

The 17th hole of the Whistler/Blackcomb course at the Big Sky resort in British Columbia.



JOHN HENBRY

“I came for the winter, but stayed for the summer.” Ask ski-crazed transplants to the mountains why they live where they do, and this is a refrain you will hear over and over in virtually every high-altitude resort in the country, to the point of cliché. But like most clichés, there is a lot of truth behind it. This is particularly true in recent years, as the nature of ski towns has changed dramatically, to the point where people are simply coming for the summer to begin with—especially golfers. • Paradigm changes that have spelled trouble for the ski industry have been a boon for golfers. Due to skyrocketing snow-making and insurance costs, it is simply no longer economically possible to operate a ski resort under the traditional model of running a mountain and selling lift tickets. Whereas the slopes were once the reason behind the town, and other amenities accessories to skiing, the skiing itself is now an accessory to the mountain town, which has become decidedly four-season in nature. All of the big ski resort operators such as Intrawest, Aspen Skiing Co., Vail Resorts

Golf on the Slopes

Mountain Golf
at America's
Best Ski Resorts

BY LARRY OLMSTED



The 16th hole at Nevada's Edgewood Tahoe lakeside course.

and Boyne Resorts, along with many smaller peers, have turned their focus from selling lift tickets to selling real estate. To do this, they have had to offer more than just skiing. The new mountain town mantra is “lifestyle,” and for more than a decade, once sleepy or even chichi ski towns have been busy repositioning themselves as year-round centers of sport and culture, building performing arts centers, sushi bars, bike trails, village centers, parks, ziplines and, most of all, golf courses. Necessity may be the mother of invention, but in retrospect it seems surprising that so few people realized that the incredible natural beauty and setting of places like the Rockies would lend themselves to golf. Whatever the motive, golf fans now have many reasons to rejoice.

“Ski destinations are inherently fun places,” notes David Baum, publisher and editor in chief of golf travel newsletter *Golf Odyssey* (and a member of the CIGAR AFICIONADO golf ranking panel). “They have a carefree party atmosphere, excellent dining, trendy boutique shopping and wonderful outdoor activities. The air is fresh, the sunshine brilliant and the temperatures quite comfortable thanks to the absence of humidity. Ski destinations make outstanding summertime golf getaways. Many ski destinations are also very good dining towns, and the village nature of most ski retreats means you can eat, drink and be merry while leaving the car at your hotel.”

Joe Passov, architecture and course rankings editor at *Golf Magazine*, is one convert. “Mountain golf is a direct conduit to memorable, often spectacular golf, because it’s got the one ingredient that lends itself to instant drama: elevation change. For most golfers, there’s no shot more thrilling than a downhill plunge, and mountain golf provides those in abundance. Watching your tee shot soar, with the ball seemingly suspended in air, is exciting, as are the long views that accompany the shot.”

Baum agrees: “What’s more exhilarating than standing at the top of the world and blasting a majestically arched drive through the thin air 100 yards farther than you’d ever dream of hitting one at your home club?”

Towns such as Aspen, Vail and Sun Valley are famous around the globe and synonymous with luxury vacation hospitality, but even in ski season,

most of their appeal and most of the time spent by visitors is off the slopes. All of these ancillary benefits, from fine dining to five-star lodging, can still be enjoyed in golf season, though without the crowds—and usually at much more reasonable prices.

The one caveat of golf in ski country is that it is almost always, by definition, the architectural style known as “mountain golf,” which is the hardest design aesthetic to execute well. The nation, especially the East, is full of ski-resort courses that are failed experiments, with severely off-kilter fairways that kick every tee shot to the same location no matter where you hit it. Some of these designs are so ridiculous that they have given the entire genre of mountain golf a bad name. But in recent years, the sport’s top designers have finally been drawn to the mountains, and coupled with technological innovations, high-altitude golf has produced some stunning gems, including several that have been widely ranked among the country’s best.

“It’s tough to reconcile the rugged mountainous terrain ideal for skiing with the softer, gentler contouring appropriate for golf,” says *Golfweek* architecture editor Bradley S. Klein, perhaps the industry’s most respected design critic. “Yet despite the contrasts, both sports share some similarities when it comes to thoughtful design. The flow of the game, whether skiing or golf, has to be mindful of proper drainage. The surface must be carefully prepped and yet appear to be entirely natural. And there has to be distinctiveness in both the slopes to be negotiated and the long vistas that are provided along the way. When properly done, both provide fodder for endless discussion and fantasy afterwards about the best places to visit and the most memorable landforms.”

