

USA »



Alice Peacock test-runs four of Utah's best ski resorts



DEER VALLEY

Swooping down a run at Deer Valley, I take a turn where the run splits into two and find myself suddenly alone — skiing a corridor fringed by snow-capped pine trees.

For a minute or so it feels as though I'm the mountain's only guest.

Then suddenly, the run pops me back out on to the main trail and I'm once again sharing the slopes with Utah's Spring Break crowd.

That is, those with a bit of disposable cash.

For the first of our four days skiing a few of Utah's best resorts, we're at Deer Valley, which I soon discover is the Moet of Utah's skiing. It's also exclusively for skiers — Deer Valley is one of the only three resorts in the United States that don't allow snowboarders on the slopes.

We're up on the mountain bright and early to catch the beginning of a bluebird day: sunny but crisp enough to warrant a doubling-up of thermal layers.

Upon arrival a ski valet helps us unload our gear in the parking lot and carries it up to the resort's base, Snow Park Village.

The "village" offers complimentary ski storage overnight, and onsite parking is made easier by a cap on daily ticket sales. The cap also prevents lengthy chairlift lines, helping skiers maximise their time on the slopes.

As an intermediate-level skier who has had a two-year hiatus from the slopes, I spend most of the morning getting a feel for the sport again.

I start off with a couple of green runs — spending a leisurely hour or two winding my way down the mountain — before testing my muscle memory

with a move into the blue, intermediate-level slopes.

Around midday I glide my way down a cruisy blue run called Solid Muldoon back to Snow Park Village, where we're meeting to debrief and grab lunch.

It's a cafeteria-style set up in Snow Park Village, but not like the ones I'm used to. Food options include a lush spread of salads, a soup bar and a bakery. I'm later told different eating spots are dotted further up the mountain, including four-course fireside dining and a specialty pho restaurant.

I think I'm fitting in, but slip up and reveal my Kiwi roots when I ask for directions from a woman working inside.

When the confused and somewhat shocked American repeated the question back to me, I realised what my Kiwi accent had done to the seemingly innocent question. I find the deck myself, red-faced.

PARK CITY

Park City Mountain Village has about 3000 ski-able hectares — more than double the area of lift-service skiing of any other resort in the state. To put this in context, Whakapapa (New Zealand's biggest ski area) has 550 skiable acres.

With this all in mind, it seems wise to kick off the day with a guided tour.

Our second day of Spring Break skiing begins at a more leisurely 10am start at the base of Park City. We set off up the mountain on a chairlift shortly afterwards, our guide pointing out the various mountains as we ascend.



Checklist UTAH

GETTING THERE

Air New Zealand flies from Auckland to LA, with connections to Salt Lake City available with United Airlines. airnz.co.nz

DETAILS

visitutah.com
visitparkcity.com

We're also thrown tidbits of knowledge about the history of the ski field.

Both Deer Valley and Park City Mountain resort, we learn, were once part of a mining town. People started flocking to the mountain settlement when silver was discovered in the late 1800s.

Locals began to dabble in skiing and a jump was built atop one of the mining dumps in the 1930s.

When the shine wore off the mineral industry around the same time, disused mining technology was converted into the first ski lift.

Miners departed, more skiers arrived, and the mammoth mountain expanse was transformed into ski runs.

Relics of the area's shiny history are dotted around — bits of old mining equipment and miners huts that we stop by as part of our tour.

The runs are also reminders of the past. We take a ride on the Silverlode Express chairlift before zipping down runs named Powder Keg and Silver Hollow.

As a whole, the resort is busier than Deer Valley and a bit more of an everyman's land.

We spot a few groups I assume are students nabbing some powder time during their spring break. We're also sharing the slopes with snowboarders this time around.

The resort, however, is kitted out for the masses. Several of the chairlifts are roomy enough for five, the runs wider and longer than anything you'd see in New Zealand — there's undoubtedly enough snow to go around.

SOLITUDE

With two days on the slopes under our belts,

Solitude ski resort seems like a great location to step the skiing up a notch.

It was good timing, then, for Shawn Stinson of Visit Salt Lake to join us. Shawn is something of a legend in Utah's skiing scene, and just as much a fan of the mountain views as he is of the sport itself.

I suspect it's because of this particular passion that we find ourselves riding Summit Express Chairlift, up to the top of Honeycomb Canyon.

It's another windless day — cool but with enough sun to warm us up a little as we whizz up over the mountain on the lift. The ride up is taking us over terrain that's a hell of a lot steeper than what we have experienced in our previous days skiing.

The runs seem more rugged than Deer Valley or Park City — it's rough, but beautiful.

Up top, we stand for a few minutes looking over Honeycomb Canyon, while Stinson points out the various mountains bordering the ski resort.

I'm in awe and also a little daunted — the tree-lined canyon below us is made up entirely of black runs and I'm not sure whether I'm equal to it. But with Shawn's encouragement, we're away, swooping down into the canyon, skis slicing through fresh, deep powder.

I experience Utah's famous fluffy snow in its entirety when I overestimate my turning ability and fall onto my butt.

It's not quite as cloud-like as it appears, but it's



Clockwise from main picture: Deer Valley; skiing deep powder in Utah; a bluebird day at Deer Valley; Alta Ski Resort (above). Photos / Getty Images, Supplied

certainly more forgiving than the somewhat icier terrain I'm used to.

I make it to the bottom in one piece and we head back to the top of the mountain for another swoop.

After a couple more runs I'm more confident with a blue-black slope. I also have extremely sore legs — by my estimation, it's time for an afternoon beer.

Lucky for me, Moonbeam Lodge at the base of Solitude has an excellent selection, from Bud Light to a range of craft beers.

We quench our thirst sitting on a balcony overlooking the bottom of the ski field. I'm sad to leave: I could easily have spent a second day on the mountain, had our schedule allowed.

ALTA

Our morning at Alta begins with a farewell — we split from our group's resident snowboarder, who heads to the neighbouring Snowbird resort.

Alta is another of America's ski-only resorts, a long-standing tradition that's been subject to much criticism.

In fact, a group of snowboarders filed a lawsuit back in 2014, alleging the ban violated the Equal Protection Clause of the US Constitution. A court ruling in 2016 concluded Alta had a right to enforce its policy, and the snowboarders stayed out.

But they didn't give up there. Through some chatter on a chairlift, I learn some boarders are so dedicated to a run on the field's

well-groomed slopes, they'll head to the top of the adjacent Snowbird Resort, slip through a side entrance and enjoy a run to the bottom.

Their commitment to the cause is pretty strong, and after a couple of runs at Alta I begin to understand why.

The terrain is majestic, and varied. Long sweeping slopes quickly turn into steep, tree-fringed runs: it all looks a lot like what I'd admired in a ski magazine on our recent road trip through the desert.

The day is fairly grey in comparison to our bluebird run thus far, and I'm dealing with a headache brought on by G&T's consumed during an NBA game the night before. But all of this does little to dampen the thrill of putting my freshly polished skiing skills to work on a few of Alta's blue runs.

We ride up the Sugarloaf lift, then whizz down Devil's Elbow, enjoying the crisp air and fairly deserted mountain.

Next we veer over to the other side of the mountain, and up the Collins lift. Midway down a run from the Collins lift, we break at Watson Shelter.

Baldy Brews is a tiny cafe on the snow-level of Watson's — unassuming, but a must-do for any coffee-loving Kiwi skiers.

It's a small menu but a flat white features, as well as a long black.

None of my American companions quite get my enthusiasm after the first sip of my first real coffee on the trip — though I do inspire someone else to try a macchiato. They wouldn't get it though — it's the taste of home.