

SECRET SKIING



PEAK ISOLATION
Heli-skiing, as provided by Canadian Mountain Holidays, is a great way to discover your own path.

Schuss through the powder in relative isolation this winter at these off-the-beaten-path ski destinations from Alaska to the Alps. // *By Larry Olmsted*

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SKIING AND SNOWBOARDING boomed when travel resumed as the world reawoke: great news for resorts, but not always so good for travelers. Last winter saw record crowds at many of the most popular resorts, lift lines that became infamous viral media sensations, and staff shortages that closed or limited restaurants and services. Fortunately, there is an easy solution for your next great ski vacation, because there are plenty of places where you can beat the crowds with awesome terrain and amenities—you just have to choose wisely.

In North America there's no place that combines big time, A-List skiing with empty slopes like Montana's **Big Sky** (bigskyresort.com). Recent additions of European-style ultra-high speed six- and eight-passenger chairs (heated and covered for all weather comfort) have given Big Sky the most advanced and efficient lift system in the U.S., eliminating start-of-the-day queues at the base areas. Once skiers head up the hill, they are dispersed on the second

largest resort in the country at a stunning near-6,000 acres (with equally impressive 4,350 vertical feet). Despite its growth, Big Sky is removed from any major city drive market and gets fewer visitors to begin with, resulting in a sparse average of one to two acres of terrain per skier. The longstanding top luxury lodging choices **Lone Mountain Ranch** (lonemountainranch.com) and **Huntley Lodge** (bigskyresort.com) were joined last winter by a new ski-in/out **Montage** resort (montagehotels.com).

Big Sky is not the only "name brand" resort with empty slopes, as America's very first luxury ski destination, Idaho's **Sun Valley** (sunvalley.com), also benefits from the absence of an urban drive market and has been known for non-existent lines for years. It features two distinct ski mountains, the smaller Dollar—arguably the best place in the country to learn—and the main event, Bald Mountain. Sun Valley was just rated the No. 1 U.S. Resort by SKI magazine's industry leading rankings, for the third time. The iconic

AMERICAN BEAUTIES
Sun Valley, Idaho, *above*, and Big Sky, Montana, *right*, are two of the finest ski/snowboarding areas for empty slopes in the U.S.



JEFF ENGERBRETSON / BIG SKY RESORT

Sun Valley Lodge (sunvalley.com) was completely rebuilt with fewer, bigger, and even more luxurious rooms.

Colorado's **Telluride** (tellurideskiresort.com) is the other famously excellent mountain that eschews crowds despite having the nation's very best variety of terrain for every ability from novice to extreme expert. That's because it sits far from Denver in the less-visited southwest corner of the state and has an erroneous reputation for being hard to reach. That keeps the big mountain empty even though it is not true, even for commercial travelers. But for those flying private, it is one of the most accessible resorts on Earth, with a fully equipped modern airport just five miles from main street. The top lodging choices are sister properties from **Auberge Resorts** (aubergeresorts.com): the full-service Madeline and residential Element 52.

Utah has done such a good job of marketing its ski resort proximity to hub airport Salt Lake City that travelers have been spoiled by the 30 to 45-minute drives to Alta, Snowbird, Deer Valley, and Park City. Many consider **Snowbasin** (snowbasin.com) "too far," even though it's just a few minutes farther, less than an hour from the airport. You can make up the difference in a single lift ride thanks to the absence of lines, and crowds are also reduced thanks to an absence of on-site hotel lodging. This is an oddity for a massive ski mountain (104 trails and bowls, 11 lifts, 3,000 acres)—especially one that hosted all the speed events, including the downhill and super-G, at the 2002 Winter Olympic Games. While it's grown beyond hidden gem status, Snowbasin is still the biggest uncrowded ski resort in Utah, and though it lacks ski-in/out rooms, it has luxurious base lodges and first-rate food, service, and lifts. Lodging options in nearby Ogden, its gateway (and even closer airport), have improved with additions like the **Compass Rose Lodge** (compassroselodge.com) boutique resort—one of just a handful of resorts worldwide with its own professional grade domed astronomical observatory.

HELI-SKIING

Both Telluride and Sun Valley are among the small handful of ski resorts that offer on-site heli-skiing by the day, the very best way to beat crowds and access immense acreages of untouched powder. If you have never been heli-skiing, this resort-based single-day

WHITE WONDERS

Facing page, clockwise from top left: Tordrillo in Alaska; Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy; Sun Valley, Idaho; Hotel de Len, Cortina.

model is a great way to check it out before committing to a longer more remote trip, and other North American resorts with day heli programs include Whistler Blackcomb, British Columbia; Alyeska, Alaska; Jackson Hole, Wyoming; and Snowbird, Utah. Heli-skiing is less available in Europe but is even more accessible, with many operators offering à la carte single rides rather than full days. One of the very best in the Alps is **Air Zermatt** (air-zermatt.ch)—which also runs the famous resort's search and rescue flights and operates one of the world's best pilot training centers.