“In the old days, budget constraints and the short growing season usually yielded short, narrow, poorly conditioned courses, but technology, imagination and sufficient funds have changed all that,” notes Passov. “In the golden age of the 1920s, you had to find a flattish parcel, so that your course could be walked. The advent of golf carts and earthmoving equipment allowed for the development of sites that traversed the mountainsides, but on a modest budget, you were left with lots of blind shots and awkward slopes. Only recently have architects been realizing the true potential of mountain golf, which at its best combines playability with the “wow” factor. Robert Trent Jones Jr., Jack Nicklaus and Tom Weiskopf have been building wonderful mountain courses for many years, and more recently, Jim Engh, Tom Fazio and Greg Norman have mastered the craft. The best mountain tandem in the country is Colorado’s Red Sky Ranch, near Vail, where Fazio and Norman have each carved out relentlessly challenging but remarkably beautiful tests.”

Here is a closer look at six of the best areas in the country today for mountain golf.

Vail Valley, Colorado

Passov is not alone in his opinion about **Red Sky Ranch** (redskygolfclub.com). Virtually everyone who has played the two courses here agrees that Red Sky in Wolcott, Colorado, built by Vail Resorts, is the nation’s finest example of ski-resort golf. Except that it is not quite at a ski resort. Red Sky lies about 20 minutes from Beaver Creek and 30 from Vail. However, as a private

club, most of whose members are homeowners—including PGA Tour Commissioner Tim Finchem—public access is available only to guests of hotels owned by or affiliated with Vail Resorts, mostly in the upscale, sister ski towns of Vail and Beaver Creek. The two layouts combine the essence of prime ski-town vacation living with the very best of Rocky Mountain golf. The Norman layout is generally considered the marquee course, though both have been rated in *Golf Magazine's* Top 100. It is certainly more dramatic, with severe elevation changes, stunning views and hazards of every description. The Fazio course is somewhat gentler and easier to navigate, but still offers drop-dead views at every turn. The 36 holes are combined with a very comfortable clubhouse, a giant log structure in keeping with the Wild West theme, and quality practice facilities. *Golf Odyssey's* Baum believes that by virtue of its multiple top-rated courses, the club deserves mention in the same breath as Bandon Dunes, Pebble Beach and Destination Kohler, adding that, “at 7,500 feet, Red Sky Ranch offers the best one-two combination of mountain golf in the world.”

Even closer to Vail and Beaver Creek is another multicourse facility of note, **Cordillera** (*cordillera-vail.com*), another large private residential community, this one with 54 holes, plus a one-of-a-kind nine-hole layout designed by instructional guru Dave Pelz specifically to practice the short game, a fun test unlike any other par-3 course in the nation. Unlike its nearby rival Red Sky, Cordillera offers on-site lodging, in the form of the luxury Lodge & Spa at Cordillera, and guests of this boutique hotel are the only “public” allowed access to the four courses. While the very high-altitude Summit Course, a Nicklaus Signature design, is considered the must-play, it is Tom Fazio’s far lower Valley Course, playing along the valley floor, which steals the show. In between is Hale Irwin’s precipitous Mountain Course, worth playing if only for the shocking elevation changes, the rare design that actually lives up to the overused description “roller-coaster ride.” There are at least half a dozen other public courses in the Vail Valley, but Red Sky and Cordillera are easily the best.

Keystone, Colorado

It may not be the first destination ski resort off the lips of winter sports fans around the world, but **Keystone** (*keystone.snow.com*), the large Vail Resort mountain primarily used by Colorado locals, has one of the richest histories in ski-resort golf. Both of its courses are excellent, and Keystone Ranch, one of the first Robert Trent Jones Jr. courses built west of the Mississippi, was for many years the highest-altitude full-sized layout in the nation at a staggering 9,300 feet, a golf breakthrough when it opened in 1980. If hitting the longest drives of your life is an enticement, few places on the planet are better suited for the job. After two decades, the Ranch remains one of Colorado’s most popular courses, winding through a beautiful and rugged river valley with tall native grasses, sage and a very Old West feel. This is capped on the fourth hole with iconic and historic nineteenth-century ranch buildings behind the green, and surrounding mountain vistas from the valley floor. A round at the Ranch sums up rugged Rocky Mountain golf in a nutshell. Surprisingly, it is here, not in Denver or Boulder or Aspen or Vail or Telluride, where you’ll find the best restaurant in the state. Located in the clubhouse, Keystone Ranch is repeatedly ranked by top food critics as the No. 1 place to dine in all of Colorado.

