

LaSal Range, Utah

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Skiing the LaSal's Geyser Pass Road offers scenery, Solitude, and abundant snow. (Ral Sandberg photo)

Lovin' Utah's LaSal Mountains

By Claire Walter

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Moab – famous for world-class slickrock mountain biking and the sculptural formations of Arches National Park – doesn't immediately bring skiing to mind. But it is a gateway to the LaSal Mountains. Roughly 15 north-south miles and 6 east-west miles, the LaSals are so modest that you can take in the entire range without turning your head.

They may be minor league as mountain ranges go, they offer abundant backcountry skiing – and Moab itself is at its least crowded and least expensive in winter. The geologically young LaSals of magma and basalt rise from the desert into a montane environment of thickly forested mountains where snow piles deep. Tree-free summits rise to more than 12,000 feet above sea level and up to 6,000 feet above the stark desert.

The LaSals are divided into the north, middle and south ranges, with the best winter options in the middle range. My husband and I drove up from the desert through semi-arid hillsides vegetated with gambrel oak, piñon, and juniper. As they gave way to aspens, we entered the snow zone as saw ski and snowboard tracks through the trees between switchbacks.

The parking area at the end of the Geyser Pass Road plowed section presented a surreal winter scene, with tailgate parties set up amid six-foot-high banks of snow. Desert-dwelling Utahans simply set up lawn chairs and gaze at the snow, while hordes of children sledged or saucered down a nearby slope. Though it was a holiday weekend, we encountered few skiers along the trail.

Geyser Pass Road, the LaSals' main street, bores eastward into the heart of the middle range. Taken on its own, it is a lovely ski – thanks largely to Bob Jones, owner of Tag-A-Long Expeditions. He is a summer river and 4WD outfitter who operates an ancillary winter business, running his ratty old snowcat up the road to maintain two barebones backcountry huts. In the process, he semi-grooms the road, for which grateful locals often flag him down to thank him as he rumbles by.

We joked that finicky Boulder purists would cringe at a machine-packed ski route, but we too appreciated Jones's efforts to make the road skiable, no matter how deep the snow. Summer road signs were all but buried, and there's a lot to be said for *not* having to break trail where there are heavy snowfalls and comparatively little skier traffic.

The Gold Basin Road branches off about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile from the trailhead toward the Laurel-Gold Basin cluster, a varied area of touring terrain, open meadows, glades and true steeps. With a summit at 12,482 feet, Mt. Tukuñnikivatz, nicknamed "Tuk," presents steep cirques and chutes with mammoth verticals. Several mountains provide skiing in virtually every compass direction, and any day might produce cloud-light powder, spring-style corn and sun crust.

However, we continued straight toward Geyser Pass. Gray, green and taupe aspen trunks from nature's palette seemed custom blended for the LaSals. Sentinel-straight Ponderosas clad in orange bark almost glowed against the snow. These conifers, still heavily laden from the previous week's snow, turned crystalline and sparkly in the sun. There were occasional glimpses back toward the desert but most of the views were of mountains: rounded, tree-free Haystack Mountain and the loftier, spikier summits of Mt. Mellenthin and Mt. Laurel. Mt. Peale, at 12,721 feet the LaSals' highest peak, was just out of sight.

Then, from the crest of the 10,000-foot pass, we descended past sparser trees and clearings to Tomasaki Hut, $3\frac{1}{2}$ miles from the trailhead and almost hidden among the trees. Overnighters ski in while Tag-A-Long ferries packs and water jugs on the snowcat. This saves uphill wear and tear on skiers and also enables Jones to brief people on how everything works. Not that there's a lot to know – just heater, stove, basic utensils, gaslights, water, outhouse, a table, some chairs and bunks with foam pads.

Easy nearby snowfields beckon tentative telemarkers to try their turns in the rarely tracked fluff, while Tomasaki Basin's lower slopes suit those with moderate skills. Experts hit more challenging terrain on Mt. Tomasaki, Manns Peak or Haystack. Touring skiers like us find the 1,000-foot ascent to Burro Pass and the fast glide back to the hut a fine excursion.

Morning snow underfoot was cold and fast, but in the afternoon, it softened and melted in a couple spots, even in deep winter. Just off-trail, we also found surface hoar. This metamorphosis of snow in the high country near the desert created thin, flat sheets of snow that glistened in the sunlight and tinkled like frozen corn flakes when we skied through them.

At the end of the stay, we returned, skiing over the Geyser Pass hump, followed by a fast run to the trailhead – even faster when carrying a pack from the hut. Tag-A-Long ferries gear in, but it's up to clients to ski it out again.

IF YOU GO

WHERE: Moab is 235 miles from Salt Lake City and 355 miles from Boulder. The Geyser Pass Road trailhead is about an hour's drive south of town.

WHAT: Day skiing and huts. Tag-A-Long Expeditions' Tomasaki and Beaver Lake backcountry huts each accommodate eight to ten people for \$30 per person, per night (plus 9 percent tax), plus mandatory \$65 snowcat transport of the group's gear to the hut and required orientation. No pets. Contact 800-453-3292, 435-259-8946 or www.tagalong.com.

OTHER INFO: Backcountry information from the Manti-LaSal National Forest, Moab Ranger District, 435-259-7155. Avalanche report, 435-259-SNOW (435-259-9669). General visitor information from the Moab Area Travel Council: 800-635-6622 and www.discovermoab.com.

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