

Idaho's Schweitzer Ski Resort touts great snow, views and no crowds



Lake Pend Oreille below makes Schweitzer Mountain feel like the Northwest's own Lake Tahoe region. And the 2,900 acres of steeps, tree skiing and family-friendly groomers are a skier's dream.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SCHWEITZER MOUNTAIN RESORT

The ski area is on private land so it has a base village with ski-in, ski-out lodging.

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Published: 03/11/12 12:54 pm | Updated: 03/11/12 1:04 pm

On a bluebird day you can see snow-capped peaks in Montana, Washington and British Columbia from the top of Idaho's largest ski resort.

Lake Pend Oreille below makes Schweitzer Mountain feel like the Northwest's Lake Tahoe region. And the 2,900 acres of steeps, tree skiing and family-friendly groomers are a skier's dream.

It's here, absorbing this heavenly panorama, that it seems impossible a place so stunning could be named after a cat-eating hermit.

But it is.

Schweitzer Mountain Resort has a quirky history, a bright future and reputation for being one of the best-kept secrets of the U.S. ski industry.

"Let's face it," said Jim Parsons, a longtime Sandpoint resident and local historian. "It's not easy to get here."

Getting to Sandpoint from the South Sound requires a nearly 400-mile drive, or a flight into Spokane followed by a 90-minute drive.

"But it's worth the effort," Sean Briggs, Schweitzer's marketing coordinator, said as he prepared to drop into the ski area's Outback Bowl. "We have an iconic view, great skiing, a base village with everything you need, and the best thing about being a little out of the way is the lack of crowds.

"You feel like you get the mountain to yourself. Even the busy days aren't all that busy."

CAT STEW

Schweitzer Mountain is reportedly named for a Swiss hermit (In German, Schweizer means Swiss) who lived at the base of the mountain more than a century ago.

In his 1991 book "Looking Back at Schweitzer," resort founder Jack Fowler wrote that the eccentric hermit was thought of as strange but polite.

Once, while wearing his Swiss Army uniform, he intercepted a young woman traveling on horseback in a snowstorm and led her to the local train station. After another incident, authorities paid him a visit and found the pelts of many missing cats.

According to Fowler's book, the hermit was quite fond of cat stew.

He was sent to an asylum where he spent the rest of his life.

The hermit has since been immortalized in local folklore and with several resort features now referencing his legend. A six-seat lift and a ski run are named Stella, after the towns-woman he reportedly loved, and the tubing park is called Hermit's Hallow.

Inexplicably, none of the 92 ski runs bear the name Cat Stew.

Parsons, the local historian, had only one thing to say about the legend: "No comment."

His interest lies more in the evolution of the ski area. Parsons, 81, moved to Sandpoint from San Diego in 1945.

There had been skiing on the outskirts of town in the '30s and he and some other locals helped build a new rope tow in the late 1940s, but he never envisioned the area would one day have a ski area that lures visitors from around the Northwest.

The turning point came in the 1960s when Fowler, a Spokane dentist, and a friend, Grant Groesbeck, spotted Schweitzer Basin on their way home from a disappointing ski trip in Montana. The idea was born and the men even brought in longtime White Pass general manager Nelson Bennett to help find the perfect location for the ski area. In 1963 the ski area was born with townspeople buying into the project for \$10 per share.

"Everybody in town bought stock," Parsons said. "I think it is the biggest thing that ever happened to this town."

BEERS, BRAS AND DISNEY

Today Schweitzer seems to have something for everybody.

For those who are a little bit wild, there is a tree under the Great Escape lift where women sometimes throw their bras – a tradition Briggs can't explain.

Other ski areas in Idaho have bra trees, but few resorts in North America have a liquor license like Schweitzer's.

"The license covers the entire mountain," Briggs said. "So people can enjoy a beer on the chairlift." For families, the resort grooms miles of ski trails every morning.

"We have tons of groomers that are long and wide open," Briggs said. "And we have some great high-angle groomers."

One of these steep groomers, Kaniksu, Briggs claims starts at a 55-degree pitch.

Because the ski area is on private land, it also has something that is a rarity in the Northwest, a base village with ski-in, ski-out lodging.

"It's great for families because they just have to wake up, grab their skis and they are on the snow," Briggs said. "It's pretty easy."

In 2000, when the ski area installed the new Stella Lift, it enlisted the help of Disney.

To reach the lift, skiers slide through a barn adorned with mining themed animatronics. Briggs said the animatronics, which included characters and steam-blowing machinery, proved to be more expensive to run than expected and are rarely turned on anymore.