The nearby River Course, a 2000 Hurdzan Fry design, is as good as the Ranch, and some would argue even better. It has several brilliant holes and is routed through environmentally sensitive wetlands, giving the tract a much more natural flavor, teeming with animals and

showcasing high-altitude Colorado flora. The 36 holes at Keystone offer a world of variety—and quality—just minutes apart.

Whistler Blackcomb, British Columbia

How much is enough for Canada’s flagship ski resort? Sister mountains Whistler and Blackcomb will anchor the next Winter Olympic Games, they boast the greatest vertical drop of any ski hills in North America, and the resort is consistently rated No. 1 on the continent by almost every major ski and travel publication. With dozens of shops, restaurants, hotels and bars, from Irish pubs to sushi to world-class French dining, its huge pedestrian village is easily the best on the continent. But when the snow melts, **Whistler/Blackcomb** (*whistlerblackcomb.com*) is also the 800-pound gorilla of ski-resort golf with not one, not two, but three high-quality courses all within easy reach of the lifts, and two more a short drive away. All five are different enough to offer a wide variety of golf styles and scenery. For true ski resort-based golf, it is hard to argue against Whistler’s prominence.

The Robert Trent Jones Jr.–designed Chateau Whistler course, which plays right across the ski slopes, is gorgeous, combining elevation changes and scenic views, with exposed rock ledges, ponds and immaculate landscaping, as well as fields of wildflowers rivaling Augusta National. The Whistler Golf Club, the first Arnold Palmer Signature design north of the border, sits at the base of the village’s valley, with nine lakes, two creeks and mountain views on both sides. Lengthened and extensively renovated within the past decade, the mostly flat course provides the valley counterpoint to Jones’s vertiginous routing. The highlight of the resort, however, is Nicklaus North, right next to the main village. When opened in 1996, the layout received glowing reviews from numerous publications, including being named Best New Canadian Golf Course by *Golf Digest*, and quickly landed the Canadian Skins Game. In the Golden Bear’s muscular style, the sprawling routing takes advantage of natural water features and thick stands of woods, and features beautiful and ample bunkering.

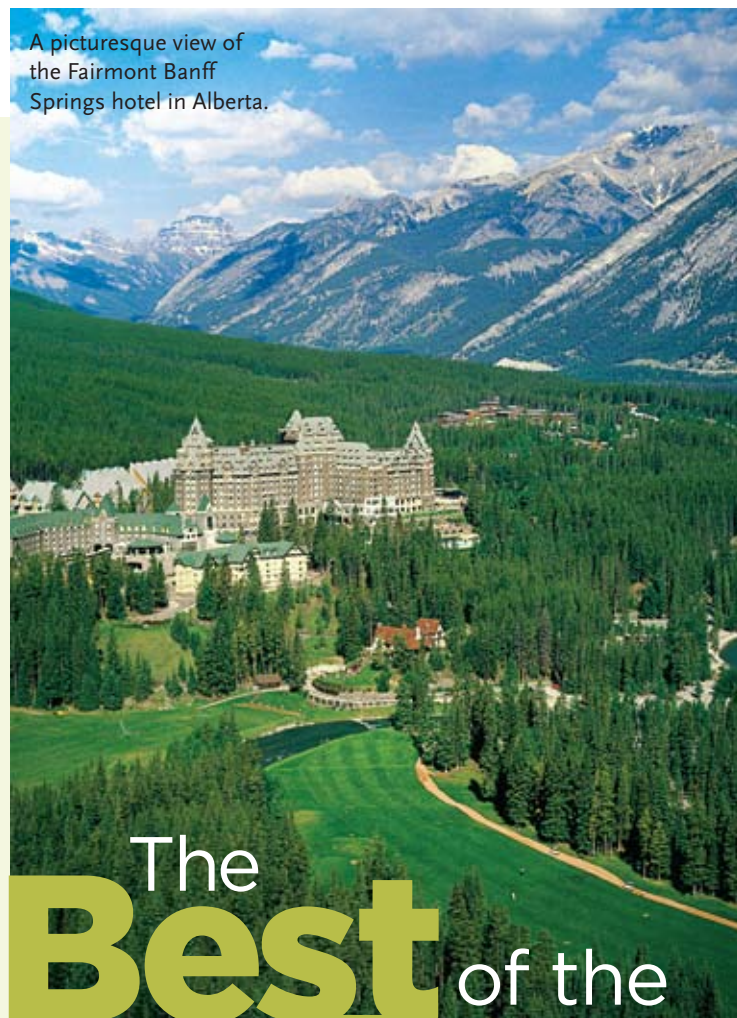
Big Sky, a visually stunning Bob Cupp design, lies just 25 minutes north of the ski resort, and is well worth the drive. It is uniquely tucked at the base of imposing, rocky, 8,300-foot-high Mount Currie and features 360-degree views. A parkland routing split by parallel fingers of lakes, Big Sky is like the best Florida golf transported to an alpine environment. Three quarters of an hour south of the resort, en route to or from Vancouver, sits the waterfront Furry Creek course. Besides the views of Howe Sound and much different feel, the layout is most famous as the setting for some of the most memorable scenes from the golf comedy *Happy Gilmore*, helping to explain why Vancouver’s burgeoning film industry has earned it the nickname Hollywood North.

