ski day here. While the tram only services expert terrain, accessing Big Sky's famous steep, above-tree-line runs like Marx and the Dictator Chutes, I've seen many intermediates take the four-minute ride up – and back down – simply for the view. On a clear day you can even make out the spires of the Grand Tetons, 150 miles away.



The funny thing about Big Sky is that after a big ski day here, when you look at the trail map over a beer at the Carabiner, even after skiing bell to bell, you realize you

haven't scratched the surface of the available terrain. Families sit around eating nachos and sipping hot chocolates next to experts in body armor. The après-ski scene is a microcosm of the expanse of terrain and lack of crowds at Big Sky – there is something good for everyone here.

It was on that second afternoon over a beer at Whiskey Jack's when I brought up my Big Couloir infatuation to my ski buddy Ryan.

"So what are we waiting for?" he chortled, poking me in the ribs and laughing above the din of the bar, an old-school band putting new twists on a cover tune from the '60s. Indeed. Why not? I pushed away images of me tumbling to the bottom of the chute.

The next morning, light streamed in through the closed curtains at The Summit at Big Sky; the sound of snow plows and avalanche explosives echoed through the village. Again, I was looking out the window, but this time

the mountain was covered in clouds. Light snow drifted from above and steam rose from the pool below, floating past huge columns of snow pillowed over the stone pillars that surrounded the water.

After signing up with ski patrol for our chance at the Big Couloir, we decided to keep our legs warm by taking a lap. We cut across the top of Lenin and Marx through the Yeti Traverse, then ripped down the Gullies, into Crons, and back to the tram. The winds were gusting, the visibility was minimal, but the snow was deep. The storm was building.

Unloading at the summit, we checked out with patrol and entered the backcountry gate. Gale-force winds pulled at our bodies as we nimbly followed the string line – step after careful side step – until we finally arrived at the edge. I immediately backed up. It made me dizzy to look down. Everything was white.

But there was no turning back and no reason to continue to battle the wind. I edged into the chute first and made one turn. Abruptly, everything went quiet. The world went from a high-pitched wind scream to the most peaceful muffle. I looked up at Ryan, standing on the edge of the cornice looking at me, his jacket flapping wildly. “It’s so quiet!” I yelled. “I know!” he screamed. “Just go!”

So I went. My opening turns were tentative, testing the slope. The flat light made it difficult to judge the fall line and I realized it was steeper than I had surmised – I was free-falling with each hop turn.

But soon I started to get into a rhythm, legs on fire, adrenaline rushing. It was starting to become the kind of on-hill experience that got me through long, dry summers. With each

rhythmic turn, snow billowed up to my waist. I hit the bend midway down the chute and rested on the edge, waiting for Ryan. When he joined me, there was nothing to say. We just shook our heads and laughed.



It might be a surprising description, but the Big Sky experience to me evokes an elegant camp-like feel. It brings me back to childhood. It tests my adult limits. It speeds me up, and then invites me to really slow things down.

It’s not just the acreage, range of terrain, the massive vertical drop, the plethora of lifts, or views that drop your chin – not to mention the seamless link between two distinct ski areas. On each visit, I awake in the morning at a dead-end road at the base of a big, beautiful mountain with tons of snow, crisp mountain air, astonishing food, and lavish accommodations, surrounded by people who will not stop smiling and laughing.

The good news is that there is no camp director blowing his whistle at 6 a.m. It’s my own job to get up if I want to catch first chair.

The irony is that in a place this big, where the vastness of the mountains makes my physical presence feel tiny, by skiing amidst these soaring beautiful peaks, my spirit grows larger with every turn in the snow. And every time I leave her, she always calls me to come back for more. ❄️

*Brian Schott is a Whitefish, Montana-based freelance writer/photographer and the founding editor of the Whitefish Review. His writing has appeared in Ski and Skiing among others.*



## OFF THE HILL

Big Sky’s options for a day away from the slopes.

Skiing is simple in Big Sky: Ride the lift, descend, repeat. For those non-ski days, however, the options can be overwhelming. Here are some ways to build your off-day itinerary.

**Cast a line** with Caché Creek Outfitters or hit the wilderness **on horseback** with a lift from Jake’s Horses. If looking for a bit more speed, try **dogsledding** the backcountry with Spirit of the North. Or, even faster, go **snowmobiling** into the deep woods of Yellowstone with Alpine Snowmobile Tours, Back Country Adventures, or Two Top Snowmobile Rentals.

A stay in Big Sky isn’t complete without a **Yellowstone snowcoach tour** through SeeYellowstone. In Mountain Village itself, attend a **rescue dog demonstration** at the fire pit on the plaza, or **ice skate** beside The Summit. And if all this adventure has you feeling weary, stay inside for a **massage** at Solace Spa.

All of these activities can be arranged with one phone call to the concierge or by contacting the outfitters directly:

**Caché Creek Outfitters**  
cachecreekoutfitters.com, 406-995-3888

**Jake’s Horses**  
jakeshorses.com, 800-352-5956

**Spirit of the North**  
huskypower.com, 406-995-3424

**Alpine Snowmobile Tours**  
bigskysnowmobiletours.com, 406-580-3812

**Back Country Adventures**  
backcountry-adventures.com, 800-924-7669

**Two Top Snowmobile Rentals**  
twotopsnowmobile.com, 800-522-7802

**SeeYellowstone**  
seeyellowstone.com, 800-221-1151

**Solace Spa**  
bigskyresort.com/activities/spa, 406-995-5803

It’s not hard to find your own face shot sequence at Big Sky; (opposite) surveying the sweeping terrain.