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Awed in Alaska

The skiing is sublime at the Alyeska Resort. And so is everything else.

By Larry Olmsted

★ If bigger truly is better, it doesn't get much better than Alaska — especially for skiing. With its towering mountains, long daylight hours, and massive amounts of snow, the 49th state does everything to epic proportions. But if you're not an adrenaline junkie, take heart. To experience the majesty of pure blue glaciers and frolicking whales, you don't need a bush plane or snowmobile — you just need a ski vacation.

Alyeska, the state's only major destination ski resort, is uniquely Alaskan — from its mountain and ocean views, to the Eskimo art in the hotel lobby, to the locally caught salmon in its sushi parlor. But what really sets Alyeska skiing apart is the snow.

Some ski resorts are noted for dining, celebrity chefs, and sommeliers, while others go after high rollers, pouring on the glitz with world-class hotels. Some boast impressive non-skiing activities, while



From top: chair lift with the Chugach mountains in the background, aurora borealis over the lodge

other accommodations bank on nightlife. But what ultimately makes a great ski trip is great snow, and Alyeska packs the powder. Whether you get down the mountain on skis, a snowboard, or telemark gear, it's all about the white stuff, and Alyeska routinely piles up some of the deepest numbers of any major ski resort in the U.S.

The snowfall here is unbelievable, with average seasons of 600–700 inches — enough to bury a five-story building. By way of comparison, Steamboat Springs, Colorado, which trademarked the

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term “Champagne Powder” for its renowned winter conditions, averages around 350 inches. Alyeska’s “driest” winter in the past decade saw over 500 inches — still a spectacular season anyplace else. And the resort often gets much deeper snow. Two winters ago, Alyeska came one storm short of a thousand inches, which is roughly equivalent to a baseball player hitting 80 home runs.

Alyeska, a 40-mile drive from Anchorage, is a destination ski resort with all the bells and whistles, yet despite its obvious appeal and an excellent trail and lift system, it’s off the map for most traveling skiers — and only because it’s in Alaska. For many skiers, the 49th state seems as exotic as Australia, even though it takes a lot less time to get there.

“Going to Alyeska is a great bargain. It stays light forever, there are no lift lines, and they have world-class cat-skiing and heli-skiing right at the resort,” says ski-buff Gregg Cerveny of New Hampshire. “And there’s so much snow! There’s really no such thing as a bad year.”



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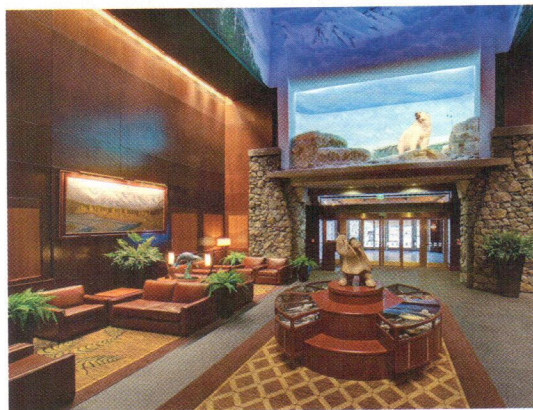
A 60-passenger tram runs from The Hotel Alyeska to the top of the ski resort, which has chairlift-served base lodges on either side. Spanning more than 1,600 skiable acres and 2,500

vertical feet, Alyeska has a mix of terrain for all abilities, including the North Face trail, which is the longest continuous double black diamond run in North America. And Alyeska is even more popular in summertime, when countless cruise ship passengers and Anchorage visitors come to see stunning views from the aerial tram, hike the resort’s huge expanse of trails, mountain bike, attend the nearly nonstop festivals, or simply to eat, since the acclaimed Seven Glaciers restaurant atop the tram is one of the best in the state.