Sun Valley, Idaho

Great ski-resort golf is a mostly, but not entirely, new phenomenon. Tycoon W. Averell Harriman, head of the Union Pacific Railroad (and later a prominent American diplomat and politician), had the idea before anyone else, more than 70 years ago. Then again, Harriman had a lot of new ideas, and for that reason **Sun Valley** (*sunvalley.com*) enjoys the distinction of being the very first destination ski resort in the United States. Harriman loved family vacations in Saint Moritz, Switzerland, and felt America was ready for a similar alpine resort—served by his railroad. He hired Count Felix Schaffgotsch, a well-traveled European skier and bon vivant, and

charged him with the mission of scouring the West for nothing less than the nation's single most perfect place for a fantasy ski resort, "an American Shangri-la." The result was Sun Valley, which opened in 1936, with, among many innovations, the world's first chairlifts. It immediately became the winter epicenter of celebrity, attracting the Clark Gables of the world along with myriad Olympic and professional athletes.

The instant winter success only encouraged Harriman, who decided on the spot that Sun Valley should be a four-season community, and just



A picturesque view of the Fairmont Banff Springs hotel in Alberta.

The Best of the Rest

Aspen: Great skiing, dining and lodging, but shockingly limited public golf. Best in the area is the schizophrenic Arthur Hills–designed Ironbridge, with a famed stretch of gravity defying holes, open to guests of the St. Regis, and usually The Little Nell and Hotel Jerome. (ironbridgeclub.com)

Banff Springs, Alberta: Known as the Castle of the Rockies, the Fairmont Banff Springs hotel has an epic Stanley Thompson course with one of the world's greatest par-3s, the Devil's Cauldron. Skiing

is at nearby Lake Louise resort. (fairmont.com/banffsprings)

Boyer Highlands, MI: Skiing is a purely local attraction, but golf is worth the trip, with four 18-hole courses, including the caddie-equipped Robert Trent Jones Jr. Heather Course, a *Golf Magazine* Top 100, and the unique Donald Ross Memorial Course, a tribute design reproducing the master's best holes. (boyne.com)

a year after the ski resort opened, its golf course was built, designed by William Bell of Riviera fame. The course was redesigned in 1980 by Robert Trent Jones Jr.'s firm, and while it gets little press, this layout is a true hidden gem. It is also unique among such courses because it plays right at the foot of the ski slopes, so close that errant tee shots can find the historic first chairlift, no longer in use but preserved, yet the routing is relatively flat. This allowed Bell to overcome the land mines of mountain golf while fully utilizing the ski-resort setting. Today, such a masterpiece would be extremely unlikely because land at the bottom of ski slopes is typically reserved for multimillion-dollar condos.

