

Cheap Skiing Guide™

Special Adventure Edition

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Mt. Superior from Little Cottonwood Canyon

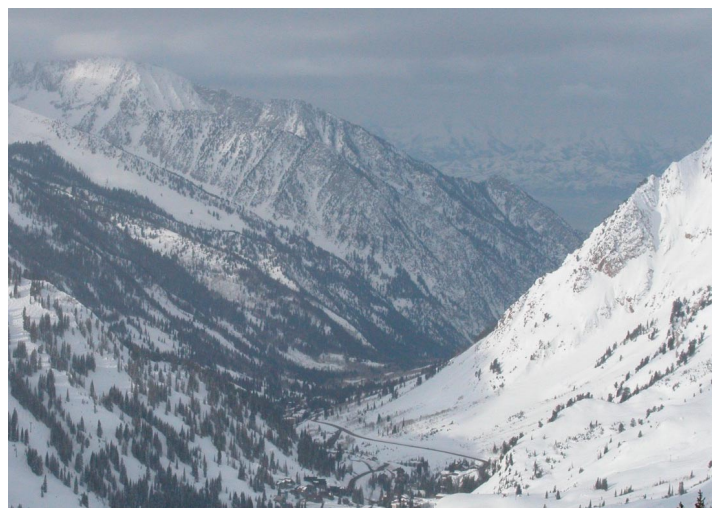
I sat silent in the shuttle's front seat as it rolled down Little Cottonwood Canyon toward the Salt Lake City Airport. Memories of the last four days danced in my mind like confetti in the wind, none ready to settle on top. Other passengers reminisced about acres of uncut powder but I chose reflection over adjoining anecdotes. As the canyon's mouth opened, I could see the Oquirrh Mountains draped behind Salty City and West Jordan. The snowy peaks conjured flashbacks of smooth powder scarred by skiers but healing overnight. Snowfall was abundant in the canyon. Predictions for dust accumulated into inches and, over one night during my visit, almost a foot. Skiers queued at the lift 30 minutes before the scheduled opening for a chance to float on crystals so light and dry, the experience redefined gravity as propulsion without weight. Hard as I tried to organize my thoughts, visuals flashed in a schizophrenic storm, none establishing salience. The cat skiing in Grizzly Gulch, the guided tour of Alta, the connection between Snowbird and Alta through Mineral Basin, the spectacular vistas, and even the accommodations at the Alta Lodge all vied for position like snowflakes in an avalanche. Even the avalanche guns echoing through the canyon engaged reflection.

Contrasts between expectations and reality surfaced frequently. Before arriving, I embraced the understanding that weather and long term plans always present risk. As chance would have it, expectations paled in comparison with my experiences.

Skiing began on Saturday, February 21, 2004. Because of a planned rendezvous with a snowboarding relative, my first day was spent at Snowbird. Alta is one of four U.S. resorts that do not permit snowboards. Buses provide free shuttle service between Alta and Snowbird and, after renting equip-

ment at the Alta Ski Shop, my son Jeff and I caught an early one. Friendly service was ubiquitous in the canyon. The gentlemen at the rental shop knew exactly what we needed and provided us with top-notch equipment along with an invitation to switch whenever and as frequently as we liked, sans additional cost.

Snowbird seemed more developed than Alta and able to accommodate more visitors but the terrain is similar at both resorts. Unlike many eastern ski areas where trails are sculpted with dozers and dynamite, most of the terrain in the Wasatch Mountains is open and natural (unnatural if one considers anthropogenic changes from silver mining that ended about a century ago). Trees are typically sparse and easy to navigate through. That day, about four inches of new snow fell on a base that was already over 100 inches deep. Hearing a board's or ski's edge carving through the surface was a rare sound. Bumps were soft and ice was hard to find. Trails are marked (almost everywhere) but, in contrast to eastern areas, ill-defined, which opens vast opportunities for the adventure-prone skier or rider but may cause anxiety for those who dislike feeling "lost." Deep, uncut powder was harder to find on Saturday; a few pockets waited to be discovered. There are some places at Snowbird where reversed inclines required some extra exertion from the unprepared but with foresight and a little extra speed transition is easy. Snowbird's main transportation to the top is a tram that holds 125 people. Trams are trams and, although they provide a smooth, warm, and fast ride to the top, I'm not a big fan of being in a large group of strangers within intimate proximity of each other—call me a tramophobe. The vastness of terrain, however, instantly dilutes the tram's horde and trail traffic is rarely congested. Our last run at Snowbird was through Mineral Basin—a pas-



View of Little Cottonwood Canyon from Grizzly Gulch

sage back to Alta and the Alta Lodge where we were staying. Had visibility been better, Mineral Basin would have been the most perfect last-run-of-the-day. As is, it was still a most memorable run. Mineral Basin is a huge, snow-filled bowl with a tremendous diversity of terrain.

