

THE LATEST TREND IN SKIING IS RENTING OUT THE ENTIRE MOUNTAIN

By Ross Kenneth Urken



Skiing at the Yellowstone Club in Big Sky Montana - Photographer Ryan Turner

"Fresh powder is one of the rarest commodities in the world," says Aaron Brill, co-owner of Silverton Mountain. There's a reason you've never heard of the resort. The private ski club in southeastern Colorado limits access to 80 guests a day—unless someone buys out the mountain. First tracks after lunchtime? It's an advantage that no name-brand resort can provide: not Aspen, not Vail, not St. Moritz.

All 1,819 of Silverton's skiable acres can be yours for \$14,000 per day. For an extra \$900 you get a helicopter and 29,000 acres of sugary, backwoods pow. Reservations are available to the public and sell out months in advance, but guaranteed access goes to 25 "luminaries," loyal patrons who have earned elite status. For that \$14,000, they can bump day-pass holders when conditions are prime. (Skiers who've already booked on those days get fairly compensated to come back another day.)

Silverton is among a growing list of membership-based skiing clubs in the U.S. For the first time this year, Vermont's Hermitage Club allows members to rent the 194-acre mountain for a day; it costs \$60,000 for you and your 99 closest friends. And Colorado's Cimarron Mountain Club, which opened in September near Telluride, has just 15 memberships, which run a cool \$3.2 million apiece. For that, you get a 35-acre slice of the property where you can build the ski home of your dreams, plus unlimited guided or snowcat skiing on 2,000 untouched acres.

"Private ski resorts are the new private jet," says Jack Ezon, president of Ovation Vacations, a Virtuoso Ltd. travel agency. "They give luxury travelers a hassle-free, line-free experience, so they can focus more attention on their family and travel partners."

The Yellowstone Club in Big Sky, Montana, started the trend in 1999. Its 2,200 acres of groomed corduroy—plus private jet access at the Bozeman

airport—are limited to owners of the 864 properties on the mountain. (They range from \$3.15 million to \$25 million—not including the \$300,000 sign-up fee, \$39,500 annual dues, and sub-association fees.) "It brought a level of exclusivity defined by a person's ability to invest in real estate," says Michael Berry, president of the National Ski Areas Association. Though it's not the new kid on the block, it's certainly booming: last year, Yellowstone saw \$700 million in annual real estate sales, compared to \$500 million in 2015.

And it's not all about powder-chasing. Hans Williamson, general manager of Yellowstone, says families love not having to worry about their kids on the slopes as they might in Aspen, where crowds make collisions more likely.

Not in the market for a chalet? No problem. Some resorts offer a happy medium between membership and homeownership. Silverton, for instance, sells standard guided lift tickets for \$179 a person—and Brill and his wife, Jen, run a comparable service in Alaska for avid heli-skiers. HoliMont in Ellicottville, New York, is limited to members on weekends but opens its doors to the public Monday through Friday. (Go for wide-open runs and stay for its renowned après-ski parties with live music and wine-fueled dinners.)

Ultimately, says David Panagrossi, owner of Plymouth Notch, a private Vermont ski club, running a members-only mountain makes financial sense. Sure, the \$7.5 billion industry is built around economies of scale—with dining and rentals contributing as much to the bottom line as lift tickets—but snowfall totals are no longer guaranteed. Membership fees are.

And for those who get only one chance to shred each season, exclusive access is priceless. "Time is irreplaceable," Brill says. "And money? You can earn more."



The lodge at the Yellowstone Club - Photographer Ryan Turner