

## Ski Magazine: 2016's Top Ranked Western Ski Resorts (VHA Extract)

### 1. Whistler Blackcomb, British Columbia, Canada

When *SKI* first visited Whistler, in 1970, we gave the four-year-old Pacific Northwest upstart kudos for its “treeless upper bowls,...chute-like descents and long, swoop-around trails.” Otherwise, we noted dryly, “Whistler is mainly for the skier who can do with minimal official merriment.” My, how things have changed. Today, as Whistler Mountain turns 50, merriment of every sort—including No. 1 ranks in *Après* and *Off-Hill Activities* and a No. 3 in *Dining*—is the resort’s greatest strength and key to readers’ voting it king of the mountains yet again. The basics go like this: Just 75 miles north of happening Vancouver, Whistler Blackcomb’s two interconnected mountains dish 8,171 skiable acres, including 200 marked trails, 16 alpine bowls, three glaciers, and expansive options across the spectrum from “family-friendly to freak out,” in the words of one modern-day fan. The valley below is lush, lovely, and lake-dotted. For visitors, the valley’s centerpiece is Whistler Village, a bustling pedestrian zone of shops, bars, restaurants, lodging (No. 2), and more. Yes, the weather is mercurial, a vacationer’s roll of the dice. Yes, if you visit at peak times, the resort will be “chaotic.” But “when all the planets align, Whistler finds itself at the top of ski experiences.” When they don’t, there’s all that merriment (including a month of festivities in January for the 50th anniversary). In other words, the best reason to visit is still the skiing (No. 1 in *Variety*; No. 2 in *Challenge*)—but Whistler’s dynamic culture of innovation and cheerful Australian-accented service add up to great times no matter what. —*Susan Reifer Ryan*

### 2. Sun Valley, Idaho

For a resort celebrating its 80th anniversary, Sun Valley remains an oddly cultish experience. The community is tight. And the mountain, right in town, is an extension of that intimate community. What makes it all magically work is that with one visit you’re welcomed into the club. “Sun Valley is a big family with a passion for skiing,” a reader says. “It’s where everyone knows your name.” This gracious resort tucked into the northern Rocky Mountains puts down a royal flush: No. 1 in *Grooming*, *Lifts*, *Kid-Friendly*, *Character*, and, most significantly, *Overall Satisfaction*. “The best skiing in North America” is a frequent reader refrain. At this true skier’s resort, the only waits are for breakfast at the downtown Kneadery and in line for first chair next to the locals you met there. After that, it’s skiing to your heart’s content, banking into multiple-g-force GS turns down Sun Valley’s long and lyrical fall lines. The big news in a valley whose enduring charm is that there rarely is big news is the “reimagining” of the Sun Valley Lodge, which first opened in 1936. Early indications are they nailed it. Stripped down to its pillars, the lodge was fully rebooted—a passion project by Carol Holding, wife of the late Sun Valley impresario Earl Holding. With more spacious guest rooms, elegant suites named after famous visitors (make your day in the Eastwood), a state-of-the-art spa along with expansive common areas, a reinvented Duchin Lounge, and modern amenities—marbled floor to beamed ceiling—the new Lodge looks to retake its perch as one of ski country’s top destinations. After your first morning of runs, you’ll learn that

the ski world is divided into two groups: those who have visited Sun Valley and get it, and those who haven't visited yet. —*Greg Ditrinco*

### 3. Deer Valley, Utah

It's all in the details at Deer Valley, a fact not lost on our shrewd readers. After all, you don't get No. 1 rankings in Service, Access, On-Mountain Food, Lodging, and Dining (and No. 2 in Grooming) without making darn sure all the t's are crossed and the i's are dotted. (Or, in Deer Valley's case, the emulsions are properly emulsified and the reductions are sufficiently reduced.) Says one satisfied customer, "It's hard to find something wrong when the resort constantly pays attention to every last detail to ensure that every guest has the best possible experience." Once again, we're salivating while perusing reader comments, from the "amazing turkey chili" to the "delicious pastries" baked in-house. Readers are less effusive when it comes to issues of the wallet (Value, No. 41). "Very spendy, but hey, once a year!" Visitors' perceptions of the resort's terrain continue to be grim, with Variety coming in at No. 35 and Challenge No. 40. But one reader thinks he's got it dialed: "Deer Valley is so famous for its grooming that everyone skis the groomed runs. There's no one on the ungroomed blacks. Except me!" With Overall Satisfaction coming in at a respectable No. 5, he's not the only one pleased with the Deer Valley experience. "If I go to heaven when I die, it will be a demotion." —*Samantha Berman*

### 4. Telluride, Colorado

No matter where you live, Telluride is "pretty remote," "off the beaten path," and some might say "a long way from civilization" (Access, No. 45). But that's exactly what makes this southwestern-Colorado town so amazing. You won't find a prettier spot in ski country: Readers rank Telluride, surrounded by "breathtakingly beautiful" peaks, No. 1 for Scenery. A free gondola makes shuttles between Mountain Village and downtown a cinch, and locals and visitors alike love that the slopes are "virtually empty." While some might bemoan the high prices (Value, No. 33) and want some cheaper dining, Telluride delivers a ski experience that "caters to all." Families praise the well-run ski school, and strong intermediates will find the easy-to-access Revelation Bowl a dream, even if it does get tracked out quickly. Experts, take note: Whether you're up for a 20-minute hike or you just want to stick to the lifts, Telluride offers "some of the best steep terrain in the country" (Challenge, No. 7). Hop on the Gold Hill Express or hike toward Palmyra Peak for plenty of fresh tracks, chutes, and steep lines. And while we can hardly wait for the ski area to replace the achingly slow Plunge lift, you can't beat skiing into town after a long day in the alpine. Telluride's growing reputation means it's no longer the "best-kept secret in the world," but this picturesque ski town "needs to be on every skier's bucket list." —*Megan Barber*

