

Desert treasure

The dry climate around Utah's Salt Lake City makes for perfect conditions, writes Rachael Oakes-Ash



WITH an average of 12.7 metres of snow every season, it's no wonder Salt Lake City has become home to Australian Olympic snowboarder Torah Bright and Shaun White calls Park City Mountain Resort his training ground. Utah's desert setting means the powder snow is super dry and super light, which means super fun.

If you're feeling adventurous or just like to ski within an hour of an international airport (Salt Lake City), then Park City and the resorts nearby offer plenty of powder. The best can be found in Big and Little Cottonwood Canyon, a day trip from Salt Lake City and Park City or a multi-day, on-mountain experience.

In the canyons, people come to ski hard all day, dine on hearty mountain food by night and rest up for another day of the same. Here's why.

Big Cottonwood

Solitude (skisolitude.com) is a pedestrian-only village that has been purpose-built for skiing. The

mountain has 485 hectares of skiing terrain to suit a mix of abilities. The scene here is self-contained and low key. You won't find glitz and glamour but you will find a handful of cafes and a combined lift pass with the neighbouring Brighton ski resort. For Utah skiing history, you can't go past Brighton (brightonresort.com). It opened in 1936 and was the first official ski resort in the state. Favoured by boarders, Brighton has 425 hectares of terrain and is very family friendly.

Little Cottonwood

If you're a snowboarder then Alta (alta.com) is definitely not for you. The skiers-only mountain is for those who like it steep and deep on 890 hectares of challenging terrain. The mountain resort was founded in 1939 and retains many of its original ski lodges. Skiers can purchase a combined ski pass for Alta and Snowbird (snowbird.com), which welcomes snowboarders but only as

Trip notes

Getting there

▶ Qantas flies A380s from Sydney to Los Angeles, with code-share partner flights direct to Salt Lake City. 13 13 13, qantas.com.au.

Skiing there

▶ A 12-night escorted ski tour combining Park City, Deer Valley, The Canyons, Snowbird and

Alta, taking place from Salt Lake City on February 4, 2012, is priced from \$3499 a person, twin share. Includes ski pass, mountain guides, accommodation and transfers. skimax.com.au.

More information

skiutah.com; parkcitymountain.com.

far as the Alta boundary. When fresh powder has been dumped, Snowbird is the first choice for locals who make the drive from nearby towns and from Salt Lake City to get the best of the best. Finish the day with fresh sushi on the top floor of the Cliff Lodge at the base of the resort.

Sundance

It's perhaps the most famous of Utah's resorts. Owned by Robert Redford

since 1969, Sundance is small, with just 180 hectares of skiing terrain. Redford has dedicated the resort to environmental conservation and there's a Native American influence in lodging decor. Expect five-star dining, artistic retreats and an eco-spa. Sundance was the original home of the Sundance Film Festival, which has since grown into a year-round institute dedicated to filmmaking. The festival takes place in January in Park City.



Powder Mountain

The Ogden Valley sits about 75 minutes' drive north of Salt Lake City and it's here, near the town of Eden, you'll find Powder Mountain (powdermountain.com), the largest of Utah's resorts. With cat skiing, guided back-country runs and groomed runs, the resort takes up 2800 hectares of terrain over three peaks but accommodation on-mountain is limited.

Gourmet Colorado

NOBUYUKI "Nobu" Matsuhisa will open a new restaurant at Vail Resort this season, bringing his gourmet Japanese seafood philosophy to Vail's affluent skiers. But there's no need to go hungry if you can't get a seat there, as a new 1208-square-metre table service on-mountain restaurant is also due to open.

Across at Beaver Creek, a new high-speed quad chairlift will open at Rose Bowl, while Breckenridge's Great Divide Lodge has undergone a makeover to emerge as a DoubleTree by Hilton resort.

Aspen Snowmass is also spending \$US26 million (\$24.4 million) on on-mountain improvements, including a new chairlift at Buttermilk Resort and a remodelling of the Merry-Go-Round restaurant at Aspen Highlands. Crested Butte will



Nobu Matsuhisa. Photo: Shaney Balcombe

launch its first winter Zipline Tour, too, with five lines and three suspended bridges. skicolorado.com

Rachael Oakes-Ash



Run wild ... clockwise from main, a skier catches some air at Snowbird; a perfectly groomed run at Park City's Deer Valley; skiers take a chairlift at the Alta resort.

Photos: Getty Images; AP

Snowbasin

The 2002 Winter Olympics left Salt Lake City and surrounding resorts with some super-lush day lodges. Snowbasin (snowbasin.com) also scored extra gondolas and a sky tram, plus an express quad to take skiers to super-groomed trails and advanced and expert terrain. Although the resort has the infrastructure of a more commercial resort, it doesn't get tourist crowds and guests stay in nearby Ogden Valley.

Park City Powder Cats

If you're up for some real powder fun, Park City Powder Cats (pccats.com) operates on the Thousand Peaks Ranch, about 30 minutes' drive from Park City. Expect to ski 10 to 12 off-piste powder runs each day in the 17,000 hectares on offer. The snow cat

transports groups of about 10 to the top of open powder bowls, chutes, tree runs and whatever takes your fancy and suits your ability.

Heli-skiing

Wasatch Powderbird Guides (powderbird.com) operates heli-skiing from Snowbird in Little Cottonwood Canyon, as well as at The Canyons resort at Park City. Day heli-ski trips explore the Wasatch Range to find deep powder runs that will keep you grinning for weeks. If back-country skiing is more your thing, then the team at White Pine Touring (whitepinetouring.com) can guide you through the surrounding ranges, complete with skinning equipment, alpine touring skis, avalanche gear and snowmobiles to get you deep into the national parks.