Heli-skiing offers fresh tracks on every single run, and to take it up a notch, try an entirely heli-based vacation, typically five to seven days based at a dedicated, remote fly-in lodge. This is skiing and snowboarding's Holy Grail and absolutely the most guaranteed way to avoid crowds. The numbers are almost incomprehensible as many heli-ski operators have more terrain than every major U.S. ski resort combined—all reserved for two dozen skiers or less. For example, Alaska's best-known operator is **Tordrillo Mountain Lodge** (tordrillomountainlodge.com), which can accommodate 24 guests at a time and has exclusive permits for 1.2 million acres (in contrast, the largest U.S. ski resort has around 7,300 acres). On top of that, it gets 600 inches of annual snowfall, nearly twice as much as most renowned Rocky Mountain resorts. Tordrillo uses state-of-the-art Eurocopter AS 350-B3 aircraft, accommodates intermediate skiers and snowboarders and above, and offers seven-day packages. These are fairly representative of North American lodge-based heli-skiing packages and include skiing, all meals, gear and rentals, guides, and the 40-minute flights to and from Anchorage, from \$17,500 per person (also available for single-party lodge buyouts). Extracurricular activities at the lodge include cross-country skiing, snowmobile tours, target and sporting clays shooting, spa, yoga, snowshoeing, and fat-tire mountain biking.

The biggest and best-known operator is **Canadian Mountain Holidays** or CMH (cmhheli.com), with 12 lodges and more than three million acres of terrain across four mountain ranges in British Columbia. CMH is considered the founder of heli-skiing and has lodges and programs for more abilities than most operators, from "laid-back" skiers to experts, as well as special first-timer programs and a wide range of one-to-seven-day trips. CMH is a blue-ribbon company, with ample operational experience and many loyal

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WESLEY D. WYLLIE



GITO TREVISAN / ISTOCK



HELENO BARBETTA



KEVIN SYMS

repeat customers, and offers all-inclusive packages with great food, amenities and modern lodging while making trip planning very simple.

Single-ride heli-skiing trips are also offered in Italy's Cortina d'Ampezzo, the "Queen of the Dolomites" and host of the 2026 Winter Olympics (they also had it in 1956). But if there is one region where you don't need a helicopter to beat lift lines, it's the Dolomites, home to the largest lift network on Earth. Several interconnected resorts around Cortina and the adjacent valleys of Val Gardena and Alta Badia combine under a single lift ticket, Dolomiti Superski (also covered by the global IKON Pass). The Superski network disperses crowds easily due to its immense size—30,000 skiable acres and nearly 900 marked trails served by 450 lifts, including many modern high-speed heated chairs, bubbles, gondolas, and trams. This extremely efficient transport links about 50 villages, large and small, most of them set on valley floors with slopes and lifts surrounding them on all sides. The unique result is that instead of just the best hotels being ski-in/ski-out, entire towns are. All of this is set among one of the most stunning and geologically unique alpine landscapes in the world, with 15 enormous vertical rock massifs, often dramatically in view. Part of the Southern Limestone Alps, the entire region has been declared a Unesco World Heritage Site.

Smaller independent hotels featuring stunning cuisine have long been a trademark of the region, and the Dolomites also have the Alps' richest assortment of "rifugios," gourmet mountain hut eateries on the slopes, some with lodging. High-end local specialty tour operator **Dolomite Mountains** (dolomitemountains.com) can arrange guided rifugio-to-rifugio ski trips with luggage transfers or weeks mixing huts and top hotels. The best options include the legendary **Rosa Alpina**, an Aman partner (rosaalpina.it), with its Michelin-starred restaurant. Luxury giant Mandarin Oriental recently purchased Cortina's grande dame, the Hotel Cristallo, as its debut mountain resort, but the property will be closed all winter 2022-2023 for a total refurbishment in advance of the upcoming Olympics. For now, the top choice in Cortina is the food and spa-focused **Hotel de Len** (hoteldelen.it), a boutique property with pronounced regional flair.

There's plenty of other deluxe lodging, including the **Hotel Perla** (laperlacorvara.it) a Leading Hotels of the World member and culinary gem with one of Italy's best wine cellars, an incredible list of Super Tuscans and a fantastic ski-in/out location in the pedestrian heart of one of the liveliest villages, Corvara. The recently renovated Relais & Chateaux **Gardena Grödnerhof** (gardena.it) and the spa-centric **Adler** (adler-resorts.com) sit nearby each other in another top pedestrianized town, Ortisei. **Ciasa Salares** (ciasasalares.it) in the charming Alta Badia town of San Cassiano is another top choice with a gourmet focus, featuring multiple bars and a selection of distinctive restaurants, including the famed Chocolate Room.

The highest-profile newcomer is **Badia Hill** (badiahill.com), which debuted just in time for the December ski season kickoff. The contemporary architecture includes 33 rooms in six whimsical categories with features such as private saunas, whirlpool baths, cinemas, wine cellars, and cigar lounges, all with terraces overlooking one of the most distinctive panoramic views in the region. There is also a unique rooftop infinity pool and sauna, gourmet restaurant and wine bar.

AWAY FROM IT ALL
The best in heli-skiing
available via Tordrillo
Mountain Lodge, Alaska.

WESLEY D. WYLIE