## 5. Jackson Hole, Wyoming

Turning 50 can be a lot of fun if you do it right. “Raw, real, authentic” Jackson Hole is doing it right. That means fluff—parties, events, deals, a cool TGR film—as well as meaty mountain upgrades that add real skier bennies. Topping the list is the high-speed, 1,650-vertical-foot Teton Lift that opens up 200 acres of new and alarmingly steep (it is Jackson, after all) groomers and glades as well as easy access to previously hike-to terrain. Hello, Craggs! But the fluff that really matters here is the 459 average annual inches that keep “The Big One” soft, fresh, and uniquely able to “slap you in the face while stroking your ego at the same time.” Earning a solid No. 1 for Challenge, Jackson also provides a “sense of escape” with everything from the breathtaking view off the Tram (Scenery, No. 5), to the 4,139 continuous vertical feet of wild (and impeccably groomed where appropriate) terrain, to the variety of off-hill recreational options (No. 10). Sleigh ride on the Elk Refuge? Fat-bike adventures? National park tours? Yes to all, and to a fun cowboy town with a surprising and fresh mix of restaurants. Jackson’s often lamented cons include inaccessibility and expense. Once here, however, the fancy Four Seasons factor is balanced by friendly classics like the Mangy Moose and the affordable, enduringly humble Hostel, “one of the last great things in North American skiing.” Grab your spurs and join the party. —*Edith Thys Morgan*

## 6. Snowmass, Colorado

Snowmass was conceived in the 1960s as an Alps-style ski resort whose vast expanses of terrain across three mountains would be linked by many lifts and several charming, ski-in, ski-out village centers. An extensive lift system continues to evolve (Lifts, No. 5) even though the multiple-village concept was largely abandoned, inviting well-placed criticism nearly 50 years later. “Nuke the whole disjointed village and mall and start over,” grumbles one reader. Yet in many ways, Snowmass fulfills its original vision. It’s 90 percent ski in, ski out (Lodging, No. 8). And with the highest vertical rise in the United States (4,400 feet), it routinely gets props for its size (“The sheer massiveness is awesome”) and variety of terrain (No. 9; “You could ski here year after year and never get bored”), which includes three terrain parks and five kids’ tree trails (Kid-Friendly, No. 8). When combined with two legitimate negatives, expense (Value, No. 36) and difficulty of access (No. 34; “Up the road and out of the way”), that actually adds up to some positives: no crowds, few liftlines, and plenty of snow per capita. Crows one first-time visitor, “I was absolutely blown away to find fresh tracks in the trees six days after a storm.” —*Catherine Lutz*

## 7. Vail, Colorado

“Vail. End of story. It really is as good as everyone says.” With more than 5,200 skiable acres, Vail is the behemoth of Colorado, and there really is something for everyone (Variety, No. 8). “Thirty-something lifts, thousands of skiers, and yet there were still fresh lines to be found at the end of the day.” And as one reader boasts, “If you know the area, you can avoid the crowds.” The seven back bowls offer up some of the best powder

in Colorado, while the grooming is top-notch (No. 7). Getting there can be a pain, though, as weekend traffic can leave you crawling along I-70 for hours. And yes, the resort is so close to the highway that the sight and noise of the traffic can make it feel like “New York in the mountains” where “skiers flock by what seems like the millions.” Ranked at No. 47 for Value, Vail sells lift tickets for upwards of \$150 a day at peak season, and one reader complains that “you need an American Express Black Card just to grab a drink of water at this place.” Although the faux-European feel in the village may be hokey, the “après scene is outstanding” (No. 3), and the village offers innumerable world-class restaurants (No. 6 for Dining). While some will refuse to give this corporate resort a shot, that’s fine with us. We’ll post photos from Vendetta’s over a beer after we plow the knee-deep powder off Chair 5. —*Jackie McCaffrey Bradley*

## 8. Steamboat, Colorado

Most snow lovers know by now that Steamboat is a mecca for tree skiing. Each winter you’ll find skiers hooting and hollering down “perfectly spaced trees” blanketed with the ‘Boat’s trademark champagne powder. Sure, some complain that Steamboat “lacks steep expert terrain,” but we bet that won’t matter much when you’re lapping the Pony Express lift. When the snow at Steamboat is good, it can’t be beat. Combine that with a slew of friendly staffers (No. 11 for Service) and you’ll see why people return year after year to “the best mountain town in Colorado.” Sure, the drive from Denver can be a drag and out-of-state skiers complain about the hassles of air travel (Access, No. 36), but “fabulous weather” and easy shuttles help Steamboat break the Top 10. The beginner terrain also gets high marks from families (Kid-Friendly, No. 5), and if you just can’t get enough turns during the day, check out Steamboat’s night skiing, now in its third season. Overall, Steamboat is an “authentic ski town” (No. 10 for Character) with a laid-back vibe that is more cowboy than ritzy fur coats. And as always, “When it dumps, there are no other trees we’d rather be skiing.” —*Megan Barber*