





# THE EVERYTHING MOUNTAIN

Overflowing with dry powder and draped in groomed runs, Montana's Big Sky offers an embarrassment of riches. **BY GEORGE KOCH | PHOTOS MARTIN SÖDERQVIST**

"My God, that sky is soooo blue..."

No North American could get away with such a banality without merciless jeering. But coming from my friend Morten Agersnap,

a Dane, it sounded charming in its naïve innocence. The sky—through 360 degrees—was indeed a stunning, deep, you'd-be-lost-forever-were-it-a-woman's-eyes kind of

blue. Meaning it was a slightly prettier than average Montana morning.

The setting was the top of Lone Peak: a near-perfect pointed alpine horn, dominating, steep, rugged, yet preternaturally skiable. And with its fall lines dropping away more than 900 vertical metres in four directions from its peak of 3,403 metres, nothing if not *huge*. If you zig this way at the top, by the bottom you're miles from the fellow who zagged.



You could ski right into the posh, exclusive Yellowstone Club to the southeast, if that were allowed. And you can actually ski down to adjoining Moonlight Basin, via possibly the finest big-mountain descent in all of North America. This massive terrain is all serviced by Big Sky's Lone Peak Tram, a hybrid gondola-cable car tailor-made for taking small numbers of serious skiers straight up onto a peak that offers only diamond and double-diamond skiing.

With avalanche transceivers, shovels, packs—even helmets!—Morten and I were just getting ready to ski the Big Couloir, a rockwall-defined S-bend down the otherwise pure cliffs of the peak's northeast cirque. Tram passengers stare googly-eyed down into the chute, which looks far nastier than it skis, and traffic is further limited by a patrol-enforced, two-skiers-every-15-minutes rule. Having raced to sign up that morning, we were among the first two pairs after the patrol, and a light snow the night before had swirled and settled at several times the recorded snowfall depth. Blasting had visually marred the once pristine powder surface, yet to our delight the debris was soft

and indistinguishable from uncut powder. The turns were sublime top to bottom.

While gnarly freeride rules Lone Mountain, its four faces make up only one side of Big Sky. Because it remains less hyped than more famous mountains, it's easy to think of Big Sky, about an hour's drive south of Bozeman (10 from Calgary) or just north of Yellowstone National Park, as a particularly well-turned-out regional resort. But during my four days of exploration with Morten plus ace photographer Martin Soderqvist and pro skier Martin Webrant, it dawned on me that Big Sky isn't just the premier ski resort in Montana. I'd say it has a serious claim to being the best skiing mountain in the U.S.

The other Big Sky sits below Lone Mountain and consists largely of rolling ridges and rounded lower peaklets that don't quite break Montana's very high treeline. It's perfectly made for cruising, with dozens of wide runs cut down the fall line or snaking along the undulating terrain. The grooming quality is, quite simply, perfect. The terrain is so vast and the largely destination-visitor skier-traffic so light at typically 2,000 per day, that you can usually find unmarred corduroy even after 3:00 p.m.—

by which time lifts and runs are deserted.

Accordingly, Martin, Morten, Martin and I spent our days on a combination of long, steep and intense freeride descents alternating with speedier cruising runs. The Thunder Wolf high-speed quad chairlift and its terrain were just built for such non-stop top to bottom hurtles. With both of us on wide skis with 30-metre turning radii, speeds of about 70-80 kph were *de rigueur* for comfortable pure-carved turns. At more crowded resorts back home we'd have been in lockup, or dead, but at Big Sky nobody said a word. This zone also has some great ungroomed snowfields dotted with huge old ponderosa pine, certain to be delightful after a snowfall. Most of the lower-elevation terrain during our visit was rock-hard from a previous melt-freeze.

There's even longer and lower-angled cruising off the Southern Comfort quad past Thunder Wolf, perfect for novices who want to be left alone, shorter steeper shots off Ramcharger quad, and some of the neatest rolling lines around off the Swift Current quad. All are high-speed. The fixed-grip Challenger Chair brings you back to burlier terrain. Challenger is great in its own right and key



when the Lone Peak tram is closed. It also connects to an unbelievably steep cirque of gullies in Moonlight Basin (a joint lift ticket is available). In-between the cruising runs are plenty of smaller sneaky plays for stormy days or to mine the last of the powder.