Set in the small town of Girdwood, Alyeska Resort is relatively self-contained, with The Hotel Alyeska at its base. Most guests stay at the hotel, but Girdwood also has a couple of small inns and some independent dining and nightlife. Many of these establishments are linked to the resort by a free shuttle bus. As an alternative, travelers who prefer a little more hustle and bustle sometimes choose to stay in Anchorage, the state’s largest city, and make the short commute to the slopes at Alyeska.

Still, for a true resort-based ski

ADVENTURE ON THE LAST FRONTIER



DINING: Seven Glaciers is Girdwood’s most renowned restaurant. It’s located at the top of the tram and serves lunch and dinner with an emphasis on game and Alaskan seafood. Sakura in the Hotel Alyeska serves up some of the freshest sushi and sashimi this side of Tokyo, and the hearty pre-skiing breakfasts and crepe-like sourdough pancakes at the Bake Shop in Girdwood are legendary.

LODGING: The top choice is the ski-in/ski-out Hotel Alyeska, which contains several restaurants and bars, a pool and spa, a ski rental shop, and more. Alyeska Accommodations rents condos, cabins, chalets, and homes. alyeskaresort.com
alyeskaaccommodations.com
girdwoodaccommodations.com

SKIING: Resort skiing includes the tram and all lifts; daily lift tickets cost \$70 on weekends and \$60 midweek, with discounts for seniors, students, and military. With lodging, Chugach Powder Guides, in the Hotel Alyeska, offers one-day heli-skiing and cat-skiing excursions, as well as multi-day packages.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ALYESKA RESORT



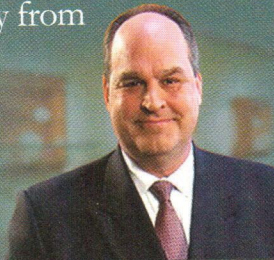
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if heli-skiing, which runs about \$1,100 per day, is beyond your budget, CPG has another 2,500-acres for cat-skiing, an alternative that is both less expensive (from \$275) and less intimidating.

Alyeska is essentially three ski resorts under one very convenient roof, with something for everyone and all

THE SNOWFALL HERE IS UNBELIEVABLE, WITH AVERAGE SEASONS OF 600-700 INCHES — ENOUGH TO BURY A FIVE-STORY APARTMENT BUILDING.

holiday, the best option is the Hotel Alyeska, which houses the ski rental shop, several bars and restaurants, and the legendary heli- and cat-skiing operator Chugach Powder Guides (CPG). CPG's 750,000 acres of heli-skiing terrain have been featured in countless extreme ski films, and the operator works closely with the resort to offer guests a seamless, out-of-bounds experience. Since backcountry skiing is so weather-dependent, the resort allows skiers total flexibility. If you sign up for a fantasy day of heli-skiing and the weather is less than ideal, you can ski at the resort and try again the next day. In contrast, most heli-skiing operations require a trip to a remote lodge where the alternative is no skiing at all when Mother Nature is uncooperative. And

GETTING THERE US Airways offers direct daily flights from Phoenix to Anchorage. Most visitors rent a car for the 40-mile drive to Alyeska, but private transfers from the airport are available with Four Seasons Transportation Group (starting at \$125 one way) or with E & L Transportation (\$90 each way). Many skiers spend a night in Anchorage to experience the city.

abilities. In the shorter winter months, they offer lighted night skiing until nine, though the best time to visit is March or early April, when it's much warmer and the sun shines until well past eight. Alyeska typically remains open for skiing until the end of April, and visitors are still taking runs in deep powder when most resorts have closed for après-ski happy hour — or for the season.

Most skiers planning a vacation to Alyeska include a night or two in Anchorage to explore the city's charming, historic downtown on foot. Extras such as dog-sledding excursions, gold-mining tours, and flight-seeing safaris to Mount McKinley can easily be added to your trip. Wherever you stay and however you spend your time, an Alaskan adventure and ski vacation is guaranteed to be far different from the Lower 48 resort experience, and you can count on the snow to be especially memorable. ✪

Larry Olmsted, a contributing editor, is an avid skier who also writes about travel and golf. His website is larryolmsted.com.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ALYESKA RESORT