

Grand Targhee, Wyoming

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The magnificent peak called the Grand Teton towers over Grand Targhee’s powder-kissed slopes. (Photo courtesy of Grand Targhee Resort)

Sailing Down Grand Targhee’s Uncrowded Slope

By Claire Walter

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Set against the majestic backdrop of the Tetons at the Wyoming-Idaho border, Grand Targhee offers more skiing with less infrastructure than any other resort in the Rockies. Just do the math: 2,000 skiable acres on two mountains. Ninety-six lodging units with 440 pillows in the compact village at the ski area base. One or two busloads of day-trippers from Jackson Hole. A few hundred people, max, who are overnighiting in Driggs

or in lodgings between town and resort, or coming in for the day from Idaho Falls. It amounts to a thousand or so skiers and riders in midweek, spiking to perhaps twelve or thirteen hundred on weekends and holidays. Some people are clustered on the beginner slopes, some are riding a chairlift, some are languishing in the spa or the outdoor pool – which means a couple of acres for every soul on the mountain.

But to purists, the only number that counts is snowfall. Grand Targhee snares 500 inches of feather-light snow on an average winter. It falls often, piles up deep and lingers from storm to storm in hidden pockets all over the mountain. With just four chairlifts – two of them recently added high-speed quads – and an uncommonly attractive vest-pocket resort village at the base, Grand Targhee is tailor-made for skiers and snowboarders who want lots of elbow room by day and a tranquil and cozy place to chill in the evening.

The resort is the quintessential mountain hideaway, located at the end of the road that climbs from the pancake-flat Teton River Valley into a highland of forested mountainsides on the west side of the majestic Teton Range. Essentially, Grand Targhee is a place to ski your legs into stumps, then kick back, relax and ignore the world. A hot night on the town is driving down to Driggs for a burger, a burrito or a beer. When it comes to the slopeside village, what you see is what you get: a handful of attractive buildings connected by pedestrian ways. Everything is ski-in, ski-out. Everything!

With the installation of a second high-speed chairlift for the 2001-02 season, Grand Targhee became a two-mountain ski resort. The ski and snowboarding terrain spreads between the original Fred's Mountain and the adjacent Peaked Mountain (the latter pronounced "peak-edd" not "peak'd"). By and large, at Targhee, if you can see it, you can ski it – a medley of open glades, meadows, cirques and chutes. If you're on a snowboard, you will fall in love with the natural halfpipes and nature-made terrain features. Grand Targhee is a place for big-mountain riding, not laying tricks onto artificial terrain.

Fabulous Fred's

Fred's tops out at 10,000 feet, where the trees are sparse and deep snowfields abound. Actually, the trees aren't as widely spaced as they appear in mid-winter, because 15- and 20-footers may be buried so deeply in the snow that they look like saplings. European-style pistes are groomed on ridegetops, the faces of open fields and the bottoms of runout drainages, but everything else is left ungroomed. The Dreamcatcher chairlift, the high-speed quad that replaced the old Bannock double chair, vacuums up liftlines, disperses skiers and snowboarders on the hill.

Three ridges form spines down Fred's Mountain, with deep drainages between them. The terrain most directly served by Dreamcatcher represents a perfect mix of intermediate to high-expert turf. Glide down the groomers or venture into the deep. Ski them and you'll find heaven on nearly 2,000 feet of continuous vertical. Ski them well, and you'll feel as if you are flying on a cloud of snow. Wild Willie, Sitting Bull and Rock Garden are immaculate intermediate pistes. Crazy Horse is a little more challenging. The Face and Ladies Waist are steeper still. Segue off-piste and play in the powder or the soft chop. Have a blast.

You'll find legitimate black-diamond thrills, drop into the chutes on either side of the Fred's handsome main face. Patrol Chute, Instructors Chute and Nasty Gulch on one

flank and The Good, The Bad, The Ugly and The Woods on the other are two sets of steep and steeper tree-lined pitches. The latter foursome is slide-prone, so they are only skiable after the patrol deems them safe.

If you angle north from the Dreamcatcher unload and follow the top of the ridge, you can drop off the Headwall Traverse into a short steep shot, of course called Headwall. It gentles and fees into tree-studded Chief Joseph Bowl. Another option is to continue on the traverse to a gentler entrance into Chief Joseph or ski past the Blackfoot chair unload to the Blackfoot Traverse. There you will find a sublimely secluded section of the ski area marked on the trail map as "Powder Area." This is pretty amusing, since all of Grand Targhee is a powder area.

Chief Joseph Bowl, the Powder Area, and everything adjacent and in between is served by the Bannock chairlift, Grand Targhee's last remaining double at the resort. If you like this far corner of Grand Targhee, make leisurely loops on Bannock and in the Powder Area, down a near-secret route called Lost Warrior and along the North Boundary Traverse back to the lift. Talk about uncrowded.