Oh, and did I mention that Lone Peak is huge? Its south and southeast faces alone are the size of many ski areas in Western Canada. Sadly, these too were refrozen as well as rocky during our visit, but would offer days of exploring in normal times. Big Sky, in other words, is an embarrassment of riches.

Big Sky's village is less an embarrassment of riches than a case of everything necessary being there and where you expect it. It's a high-end resort all the more startling for its remoteness. The compact village sits directly beside the lifts, centred on five large hotels, including the original Huntley Lodge. One aspect I love is the European practice of including breakfast with the overnight stay, in this case a vast breakfast buffet covering granola and fruit to custom-made omelettes. The Huntley Lodge also has a nice bar, two sets of indoor-outdoor hot tubs and a ski room situated on the short stroll to the lifts. The

central day lodge building houses shops, rentals and a good bar/café for lunch and après-ski. The Mountain Village building houses the very fine Andiamo Italian Grille, where we enjoyed a sumptuous dinner.

An extensive community of acreages, small condo and cabin developments, shops and eateries is strung out along the resort's access road. We drove past these one evening, down to the main highway between Yellowstone and Bozeman, to Buck's T-4 Lounge. Buck's is a classically western American undertaking: a somewhat dilapidated log bungalow proudly serving numerous varieties of red meat, including wild game. "That was probably the best steak I've had in my life," murmured Morten as the four of us leaned back in that post-carving-post-chewing glow and slowly sipped bourbon.

The next morning, we were atop Lone Peak, and again in a patrol shack, but this time in that of the Moonlight Patrol, deployed like some lonely UN peacekeeping outpost in uncertain territory (the Moonlight crew has to use Big Sky's lifts to get there). Vast wall photos depicted sketchy-looking lines down the northwest face, and a patroller sonorously intoned numerous hazards we might encounter in the North Summit Snowfields. As in the Big Couloir, only one group is allowed in every 15 minutes; at least the policy guarantees zero moguls.

The cliffs of the main cirque to our right, a limitless convex snowfield rolling away to our left, we skittered carefully between snow fences and piles of shale below the peak. The golden-brown Madison River valley lay to the west, followed by ranks of mountains seemingly without end. I had an inkling of the wonderment Lewis and Clark must have felt. The opening pitch was a vast open face, and I found blown-in powder in the lee of a low hummock, 50 turns of classic big-mountain skiing. Eventually it rolled away into cliffs, with an abrupt leftward traverse bringing us to a tight steep gully. This too ended in rollaway rocks, motivating some ginger turns. A rightward zag brought us to yet another gully, also steep, fanning out into a runout with huge untracked fields of powder.

From here a forest trail led back into a virtually deserted Moonlight Basin. The North Summit Snowfields were like a really great off-piste run in the Alps: more than 900 vertical metres of pure fall line in four unique pitches. We looked back in awe, hardly believing what we'd found. ❄️

## FACTS & STATS



## BIG SKY

### Facts & Stats

**LOCATION:** Big Sky is in southern Montana about 80 km south of Bozeman and 20 km north of Yellowstone National Park. Seven airlines serve Bozeman airport (Gallatin Field) with approximately 25 scheduled flights per day.

**TERRAIN:** 150 named runs on 2,225 skiable hectares; 1,125 metres total vertical drop; peak elevation, 3,400 metres.

**LIFTS:** (including Moonlight Basin) 15 chairlifts (4 high-speed), one aerial tram, five surface lifts for a total capacity of 23,000 skiers per hour. Typical daily visitation is about 2,000 with peak days of about 5,500.

**SNOW:** 10 metres annually

**LIFT TICKETS:** Single-day adult, US\$79; six-day pass, US\$444.

**ACCOMMODATION:** Five main hotels are slopeside in Village Plaza, plus there are numerous townhouse-style condominiums and cabins in a rental pool in the village.

**MORE INFO:** [www.bigskyresort.com](http://www.bigskyresort.com) or 800/548-4486