



Snowbound: (From left) Alta's allure lies in its old-fashioned charm and its world-class skiing.

Lasting Resorts

Alta, Utah's traditional ski lodges cleave to bygone ways

BY ERIC LUCAS

Hope it's okay if my toddler crawls around underfoot." Convened in the lounge at Alta Lodge, two dozen adults all nod assent to this request—certainly one of the more unusual conversational gambits you might hear in the après-ski lounge of a world-renowned mountain resort. In the background, avalanche guns boom amid the gusts of an early spring blizzard. Snow piles high outside the windows; inside, temporarily marooned skiers and their kids break out Monopoly boards and coloring books.

This interlude is simply part of Alta's distinctive character. We hundred or so guests are clustered in the

downstairs lobby and upstairs Sitzmark Club to safely wait out avalanche control in a storm that has brought 8 feet of snow to the Wasatch Range above Salt Lake City. Town regulations require that guests stay indoors, in reinforced parts of the building, when avalanche danger brings out the professionals to shoot down the cornices.

The sturdily built Alta Lodge is a charming throwback to more basic times, and it hews to this ambience fervently. Plastic bucket chairs accessorize the rooms; drooping philodendrons perch in macramé hangers; all the guests sit down to dinner in the dining room between 6 and 8:30 P.M., with table sharing a popular option.

Thus, East Coast attorneys nudge elbows with California retirees, Texas oil executives, and Midwesterners.

It therefore fits the resort's nature perfectly that when avalanche conditions demand it, all the guests gather for convivial safety. It's like summer camp for grown-ups. But after one day of enforced relaxation in the lodge, the storm clears overnight, and the magical morning about which Alta fans fantasize dawns: fresh powder, skies as clear as glass, midweek low crowds.

Guests carve broad, effortless comas through knee-deep fluff under bluebird skies in wide bowls. Deep-powder experts fling themselves downward through hip-deep drifts of

>>> Getting There Salt Lake City International Airport (SLC) is served by daily flights from Dallas and Houston. Delta provides the most frequent service. Alta is about 45 minutes by shuttle from the airport.

FROM LEFT: COURTESY ALTA LODGE; COURTESY ALTA SKI AREA



Après Appeal: (From top) When not skiing, Alta Lodge guests can enjoy fireside chats and board games at the Sitzmark Club or a relaxing soak in one of the indoor hot tubs.

cottony snow, plowing head-high wakes. Sitting atop a narrow valley at 8,530 feet, this former mining enclave has been famed, since its inception as a ski resort in 1938, for reliable heaps of light powder snow and a distinctive character that's utterly inimitable.

Among other things, there are no brass-and-granite luxury hotels here for guests; just the hominess of Alta Lodge and its similar brethren. Snowboarders are barred. Chairlifts suffice where most big resorts today have a gondola or two.

"I've been coming here for 30 years," my companion on the first lift ride up the mountain says, "and this is exactly what we all hope for. We paid our dues yesterday. We get paid back today." And so we do. The road up from Salt Lake isn't open yet; only Alta overnight visitors have access to the mountain at the moment, a situation zealots call "country club."

And now I must reveal my Alta-born revelation: I lack deep-powder skills. Essaying a run in the powder of the Ballroom Bowl, just beneath 11,068-foot Mount Baldy, I totter like a

carnival beanbag doll. It's deep; I'm rusty. No falls, but no pictures please. I spend the rest of the day on groomed runs under the Sugarloaf lift, thus discovering Alta's secret: This famous powder mecca actually has a huge amount of splendid intermediate territory, with long cruising runs on which I can carve beautiful turns in the soft, fresh, shaped snow.

I think back to a conversation the previous afternoon with Naomi Wain, a Santa Barbara, California, resident in her 80s who has been coming to Alta for the better part of 45 years. Next to us, a dad and his kid play rock-paper-scissors in French, and families contest Scrabble on lounge tables. Wain gazes out at all this as fondly as if it were a family reunion. Such loyalty to one destination. Why?

"The snow! The wonderful lodge atmosphere," she tells me. Outside, the blizzard rages. In 45 years, she reports, this is the most extreme she's seen.

"Pretty bad, then," I remark.

"No, not bad at all," Wain corrects me. "It's beautiful!" ❄️

DO Alta is about skiing, period. The valley offers three miles of groomed **Nordic trails** as well as the **Alpine lift-served mountain**, on which, weather permitting, there is also a groomed Nordic track served by the **Sunnyside lift**. This eastern side of Alta resort is the best territory for beginners and intermediates; families with complete novices may wish to take advantage of **Alta's Ski Free After 3 program**—anyone can ride the Sunnyside lift without buying a lift ticket after 3 P.M., every day. Adult lift tickets are \$69 per day, with discounts for various multiday packages. At Alta Lodge, guest rooms have no TVs. There are just two televisions, and they're located in common areas along with books, board games, and such. The **hot tub facility** has an excellent view of the ski area.

STAY Stay/dine packages at **Alta Lodge** (800-707-2582; altalodge.com) range from \$290 to \$433 per couple, early and late season; main season rates range from \$413 to \$573 per couple. The ambience is equally laid back at **Snowpine Lodge** (800-742-2000; thesnowpine.com), where rates start at \$276 per couple, main season, including meals. Stay at Snowpine early season or late (before January 15, after March 21) and rates are discounted about 15 percent.

EAT Guests at Alta Lodge are offered communal breakfasts and dinners, included in the room rate. On-mountain, **Watson Grill** is a splendid lunch spot, serving great chili (the benchmark for all ski-resort cafeterias) and hamburgers, both made with grass-fed, organic Utah beef.

For more information about Alta Ski Area, call (801) 359-1078 or go to alta.com.

For travel information, visit your local AAA branch, call (866) 567-9217, or go to AAA.com/travel.