

more than a job

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Getting to work on
how to do a science

the **T**ESTS!

Almost no failures at A-level

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How to get into the most competitive to gain insights, page 6

How to get into the most competitive to gain insights, page 6

How to get into the most competitive to gain insights, page 6

How to get into the most competitive to gain insights, page 6



Get away

All hail the unsung slopes of Colorado

If you want to ski rather than play spot the celebrity, try Winter Park. **Yolanda Brooks** reports

The lucky people of Denver, Colorado, are within a three-hour drive of at least eight major ski resorts. Glitzy Aspen and Vail with their sushi bars and A-list celebrities are well known, and Breckenridge is the Colorado resort that clocks the largest number of British visitors. But it's the lower-profile Winter Park that attracts the greatest number of visits from the skiing and boarding aficionados of Denver. Despite its success with the locals, Winter Park is little known and little visited by winter sports enthusiasts from the UK. Maybe it's the name — its utilitarian moniker comes courtesy of Denver city council, which created the resort back in 1939. Or maybe the Colorado crowd likes to keep the place to itself.

And with good reason. Last season, while Europe and other resorts in the Rockies struggled with miserly snow records, visitors to Winter Park enjoyed decent conditions. Admittedly, the snow depth of 165cm seemed meagre compared with the average of 185cm, but it highlighted the fact that when good snow is scarce elsewhere, Winter Park can be relied upon. It's a huge territory, with 104 km of marked trails spread over four mountains offering a total of 2,886 skiable acres (1,169 hectares). As in all North American resorts, the run-grading system is slightly different from the European system with blue-black and black runs the equivalent of European red runs.

There's a nursery area at the base of Winter Park with a "magic carpet" conveyor belt that takes children to the top of a gentle slope. In the



Solid slope: when good snow is scarce elsewhere, Winter Park has an abundance of the white stuff

25-acre Discovery Park, beginners can learn the basics in peace. There are loads of straight and wide cruising runs on the quieter sections of Vasquez Ridge. But the real fun is to be had in the Mary Jane area — as the regulars say, "No pain, no Jane". Mary Jane is more challenging and thus much quieter than the main resort area. There's little time for slacking as you tackle mogul field after knee-crunching mogul field. The Parsenn Bowl, part of Mary Jane, offers fast, open blue runs above the tree line before a descent into trickier gladed areas. For adrenalin junkies, the shutes and bumps of Vasquez Cirque should keep the heart rate up.

After a weary day on the slopes, we collapsed into the comfort of the Wild Horse Inn, 8km from the slopes in the small town of Fraser. This upscale B&B, which somehow managed to be both swish and rugged, provided the perfect end to strenuous days. Constructed of huge pine logs and rocks, the mountain lodge comes with many of the benefits of a swanky hotel —

outdoor hot tub, sauna, real log fires, king size beds — but without the pretension or the price tag. Other highlights of this cosy establishment include a bottomless cookie jar, an in-house masseuse and breakfasts to die for. The gourmet food option is Devil's Thumb Ranch, a mile up the road from the Wild Horse Inn. There are also dozens of eating options in town closer to the ski hill, covering everything from fast food and Cajun to Mexican and Chinese.

Alternatives to skiing and snowboarding include the Fraser Tubing Hill. But be warned: if you aren't keen on the speeds associated with boarding and skiing, you will hate tubing. More sedate activities are available at the Nordic centre at Devil's Thumb, which has 108km of trails and offers cross-country skiing, snow shoeing, sleigh rides and horseriding. Snowcat trips and a climbing wall are also available from Winter Park itself. And if you've got a car, the Hot Sulphur Springs resort is just 30 minutes away.

There are some disadvantages compared with Europe: a 10-hour flight to Denver, lower temperatures and a much higher altitude. The highest point of the resort is 3,261m, so expect to be breathless for the first few days.

It's a long season — from mid-November to mid-April — but probably not long enough for teachers when Easter is late, as it is this year. But there's still time to get organised for half-term, and the drawbacks are minor when you consider the uncrowded and extensive terrain, short and orderly lift queues, flexible and value-for-money hire and lesson packages, a reliable shuttle service between the slopes and hotels and reasonably priced restaurants — not things you can always rely on in Europe's most popular resorts.

Winter Park is down to earth, but it has everything the serious skier or boarder could want. Those who want to people-watch go to Aspen, but those who want no distraction from the slopes head for Winter Park.

Winter Park is situated next to the Continental Divide, 137km from Denver airport and 108km from Denver itself. British Airways flies direct from Heathrow to Denver every day and return prices start from £328. Weekly car hire prices from Hertz start from around £330 for a medium-sized car. Home James, a shuttle service, runs between Winter Park and Denver International Airport several times a day. A return ticket costs £53.50 and bookings can be made online at www.homejamestransportation.com. Book accommodation, ski hire and lessons online at www.skiwinterpark.com. Rooms at the Wild Horse Inn cost between £107 and £123 per night with 10-15 per cent discounts available depending on length of stay. See: www.wildhorseinn.colorado.com. Cheaper options in the town of Winter Park itself include the Olympia Lodge Motel (from £40 a night) and Winter Park Mountain Lodge (from £60). Virgin Holidays offers seven nights at the Winter Park Mountain Lodge from £679 per person for departures on February 14 or 21. The price includes flights, accommodation (based on two sharing), and car hire. A lift pass costs £163 for six days; ski rental £12-£19 a day, snowboard rental £14-£19 a day and breakfast £8 a day. See www.virgin.com/holidays