Alta's director of marketing and public relations, Connie Marshall, provided us with a guide for the morning of our second day. Tyler Jackson, an extremely nice young man, showed us exactly what we were looking for and may not have found on our own—fresh powder. He also took us through the High Traverse, which leads to the venerated High Rustler (a.k.a. High Boy) and adjacent Eagle's Nest, trails so steep and exhilarating, my son and I forgot to breath on the way down. Another 4 – 5 inches of snow fell that morning. We parted ways with Tyler a little after noon and grabbed a bite. We didn't realize how tired we were until after lunch. We took one more run and headed for the hot tub at Alta Lodge.

On Monday, our third day, we were scheduled to go snowcat skiing at Grizzly Gulch but when we called to confirm Sunday afternoon, the decision not to go was made for lack of new snow. Little did they know that almost a foot of new powder would fall that night. Chance again favored reality over expectations. Monday's powder offered untracked passage through trees, down steep chutes, and even on some of Alta's open slopes for most of the morning. Floating through this world-famous snow is like riding a cloud. Untracked routes were harder to find in the afternoon but the snow was still deep and soft. Our legs became acclimated by the end of the day and we were ready for the good news when we called to confirm—Grizzly Gulch was a go on Tuesday morning!

We arrived at the meeting place the next morning, paid for the excursion, and sat down to a complimentary breakfast. Ski patrollers Matt Biddle and Kevin Payne issued radio beacons to all in our group in the unlikely event that one or more of us were buried in an avalanche. Avalanches are common in Little Cottonwood Canyon but dangerous ones typically



Snowcat at the top of Grizzly Gulch

occur only after big storms that accumulate two or more feet of snow. Matt briefed the group and we headed for the snowcat, a specially equipped groomer with a heated cabin that seats twelve (in upholstered seats) and fully stocked with bottled water and snacks. At the top of Grizzly gulch, we could peer over the northern cornice down into Solitude, another ski area located in Big Cottonwood Canyon. Jeff and I had traded skies the day before for fat powder skis. Matt showed the way and Kevin swept the rear to make sure no one was left behind. We launched into the snowfields, ducking into trees and over knolls, gliding silently, smoothly, and effortlessly through snow we had only seen in Powder Magazine and Warren Miller films (at the time it felt effortless but after five runs, our legs told a different story). Each run was down a fresh section of the gulch through deep untouched powder. The experience was exhilarating beyond words. Unlike lift-served terrain, competition to cut tracks was absent. Each run could be savored like exquisite cuisine. It's no wonder so many skiers and riders want this backcountry experience again and again. The tour ended around noon and my son and I felt it would have been anticlimactic to go back out onto lift-served slopes. We decided to head back to the lodge and relax for the rest of our last day.

Alta lodge was originally built in 1939 and has a homey and comfortable feel to it. It's the antithesis of a typical ski resort. Quaint little details like afternoon tea, fresh flowers and a family atmosphere bring skiers back here year after year—for generations. Alta Lodge, like Alta Lift Company, are for people who are more interested in the skiing experience than shopping, spas, or gawking at the rich and famous. While I was packing my things that afternoon, I got a call from Mimi Levitt, owner of the lodge who invited me to have a drink with her and her husband Bill, the mayor of Alta. Bill and Mimi are gracious and gregarious hosts. They are on a first name basis with most of their guests. Bill dons a collar pin with the head and neck of a giraffe. It came from the Giraffe Heroes Project, an organization that recognized his environmental efforts over the years and commended him membership for “sticking his neck out.”

As I schlepped up the long sets of stairs from the lodge to the road one last time, I expected to hear someone say “ski you later.” The term was as common as snow at Alta.



Matt Biddle guiding us through the unscarred snowscape