

A Different Approach to Skiing

Ski more for less

by Emilio Trampuz

~~\$269~~
\$15

In 1987/88, a day lift ticket at Timberline cost only \$15. Mt. Hood Skibowl charged only \$14. And Mt. Hood Meadows cost \$20. Then prices started rising. Some time around the year 2010, lift ticket prices cost more than \$100 in many places, and we were all shocked. But now, by 2025, ski areas such as Vail, Beaver Creek, Deer Valley and Park City, are charging **\$329** for a day ticket around Christmas and New Year. On other days, they charge around **\$259** or **\$269**, and a senior discount is often just \$10 or \$20 off.

But there are alternatives. You can still ski for \$15 or \$20, or even FREE at some ski areas. Other ski areas might charge you \$35 or \$75, which is still 4 to 7 times cheaper than the mega resorts. And it just so happens that these same ski areas are less crowded, have no lift lines, the powder last longer, and the cafeteria prices are reasonable. What is there not to like? You just need to discover these hidden gems.

Here is a lift ticket price list from **Hart Highlands** ski area in British Columbia, located on the outskirts of the town of Prince George. These prices are in Canadian dollars. It would be less in US dollars.

LIFT RATES	DAY	NIGHT/HALF
UNDER 6 YRS	FREE	FREE
6-12 YRS	\$19	\$17
13-18 YRS	\$23	\$21
STUDENT (ID)	\$25	\$23
ADULT	\$28	\$26
OVER 65	FREE	FREE
FAMILY	\$84	\$78

hartskihill.com

Most people want to ski only at the largest and most famous ski areas, such as Whistler/Blackcomb, Aspen/Snowmass, Vail Resorts, or Palisades Tahoe (formerly known as Squaw Valley). They think they would be missing something at smaller or less well known ski areas.

The reality is that the most famous ski areas are also the most crowded because everyone wants to ski there, and they have the longest lift lines. Fresh powder gets all cut up within an hour. They are also the most expensive, both for lift tickets and for cafeteria prices. Why pay \$20 for a burger when you can get one for \$7 at a less famous ski area?

With lift ticket prices rising to \$300, skiing is rapidly becoming a sport for the rich. The reason for the high prices on day tickets is that ski resorts want to force us to buy a season pass and thus force us to be their loyal customers and ski nowhere else. But, fortunately, alternatives are still available. You can still get an all day lift ticket for \$15, or \$20, or even for free.

The simple solution is to visit ski areas that are less well known. Ski at places that are locally owned by skiers, by mom and pop, not by corporations. Avoid anything that has the word “**resort**” in its name, and ski at “**ski areas**” and “**ski hills**”.

Bear Paw Ski Bowl in northern Montana charges \$25 for an adult all day lift ticket. It offers steeps, powder and 860 vertical feet.



In the past 6 or 7 years, I have gradually developed a yearning **to ski at all the ski areas in the West.** Everything west of Denver, Colorado. A total of 225 ski areas. And this includes the 35 ski areas in British Columbia, and the 30 ski areas in Alberta. So far, I have found a lot of hidden gems.

I was lucky to have already skied at most of the famous places when I was younger, at a time before they started raising their prices into the stratosphere. So, most of the ski areas that remain on my bucket list now are the less well known ones. Some are small, some are medium sized, but some are quite large, unknown due to their remote location.

Examples of large but unknown ski areas are:

1. **Marmot Basin, AB**, 3000 vertical feet, 1720 acres, 91 trails, served by 6 chairlifts.
2. **Castle Mountain, AB**, 2845 vertical feet, 3592 acres, 95 trails, served by 4 chairlifts and a T-bar. A lot of very steep slopes.
3. **Powder King, B.C.**, 2100 vertical feet, 925 acres, 38 trails, served by a triple chair and 2 surface lifts.
4. **Eagle Point, UT**, 1500 vertical feet, 600 acres, 43 trails, served by 5 lifts.
5. **Turner Mt., MT**, 2110 vertical feet, 22 named trails, 60% of them are black diamonds, and more than 50% are left ungroomed on purpose for the powder enthusiasts. See video at:

<https://youtu.be/ByjC-ztjauU?feature=shared>

6. **Ski Apache, N.M.**, 1900 vertical feet, 750 acres, 55 trails, served by a gondola and 11 lifts.

There is a whole world of skiing that most people will never see or ski. And it just happens to be the most affordable part of the ski world.

And here are some of the most affordable of all. These are smaller ski areas, but they have enough terrain to keep you busy for a day.

1. **Blizzard Mt. ID.** No lift tickets here. This ski area runs on donations. There is a jar in the day lodge where you can drop in a few dollars and sign your name in a visitor's book. See short video at: <https://youtu.be/pjyxUbZZIx8> .
2. **Badger Mt. WA.** Officially advertised as the cheapest skiing in North America. A day lift ticket cost \$10, but recently rose to \$15.
3. **Rotarun Ski Area**, near Hailey, ID. Lift tickets cost \$15, but night skiing on Wednesdays is free. See short video at: https://youtu.be/o-y_xOIttZw .