Proving that everything old is new again, Sun Valley just opened its

Crystal Springs, NJ: This would hardly be your first choice for skiing—the resort barely mentions its 46-trail mountain on its Web site—but it does boast a collection of seven golf courses, including Ballyowen (frequently ranked the state's top public) and a large golf academy. (crystalgolfresort.com)

Giant's Ridge, MN: Another mediocre ski area, state-run Giant's Ridge's main attraction is 54 holes of excellent golf, including the Legend, Quarry and nearby Wilderness at Fortune Bay, a casino (fortunebay.com). These three are among the five best public courses in Minnesota, and the Quarry is the best, but they are all must-plays. (giantsridge.com)

Jackson, WY: Jackson is one of the nation's greatest — and wealthiest — ski towns, and as such, its best courses are private. Until this summer, public access has been limited to Jackson Hole Golf & Tennis (jhgtc.com) and Teton Pines (tetonpines.com). The game changer is the private, Tom Fazio designed Shooting Star (shootignstarjh.com), on a historic ranch immediately next to the Jackson Hole ski resort, which allows very limited unaccompanied play to guests renting an onsite luxury cabin (through rental agency theclearcreekgroup.com).

Mammoth Mountain, CA: This huge ski resort is the runaway favorite in the Golden State, and

now has a golf course to match, the highest in California at over 8,000 feet. Despite its height, the new Sierra Star has surprisingly gentle elevation changes, allowing it to work well as a modern example of mountain golf. (mammothmountain.com)

Steamboat, CO: This sleepy but big-time mountain cultivates a forgotten Old West image, but just wrapped up a major renovation of its classic Jones Jr. course, reopened last summer as the Rollingstone Ranch Golf Club. (rollingstoneranchgolf.com)

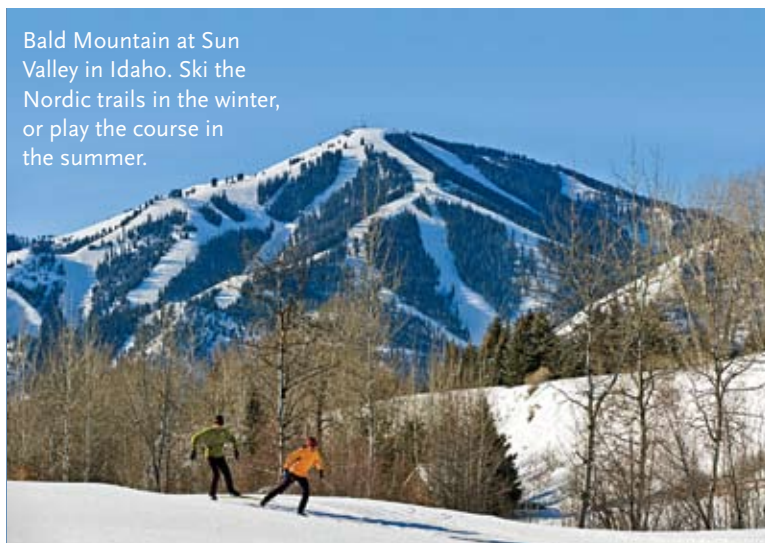
Stowe, VT: Vermont has always had the best skiing in the East, but among the least golf. In 2007, the Green Mountain State got its highest-profile course yet, a Bob Cupp private tract at the foot of legendary Stowe Mountain. *Golf Odyssey's* Baum believes that the "spare-no-expense private layout" that's accessible only to guests of the posh new Stowe Mountain Lodge "provides the most dramatic game of any mountain course in New England." (stowemountainlodge.com)

Tremblant, Quebec: Whistler's East Coast sister resort lacks the quality of its sibling's ski terrain, but the area rivals British Columbia for golf with two very good courses, Tremblant's Le Geant and Le Diable, plus the fantastic La Bête nearby. (tremblant.ca)

second course, White Clouds, last summer. Actually, it is the first nine of the new course, playing as a stand-alone nine-holer until the next phase gets under way, once the economy recovers. It is as strong as nine-hole courses come, and also a night and day difference from its predecessor, carved from the region's high desert on a ridge opposite the resort. The layout has much more visual drama than the 18-holer, and much more do-or-die shot making, with narrow fairways, carries across ravines and penal desert waste area all around. It is a high-quality, well-conditioned course that is also quite difficult. White Clouds beckons the low handicapper, while players of every ability will thoroughly love the original, now renamed Trail Creek.

