

*Silverton Mountain, Colorado*

The following article appeared under the title, “Chills, Thrills, and No Frills” in the November/December 2003 issue of *Endless Vacation*. Another version was later distributed by Travel Arts Syndicate and appeared in the *Columbus Dispatch* and *Kansas City Star*.

Editors: For reprint rights to this article (which will be updated with current information), contact [cmwalter@claire-walter.com](mailto:cmwalter@claire-walter.com) or [TravelArts1@aol.com](mailto:TravelArts1@aol.com). Images are available (some from author; some from Silverton Mountain).

*Note to readers and editors: In March 2006, Silverton Mountain initiated the option of unguided skiing. See ski area website for details.*



**At frill-free Silverton Mountain, abundant powder, blue sky and ungroomed steeps beckon expert skiers and snowboarders. (Photo courtesy Silverton Mountain)**

## Skiing Colorado's Steep and Deep

*Dream skiing in Colorado's San Juan Mountains – but only experts need apply*

By Claire Walter

Copyright © Claire Walter 2003.

The double chairlift climbs slowly from a deep valley in southwestern Colorado through a dark corridor flanked by shadowy conifers. In summer, day-trippers riding the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad and road-trippers who discover the funky old mining town of Silverton disembark from the lift, gaze at the jaw-dropping vista of a humongous glacier-carved basin ringed by soaring peaks, and ride the lift back down.

But it's winter, and the lift is the portal to Silverton Mountain, a daring non-resort, now entering its third season, that represents the antithesis of tame, super-manicured, snowmaking-intensive mega-mountains so favored today. In just two seasons of operation, Silverton Mountain achieved cult status. It has no conventional amenities, no novice terrain (in fact, not even any intermediate terrain), no grooming, no trail map, no ski school, no slopeside lodging, minimal food service – in short, no frills. Those features abound at Durango Mountain Resort, 28 miles to the south, and in fact, expert skiers and riders can slot a couple of Silverton Mountain days into a Durango ski vacation.

Corby Stokenberry, a lowland-dwelling bike racer who came with a group of friends, said, "Skiing Durango is like putting your car in cruise control, but Silverton is a mental effort, not just a physical effort. It's freeform skiing. It's technical. No two turns are the same. Snow conditions change. Trees add another layer of challenge. It's fabulous, but you're whipped by the end of the day."

On my first visit, I got off the chairlift, hefted my pack (required to hold the mandatory shovel and extra clothing), double-checked my avalanche transceiver (required at this wild ski area in Colorado's snowiest corner), and followed my guide (also required at this time) across the ridgetop to what felt like the edge of the earth. It was spring, with warm sun, blue skies, and soft, forgiving corn snow. But the ski terrain down the steep sides of that big glacial basin is anything but forgiving. The easiest runs – and remember that *easiest* doesn't mean easy – are Riff and Raff, which start with headwall drop-offs, then alternate between rock-walled narrows and fall-away steep sections lined with trees. Many portions of this duo – steeper than The Plunge, a legendary expert run at nearby Telluride – average 32 to 35 degrees. The most vertiginous pitches are almost 60 gut-gripping degrees. Sunset Boulevard is open at the top, chokes down to a narrow pass, and funnels into a scenic gully. Even the relatively gentle bottom sections would legitimately wear black diamonds elsewhere. The ski-out is along an old road to a meeting spot with the area's van at the end of the plowed section for the quick ride back to the lift.

I skied with my toes curled up in my ski boots and held my poles in a vise grip – an illusion, or delusion, of security. True security comes from assiduous snow-safety methods and the present mandate of guided skiing. But don't think of the Silverton Mountain experience as the ski-country equivalent of a follow-the-leader horde on a motorcoach tour. It's more like heli-skiing without a chopper. Only 40 [editor – this could be increased] people a day are permitted to ski or snowboard in small, guided groups. "It's amazing. It's like having your own private mountain," said Aaron Sales, a snowboarder from Hood River, Oregon.

“After heli-skiing in Alaska two years in a row, we were looking for some adventure skiing close to home,” enthused Ahti and Jill Suo-Anttila of Albuquerque who make several annual visits. “We have had some incredible powder days up there.” Jill remembers “an early-season descent down Two Smokes. The chute was too narrow to make turns, so a rope was in place to help out.” Speaking of ropes, the guides think of Rope-D-Dope as a ski area unto itself. Of the four entrances, three are difficult and is one (relatively) easy. They all funnel into a huge open area that might just be the best run you’ll ever ski.

Mandatory Air starts with a five-foot jump into a tight gully. One of my personal skiing rules is “no jumping,” so you won’t see me leaping off a cliff or a cornice, but I do get a thrill skiing the kind of terrain where people braver than I do so. Nothing, and I mean *nothing*, compares with the satisfaction of conquering a run so steep that you can’t see the bottom from the top. I angle in tentatively, wondering whether I’ll again beat one of nature’s greater forces, then traverse a bit, hoping the law of gravity has, perhaps, been temporarily suspended until I work up the nerve to really start skiing. For me, and maybe for you, those first turns are chest-pounders.

Silverton Mountain’s elevation and challenge make every run a chest-pounder. From a 10,250-foot base, the sole lift climbs the west side of the north ridge of a soaring summit labeled Storm Peak on topographic maps. It unloads well above the treeline at the 12,247-foot saddle that skiers and riders cross to the edge of the humongous east-facing bowl. Below is some of the most challenging lift-served ski terrain on the continent: chutes, couloirs, cliffs and seamless snowfields. If the 1,600 directly lift-served acres isn’t enough, there’s another nearly 1,000 feet of hike-up vertical to Storm Peak’s actual summit. “The guides allow you to hike to peaks that put you at the edge,” Aaron Sales said. “You can take it to your most extreme ability level.”

Why do people take the trouble to ski so remote and simple an area? Abundant fresh powder that lingers from storm to storm. Secret stashes and guides to let you in on the secret. Backcountry tranquility combined with hoot-and-holler experiences in every unique run. Drop-dead scenery. Weather that can change from sunshine to snowstorm, and back, in a heartbeat. Sublime.

## IF YOU GO

Silverton Mountain is six miles north of Silverton, 52 miles north of Durango via U.S. 550. The area operates Thursdays through Sundays, weather permitting. For reservations (required), call (970) 387-5706. Information from [www.silvertonmountain.com](http://www.silvertonmountain.com). Bring water (there is no running water at the area). Either bring your own lunch or order in advance when you reserve. A one-day guided adventure is \$xx in high season, \$xx in low season. An avalanche beacon, shovel, and probe are required and can be rented at the mountain for \$15 a day. The ski area also hosts annual avalanche safety courses, Steep Camps with name extreme skiers, and Sisters in the Steeps for women.

With the following Silverton Mountain has developed, more local businesses are staying open in winter. There is also cheap and easy family skiing and free ice skating at municipally run Kendall Mountain. Groomed winter trails, also free and suitable for cross-country skiing and snowshoeing, ring the downtown core. Snowmobiling on 150 miles of maintained trails is popular; snowmobile tours are available. Winter events include such holiday events as the Yule Log & Sugarplum Celebration (December),

Silverton Avalanche School courses (January and February), Snowscape Winter Carnival (February), and Snowmobile Playdaze (March). For details, contact the Silverton Chamber of Commerce, (800) 752-4494, (970) 387-5654, or [www.silvertoncolorado.com](http://www.silvertoncolorado.com).

-end-