They don't get many complaints, perhaps because skiers don't spend much time in the barn.

"There are no lift lines at Schweitzer," said Jeff Nizzoli, owner of Eichardt's Pub in Sandpoint. "That's one of the great things about skiing here."

And then, for those who love to push themselves, Schweitzer offers challenges both on and off the slopes.

DOUBLE DIAMOND DINING

At the base of the Outback Bowl, where dozens of steep double diamond, diamond and a handful of intermediate runs converge sits a small lodge with a big menu.

The Outback Inn is a popular lunch spot best known for its homage to an Idaho icon – the potato.

Joe Sorentino was manning the tater station when a skier ordered the Outback Potato. The skier realized he was outmatched as soon as Sorentino pulled out a large red and white paper basket. As Sorentino loaded on chili, tomatoes, onions, bacon, sour cream, jalapeños, cheese and more, he announced that lunch would weigh more than three pounds.

"And," the cashier chimed in, "you can't leave until you finish."

Luckily he was joking because there was no chance. And Outback Bowl was calling.

The more challenging of Schweitzer's two bowls, Outback Bowl is where the resort keeps its toughest terrain: the steep Lakeside Chutes and expert runs with names like Whiplash and Misfortune. "And great, quality tree skiing," Nizzoli said.

"On a powder day it will blow you away," Briggs said.

That's about the reaction Rob Karmin of Portland had last month when he took a four-day vacation at Schweitzer with his girlfriend.

"This place is pretty amazing," Karmin said. "If Schweitzer was right next door to Mount Hood I would come here."

TAHOE NW

Svein Nostdahl, co-owner of Sandpoint Sports, moved from Aspen, Colo., 13 years ago looking for a place where he could ski in the winter and play on the lake in the summer.

His first thought was Lake Tahoe, "but it has too many people," he said. "This place is second only to Tahoe."

In comparison with Aspen and Tahoe, Nostdahl says he wouldn't exactly classify Schweitzer as a resort. "But it's getting there," he said.

Mack Deibel, spokesman for the Sandpoint Chamber of Commerce, says Sandpoint still gets most of its visitors in the summer. He doesn't have visitation statistics, but inferred you'd have better luck finding a bowl of cat stew than a hotel room in town between July 4 and Labor Day.

"We are a lake town," he said. "But we are becoming more of a ski town."

One step Sandpoint took in that direction this year was adding free public transportation from each of its hotels to the base of Schweitzer, where the resort offers round-trip shuttle service to the lifts for \$3. Deibel said the new service is used by about 1,000 people per week.

Duffy Mahoney, co-owner of MickDuff's Brewing Co., says he and his brother, Mickey, moved to Sandpoint in 2005 to convert an old breakfast diner into a brew pub because Sandpoint was a dream destination. In addition to the skiing and water sports, they appreciated the local arts and music scene.

"It's like somebody took Portland or Seattle and shrunk it down to a town of about 8,000 people," Mahoney said. "... And then put here where we have this great lake in our front yard and world class skiing in our backyard."

THE DETAILS

Where: Schweitzer Mountain Resort in Sandpoint, Idaho

Lift tickets: \$67, \$57 (65 and older and college students), \$50 (7-17). Children 6 and younger accompanied by an adult ski free.

Terrain: 92 trails, 2,900 acres, terrain park

Lifts: Nine

Elevation: 6,400-foot highest lift, 4,000 feet at base, 2,400 foot drop

Nordic: 32 kilometers

Annual snowfall: 300 inches

Stay here: Lodging is available slopeside at the Selkirk and White Pine lodges and a variety of condominiums available for rent. Rooms can be found for as little as \$164 midweek to almost \$1,400 for a holiday condo rental. A variety of hotels are available in Sandpoint, an 11-mile drive from Schweitzer. For more information call 877-487-4643.

Dine here: Just six years old, MickDuff's Brewing Co. in Sandpoint has become a popular apres ski destination. Pub co-owner Duffy Mahoney says skiers and snowboarders flock in for the 3 p.m. happy hour and the beers brewed by his brother, Mickey. (Mickduffs.com). Eichardt's Pub is another popular spot known for its garlic fries (\$5.50) and blackened and wild salmon Caesar salad (\$14), owner Jeff Nizzoli said. 208-263-4005. The ski resort also offers restaurants, cafes and a couple pizza places on the mountain.

More info: www.schweitzer.com, 800-831-8810

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