Lake Tahoe, California/Nevada

Tahoe's strength is also its weakness, as both a golf and ski destination: it is just too big. It is home to more than a dozen major ski resorts, but they are spread out in the mountains around the periphery of the nation's second deepest lake, one with a whopping 72 miles of shoreline, ensuring that nothing is too close to anything else. Only a handful of the ski resorts have on-



Bald Mountain at Sun Valley in Idaho. Ski the Nordic trails in the winter, or play the course in the summer.

site golf, most notably Squaw Valley USA and **Northstar** (*northstarattahoe.com*) at the north end, and at the south, Heavenly, which recently stretched the definition of ski-resort golf. Massive Heavenly sits high above the south end of the lake and straddles the California and Nevada borders, explaining why the town below it is aptly named Stateline. This is where most of the large casinos, numerous hotels and golf courses are located. A couple of years ago, Heavenly wrapped up an ambitious \$750 million expansion that created a new base area right in the heart of Stateline's equivalent of the Las Vegas Strip, complete with a long gondola to whisk urban skiers onto the snow. In doing so, the ski resort essentially annexed Stateline, turning the casinos themselves into ski-in/ski-out lodging, and giving guests easy access to the golf, including **Edgewood Tahoe** (*edgewood-tahoe.com*), widely regarded as the region's best. The 1969 George Fazio design was redone by his nephew Tom, often considered the game's greatest living architect, and concludes in epic fashion with three famous lakefront holes. Less than 45 minutes away in the burgeoning golf mecca of Carson Valley are South Lake Tahoe's two other standout layouts at **Genoa Lakes** (*genoalakes.com*), one by Peter Jacobsen, one by Johnny Miller, both with John Harbottle III.

1960 Olympics venue Squaw Valley USA, the premier ski hill in North Lake Tahoe, boasts the Robert Trent Jones Jr.-designed Squaw Creek course at the base of its slopes. A thoroughly modern ski-resort

course, **Squaw Creek** (*squawcreek.com*) uses ample boardwalks to wind through marshy wetlands, more Kiawah than Sierras. The other ski resort with its own good course is once-sleepy Northstar, which is undergoing a renaissance with a new base village and Ritz Carlton resort. The Robert Muir Graves tract is half radically elevated mountain golf and half pastoral meadows, and both sides are well executed. Other nearby courses of note are the recently constructed **Coyote Moon** (*tahoemountainclub.com*), and the 36 holes at **Incline Village** (*golfincline.com*), anchored by the definitive North Shore layout, the Championship Course, a standout lakefront parkland classic by RTJ Sr.

Park City, Utah

Despite a passionate following of local golfers, the Beehive State has fewer big-name courses than just about any other. At the same time, recent Olympic venue Park City, a very short drive from Salt Lake City, has more big-time skiing than any other U.S. locale, with three world-class resorts, Deer Valley, the Canyons and Park City Mountain Resort, any of



which could anchor its own ski destination, all in one quaint place. The result is a summer glut of deluxe lodging and dining, and for the savvy visitor, some great golf. Like Colorado's Red Sky Ranch, a number of top ski-country private clubs align themselves with one or more luxury hotels to allow very limited outside play. In Park City, the **Stein Eriksen Lodge** (*steinlodge.com*) does just that with the Pete Dye-designed Canyon Course at the Promontory Club and the Nicklaus-designed Park Meadows. The new and very lavish Sky Lodge on Main Street, easily the best in-town lodging, is also trying to work out some private-access deals for guests

For everyone else, there is a very high-quality 36-hole public facility at **Soldier Hollow** (*soldierhollow.com*), the site of the cross-country events in the 2002 Winter Olympic Games. The town's own municipal Park City Golf Club is a well-above-average layout to round out the field, and out the back door of the excellent Hotel Park City. But the best course in the region is the very private Mark O'Meara design at the Talisker Club. In an interesting reversal of fortune, this private residential community just acquired the Canyons, one of the five largest ski resorts in the country, with several hotels, including a new Waldorf Astoria collection spin-off, so the enticing possibility of limited public access to Talisker may be coming soon. ❖

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