There are dozens upon dozens of smaller and medium sized ski areas. Each one is unique. You will discover many hidden gems. The less well known they are the better. I love going to ski areas that nobody has ever heard of. They have so many advantages, including:

- a) There are no tourists there. Just locals. Experience the local culture.
- b) There are no lift lines, or maybe very short ones.
- c) The slopes are not crowded.
- d) The fresh powder stays untouched much longer.
- e) The cafeteria prices are much more affordable.
- f) Each ski area is unique and has something different to offer. If you like variety of terrain, go visit all the smaller ski areas you can find. You will also be helping the local economy.

There are unique experiences at many places. The skiable terrain is quite varied. And there are some special moments. For example, check out the westernmost ski area in Canada – **Shames Mountain**, which is further west and further north than the two ski areas on Vancouver Island. The groomed part of Shames Mountain is quite large, but on top of that Shames Mountain offers 7800 acres of skiable powder in the side-country, accessible from the ski lifts.

Experience the northernmost ski area in British Columbia – **Bear**

Mountain, and the northernmost ski area in Alberta – **Whispering Pines**.

All of these are so far north that the powder can be extremely light and it can remain suspended in the air for a long time, so you can witness amazing **shimmering pillars of light** descending from the sun.



Some examples of unique experiences:

1. **Ferguson Ridge in Eastern Oregon.** Unhurried, relaxed atmosphere. And they have a saying about “Fergie, where 2 inches feels like 6.”
2. **Salmo Ski Hill, near Salmo, BC.** A long slope full of rolling hills, as if some giants had carved a series of giant moguls in the snow. You can choose how steep the terrain you want. If you ski in the troughs, it's easy. If you ski over each of the giant mogul-like hills, you get steeper terrain.
3. **Magic Mountain, ID.** It really felt like magic there on a nice powder day. The chairlift is completely self-served, and the terrain is really interesting, a lot of it left ungroomed for powder hounds.
4. **The shimmering pillars of light.** I have seen them at two places: [Troll Mountain](#) and [Shames Mountain](#), both in British Columbia, but you might see them at other places too. The further north, the better.

Compare the experiences. Recently, I was skiing one of these places with no lift lines at all. You just ski directly to the lift. During the 5 or 6 minutes ride on the chairlift, I was thinking about my friends who were probably skiing at Mt. Hood Meadows around that same time. I compared our experiences. While they were standing in a lift line for 5 or 6 minutes (and sometimes longer), I was riding the chairlift up. By the end of the 5 or 6 minutes, my friends finally boarded a chairlift, while I was starting to fly down the hill. I was waiting less and skiing more, and for much less money. What is there not to like?

If instead of **daily lift tickets** you prefer to think in terms of **season passes**, consider this. Would you rather pay around **\$1,000** for an IKON or an EPIC pass that gives you access to the most expensive and most crowded places? Or would you rather pay around **\$300** for an INDY pass, which gives you 2 free ski days at over 200 mostly uncrowded ski areas? You could be skiing all winter with no lift lines for just \$300 or less.

NOTE: The prices above are only approximate, because the actual price depends on how early you purchase it. A pass can cost less or more than the prices mentioned above, depending on when you buy it.

The problem is that most people want to visit only the “**best**” ski areas, and various articles in ski magazines, newspapers and online are basically popularity contests, where the top best ski areas are those that got the most votes. So, people end up going to the most famous and most popular and therefore most crowded and most expensive places.

What is “best” about that? Best is a very relative term. Best for what? Best for beginners? Best for advanced skiers? Best for fresh powder? Best for variety of terrain? Best for the views? Best for the local flavor? Best for how uncrowded they are?

There are a dozen ski areas around Lake Tahoe, but everyone wants to ski only at the 3 or 4 most famous ones, such as Pallisades Tahoe (Squaw and Alpine Meadows), Northstar-at-Tahoe, and Heavenly Valley. Most people are missing the best views of Lake Tahoe that can be seen from Diamond Peak and Homewood ski areas.

Here's a view from the **Homewood ski area**. There are still several hundred vertical feet down to the lake. And if the “Experts only” sign scares you, there is also an intermediate trail down just a bit further to

the right.



Here's a suggestion: **Go ski them all** and find out for yourself which ski areas are best for you. To avoid the crowds, go where most people don't go. Ski more for less.

You just might catch the same bug I did, and suddenly want to ski ALL the ski areas in North America. Or at least ALL the ski areas in your State and your neighboring State.

If you have time to watch a longer video or two, check out the following videos, each showing a different road trip to 4 or 9 different ski areas:

1. Skiing Northern BC and Alberta. <https://youtu.be/C5dGsLvDqBc>
2. Northern BC & Alberta - part 2. <https://youtu.be/gW-Fo9g7LBw>
3. Skiing North Central Washington. <https://youtu.be/YqKitBSdaqY>
4. Idaho Ski Safari to Less Well Known Places:
<https://youtu.be/zkfSXX-7bSo>

Most skiers will never see any of these places. This is your chance to

take a peek.