

Travel

Destination Brokeback Mountain

A guide to spring skiing for GLBTs

By Matt Alderton

CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Although he's skied down some of the world's largest mountains—in faraway places like Switzerland, Italy and Argentina, just to name a few—Illinois native Chris French grew up skiing down some of its smallest.

"I'm from one of those teeny tiny farm towns about two hours outside Chicago," says French, 35, who now lives in New York. "I grew up skiing the huge and mountainous Chicago-area ski resorts like Alpine Valley—with a 400 foot vertical, maybe?"

He laughs, but he means it when he says Chicago was a great place to learn. "The Midwest obviously isn't known for its skiing, but there are some really great little local hills in and around Wisconsin."

All grown up, French eventually found out that when it comes to mountains, size really does matter. "I had family who moved to Utah," he says, "and when I was visiting them I got a taste for how incredible it is to ski down giant, huge, gorgeous, spectacular vista mountains."

Because a taste wasn't enough, French founded Ski Bums in 2003. The country's largest GLBT skiing and snowboarding club, it now has more than 650 members from 30 states, the United Kingdom, Canada and Asia. The club, which welcomes GLBT skiers and snowboarders of all skill levels, typically organizes nine trips every year to places as varied as California, Colorado, Canada and Chile.

"There's something naturally euphoric about doing something you used to do as a kid with your family," French says, "but now being fully yourself—being comfortable being out. I find it really empowering."

Whether or not they feel empowered, gay and lesbian travelers almost always feel welcome at ski resorts, according to gay skier John McGill, owner of Dallas-based

PR firm StraightOut Media & Marketing. "One of the things I love about ski resorts is the character of the people they tend to attract," says McGill, a Chicagoland native and founder of Telluride Gay Ski Week in Telluride, Colo. "The people who live in ski towns just seem a little more laid back. They celebrate nature, and they celebrate diversity. It's live and let live. They're just wonderful."

While most ski resorts are gay friendly, the following five destinations have an above-and-beyond reputation for waving the rainbow flag. Although it's late in the season, there's still plenty of time to hit their slopes—or to begin planning for next year.

1. Aspen

For gay and lesbian travelers, perhaps the best time to experience the slopes is during one of more than 20 gay ski weeks that take place all season long at the world's most popular ski resorts. Typically hosted by private promoters, they offer much more than sport. In addition to skiing and snowboarding, for instance, Aspen Gay Ski Week—the world's oldest gay ski week, which this year celebrated its 33rd birthday in Aspen, Colo.—offers an entire week of activities in mid- to late January, including films, comedy and music, not to mention a "Battle of the Sexual Preferences" ice hockey match and a cross-dressing ski-off called the Drag Downhill. Think Disney Gay Days on ice.

Known as a high-fashion celebrity hotspot—Ralph Lauren famously designed the Aspen ski patrol's uniforms—staying and skiing in Aspen can be pricey. If you're on a budget, French therefore recommends staying in Aspen's sister city, Snowmass, Colo. "[Aspen] tends to draw more upscale gay skiers and snowboarders," he says. "What a lot of people don't realize is that Snowmass, which is about a 20-minute

drive from the town of Aspen, has a lot of affordable hotels and a huge, incredible ski area." (www.gayskiweek.com)

2. Telluride

Approximately 200 miles south of Aspen is Telluride, Colo., which hosts the country's newest gay ski week every year during the last week of February. Founded by McGill in 2004, Telluride Gay Ski Week—named the country's "Top Gay Ski Week" by Gay.com—hosts a party on the slopes every day and a party off them every night. What sets the festival apart, however, is its charity element, according to McGill, who's hosting Judy Shepard at this year's event, which benefits the Matthew Shepard Foundation.

"Telluride's probably one of the most liberal cities in the country," McGill says. "The town of Telluride is an old mining village that looks very much like it did back in the 1800s; they don't allow any chains there, so it's all Mom-and-Pop stores. From there, you take a gondola up the mountain and halfway down the other side to the town of Mountain Village, which is very European. It's two totally different experiences connected by a gondola that runs from 7 a.m. until midnight every night—or 1 a.m. during Gay Ski Week." (www.telluridegayskiweek.com)

3. Jackson Hole

Although it's not a regular on the Gay Ski Week circuit, Jackson Hole, Wyo., is a Ski Bums favorite, according to French. "Jackson Hole, Wyo., has been by far one of the best resorts we've worked with," he says. "We took 40 people there this year and the staff absolutely rolled out the red carpet for us."

Even though it's in the middle of a state that's as red as it is square, Jackson Hole is Brokeback Mountain meets Aspen. Because it lacks the gay nightlife that makes other destinations so appealing, however, it's more suited to outdoorsmen than club kids. Its proximity to Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks means you can supplement skiing—Jackson Hole has three ski areas to choose from—with snowboarding, snowshoeing, snowmobiling and even dogsledding. Or, if you'd rather live it up than rough it, warm up at the posh Amangani—one of the world's best hotels, according to Travel + Leisure—which has a private ski lounge, as well as a health center offering massages for burned-out skiers. (www.jacksonhole.com)

4. Whistler

If you've got Olympic fever, you'll want to check out Whistler, British Columbia. Not only is it the site of the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympic Games, but it's also home



to WinterPRIDE, the world's largest gay ski week. Taking place during the first week of March, it promises an action-packed schedule of events, including dinners, wine tastings, safer-sex clinics, bar crawls and snowmobile tours, not to mention several events for women only—a rare find at gay ski weeks—plus over 8,100 acres of Olympian-approved skiing. Because British Columbia legalized gay marriage in 2003, you can even tie the knot after you test the terrain. (www.gaywhistler.com)

5. Stowe

Newspaper editor Horace Greeley famously said, "Go west, young man." If it's gay-friendly skiing you're after, however, you can just as easily go east, to Stowe, Vt. Although it hosts its gay ski week, Winter Rendezvous, in late January, Stowe's a popular GLBT destination all year round, according to French. "The town of Stowe has made a concerted effort to draw gay and lesbian travelers," he says. "It's a charming town with great hotels and a really nice New England feel to it. It's got a lot of local shops and galleries and restaurants, and the mountain has incredible terrain."

Visit www.winterrendezvous.com for more information.



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Joy Hammerman, R. PH.