

Downhill Skiing Not for the Frugal

I walked up to the ticket window at Big Sky ski resort in Montana a few weeks ago and asked for a half-day lift ticket. The lady said “That will be 135 dollars. Plus tax.”

I thought about that for a moment and said, “How much is it without the champagne and caviar brunch?” She was not amused. I’m guessing she has been verbally abused by cleverer skiers than I, all too happy to shoot the messenger.

You might not think a Montana ski resort could demand prices on par with Aspen and Vail, but it does. It surprised me to learn that Big Sky Resort (an hour south of Bozeman and an hour north of Yellowstone National Park) is actually the largest in the United States, with almost 6,000 skiable acres and a 4,350-foot vertical drop.

More and more resorts have switched to a “dynamic pricing” model, following the practice of Uber and the airlines, which varies prices based on demand and how far in advance you purchase your lift ticket. For example, Vail’s walk-up last-minute “sucker” rate during peak season for a full day pass is \$189. A half-day ticket saves only about \$20. There used to be a greater savings, but it seems most skiers are now like me - too lazy to get their butts out of bed early to make first tracks.

It’s hard to enjoy your afternoon when you spend all your time on the lift mentally calculating the actual cost of each trip down the mountain. With only about three hours available half day, one can make only a limited number of runs and each one is expensive. Especially when it’s cold and you must go inside to warm up periodically, or when it’s not cold and you must go inside to drink an overpriced craft beer.

I solved this dilemma by imagining that my coat pocket was unzipped and \$135 blew out of it, over the edge of a cliff. Damn! Well, I’ll get over it – things like this happen. But wait! The \$135 is history, but every ride I take up the mountain is now free! What could be better than this?

Not to mention there’s always the chance to see a celebrity – the Kardashians evidently are regular visitors, plus Jessica Biel and Justin Timberlake have their

primary residence at Big Sky. On the other hand, when everyone is bundled up and wearing ski helmets and goggles, I could be riding up the chairlift with Queen Elizabeth II and not recognize her.

At the other end of the skiing spectrum may be Snowstar, a ski/tubing hill just east of Muscatine (Iowa) with dizzying 262 feet of vertical drop. Their season is pretty much over by now, but my company held an event there a couple of weeks ago. Tubing down their hill was inexpensive, and way more fun than I thought it would be.

Back in Montana (unfairly known as a state where men are men and sheep are nervous) LuAnn and I took a couple of daytrips into Yellowstone on a snow coach. It's essentially an oversized, enclosed snowmobile, which is itself the only other way to access the park in winter. The snow coach we rode in was manufactured by Bombardier the same year I was born – 1953. It had had been refitted and reconditioned, although there was a shocking lack of cupholders. Or airbags.

The eight of us in our snow coach group were the only ones at Artist's Point when we stopped there – it's the second-most-visited spot after Old Faithful. Our guide said gridlock there all summer is a given, with several thousand people jockeying for parking all at once.

If you're looking for an inexpensive vacation, skiing is probably not for you. The high cost of food, lodging, equipment, and ski passes is probably keeping the riffraff off the slopes, but I'm dangerously close to becoming riffraff myself. For now, it's perversely rewarding to consider myself one of the privileged class, enjoying its privileges.

Writers Group member Dave Parsons grudgingly interacts with the common folk, often at the business he co-owns on the Coralville strip.