A must-do run is Teton Vista Traverse, to the south of the Dreamcatcher unload and the only truly easy route from the summit. This scenic glide offers jaw-dropping views of the west faces of Grand Teton, Middle Teton and South Teton, a trio of wild and commanding peaks by any measure.

Perfection on Peaked

The Sacajawea high-speed quad, added last season, now serves some of the Peaked Mountain terrain that had previously been accessible only by snowcat. The year-old lift starts and unloads lower than Dreamcatcher. Peaked's 500 newly lift-served acres include more big snowfields and open glades on high, plus runs cut through tight trees at the bottom. Sacajawea's terrain is largely sheltered from wind and weather.

Where snowcat skiers and riders were once thrilled in virtual solitude, making eight to 10 runs a day, it is possible now to yoyo on the Sacajawea lift and Peaked runs all day. This sector of Grand Targhee gets only marginally more crowded in the afternoon, when skiers are looking for a change of scenery from Fred's or for more sheltered terrain if the clouds roll in or the wind picks up. Each of the two main routes from the top has an optional cut-off on the bottom. Northern Lights is a blue-black run along the perimeter of the lift-served part of Peaked with an easier cut-off on the bottom portion called Half 'n Half, and Dreamcatcher on the other side of the lift is a blue-square cruiser with a more challenging cut-off on the bottom called Shadow Woman.

Even though Sacajawea took a 500-acre bite out of the snowcat-only terrain, the cats still operate and the guides still lead groups on 1,000 acres higher on Peaked Mountain and also farther from the village center. Grand Targhee's snowcat skiing is primo. Imagine skiing in a small group on a playground of hundreds of acres under the brow of the soaring Tetons. If a full day of runs up to 2,400 vertical feet of untracked powder is too much, half-days are also available. Selected early-season packages (through December 24) include free snowcat skiing. Unbelievable!

Fabulous for Families, Beautiful for Beginners

Grand Targhee has earned its reputation as a place that experienced skiers go for seamless powder laid onto vast tracts of uncrowded terrain, but no one was born on skis

or snowboard, and the resort presents itself as a gorgeous place for youngsters and adults alike to develop their ski legs. Adding to Targhee's appeal for families is the steal of a deal: children 14 and under ski and stay free when sharing parents' accommodations (childcare and lessons with the snowsports school are, of course, additional).

Kid's Club is the name of Grand Targhee's highly regarded childcare program for children from age two through five. They can start skiing as early as three on the gentlest little slope, riding a safe and easy Magic Carpet to the top and gliding to the bottom under the watchful eyes and nurturing guidance of one of the resort's award-winning children's snowsports instructors.

Powder Scouts is for six- to 14-year-olds. These kids also start on the Magic Carpet and soon learn fast, and soon graduate to "the big lift," officially the Shoshone fixed-grip quad, right behind Kid's Club. Tucked into the trees of the gentle hillside are all sorts of adventure areas and terrain features to help them learn to steer control their skis. Children have the choice of skiing over, around or between Giant Ant Hills, helping to create an instinctive terrain awareness. Bobsled Run and Humpback Forest help them turn. From there, it's on to the main mountain, as skill, stamina and slope conditions permit. Pretty soon, many children outskiing or outriding mom and dad.

Adults taking up skiing or snowboarding can't have it better than with the Targhee touch either. The learn-to-ski or learn-to-ride program is the easiest and most economical way for a first-timer to get that initial taste of skiing or riding. The Magic Carpet, the Shoshone Lift and the gentle trails around it offer easy-street skiing that builds confidence and skills – fast.

Beyond those first turns, Grand Targhee is one of the best places on the planet to transform your skiing or riding from the smooth and groomed to the steep and deep. The snowsports school is masterful at introducing people to powder. Inspirational!

Other Activities

Just as Grand Targhee offers more terrain with a smaller infrastructure than anyplace else, its ratio of off-slope activities to guests is phenomenal too – in favor of guests. Again, remember the magic number of 440 pillows. How many will be taking a day off from skiing or riding to spend time at the small spa, following a naturalist on a snowshoe walk, cross-country skiing on a 15-kilometer groomed cross-country trail system, ice skating, taking a backcountry dogsled or guided ski tour, visiting Yellowstone National Park, going shop in Driggs or Jackson – or simply relaxing with a good book back in the lodge? Not many. You won't have much competition for most of the activities – and none at all if you choose to relax indoors.

In the evenings, Grand Targhee offers just enough but never too much diversion. A handful of restaurants, a little live entertainment, the option of a sleighride dinner. But that's really all you need when the you've been sailing over sublime snow all day. Honestly!

MORE INFORMATION

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