

SLIDE RIGHT UP

NEW LIFTS, NO CROWDS, AND ENDLESS TERRAIN –
BIG SKY DIALS IN THE SKIER'S SKI VACATION. BY JUSTIN PAUL



JON RESNICK

Big Sky's Ramcharger 8 was North America's first eight-person lift.



Dropping into the Pinnacles and (opposite) a midmountain lunch at Everett's 8800.

ON A BLUEBIRD DAY, from the top of Lone Peak you can see clear to Yellowstone and the Tetons to the south, Idaho to the west, and across who knows how many hundreds of square miles of Montana wilderness and ranchlands in other directions. But it's not the horizon that draws my gaze: I can't stop looking down; nearly 2,000 vertical feet of pillowy, wind-loaded snow spread out below me – and that's before you hit the tree line. Wide-open Liberty Bowl beckons to the right, as do the more steeply pitched Lenin and Marx runs to the left, in a sort of geopolitical battle for some of the country's preeminent high-alpine resort skiing.

"This look good to you?" my mountain guide asks on our second lap up to the top, nodding toward Lenin. With

that, we're off – and I mean *Off*. A few hundred yards down the 11,000-foot peak, he smiles as I pull up beside him to catch my breath, grappling with the altitude. "We don't turn as much up here as you do on Pacific Northwest slopes," he says with a shrug. "Tires you out."

It's about as good an introduction as you could get to Big Sky, the third-largest ski resort in the U.S. behind Park City and Palisades Tahoe. An hour's drive south of Bozeman, the mountain is known for wide-open, big-mountain skiing up top and prime glades, bumps, and cruisers lower down. Guests have their pick of more than 5,800 acres that go from "Let's take this one easy" to "I'm up for the challenge" to "Warren Miller-caliber insanity." (Keep your eyes trained on the upper chutes

and mountain-goat paths, and you'll likely see seasoned locals and visiting crazies hitting what could be considered audition reels.)

What Big Sky *isn't* known for is equally delightful: crowds. Thanks to its size and lack of a nearby major city and interstate feeding it weekend warriors, it's a welcome respite from the Summit County and Utah resort scenes. "What sets Big Sky apart from other resorts is the feeling that I have the whole run to myself," says Rick Reichsfeld, president of ski-vacation tour operator Alpine Adventures, who has skied at more than 100 resorts in 15 countries. "You can let your guard down without worrying about somebody running into you, even in high season."

The latter fact makes Big Sky's slopes especially appealing to families and

Outdoors

beginner-intermediates, who have a wide variety of terrain spread across the lower mountain rather than being hemmed into one area, as is the case at some resorts. And the impressive lift system – including three with heated seats and windscreens to protect against the Northern Rockies' wind-chill – cuts lines to a fraction of what you'd expect in high season, making it easy to bounce around the hill. Bonus: This season, the new 75-passenger Lone Peak Tram replaces its 15-passenger predecessor, reducing what was perhaps the mountain's only choke point. Work is also underway on a new gondola that will provide direct access to the tram from the resort's base.

In fact, until recently, Big Sky's biggest ding was its dearth of high-end accommodations and amenities. Aside from the billionaire-beloved Yellowstone Club, a private residential estate and ski resort on the mountain's east flank, it was about what you'd expect



Stay More, *Save More*

15% off 3-4 night stays

20% off 5+ night stays

*50% non-refundable deposit required at time of booking
One date change allowed | Other restrictions apply*



Please book travel through a
Virtuoso Travel Agency or Advisor.

THE
ESTATE
YOUNTVILLE



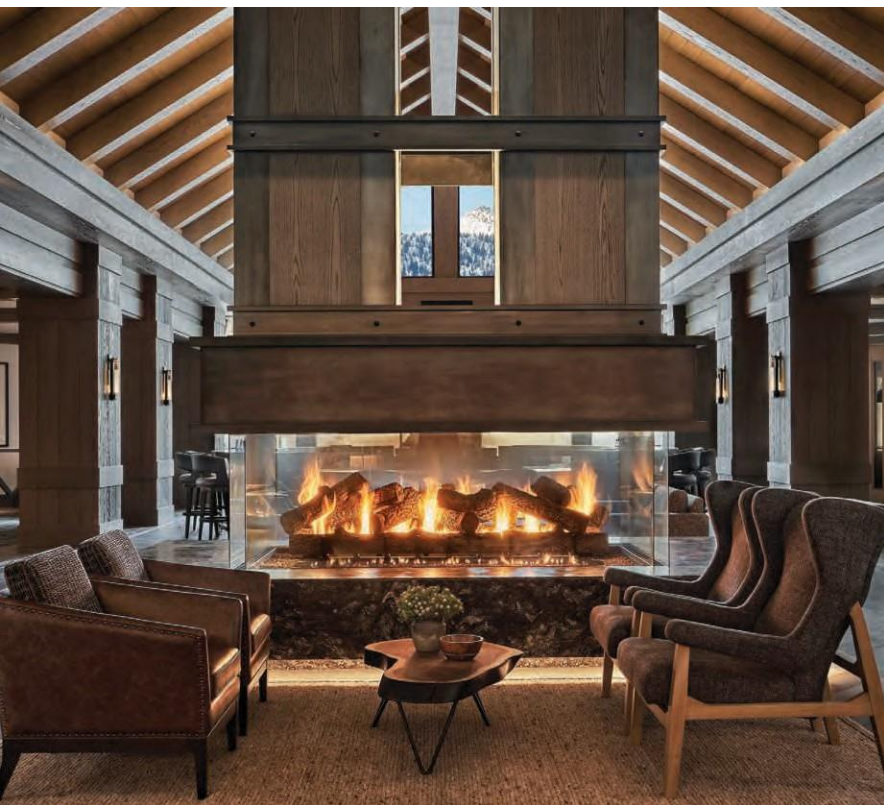
A reigning champ of Lone Peak and (opposite) Montage's Alpenglöw bar.

for a no-attitude mountain in western Montana. That changed in late 2021, when the Montage resort opened adjacent to the Yellowstone Club, complete with a bowling alley, tubing hill, and small army of ski concierges to ready guests' gear each morning. The mountain is primed to receive another boost when One&Only opens its first U.S. property on Moonlight Basin next season. But even if the rush is on, Big Sky will never be Aspen or Telluride. Skiers looking for rollicking après-ski or nightlife and walkable Wild West mountain towns will mostly find themselves poling the flats.

NEARLY 23,000 vertical feet and 39 miles covered since the day's first lift, I hand my boots to Montage's ski concierge to be dried and warmed for the next day and, on a tip, make the 20-minute drive to The Riverhouse BBQ. In its gravel parking lot on the bank of the Gallatin River, six-wheeled pickups with Montana plates outnumber rental SUVs. Inside the lodgelike space, metal beer and highway signs fill the wood-paneled walls.

A crew sporting Carhartts and fleece-lined jean jackets holds down part of the packed bar, while servers carry heaping Hill Country-style plates out to lifties from the mountain, college spring-breakers, and dozens of others decked out in pom-pom beanies, Cotopaxi puffers, and souvenir sweat-shirts repping favorite ski towns. It seems like half the mountain is here – and by 9:30, out the door.

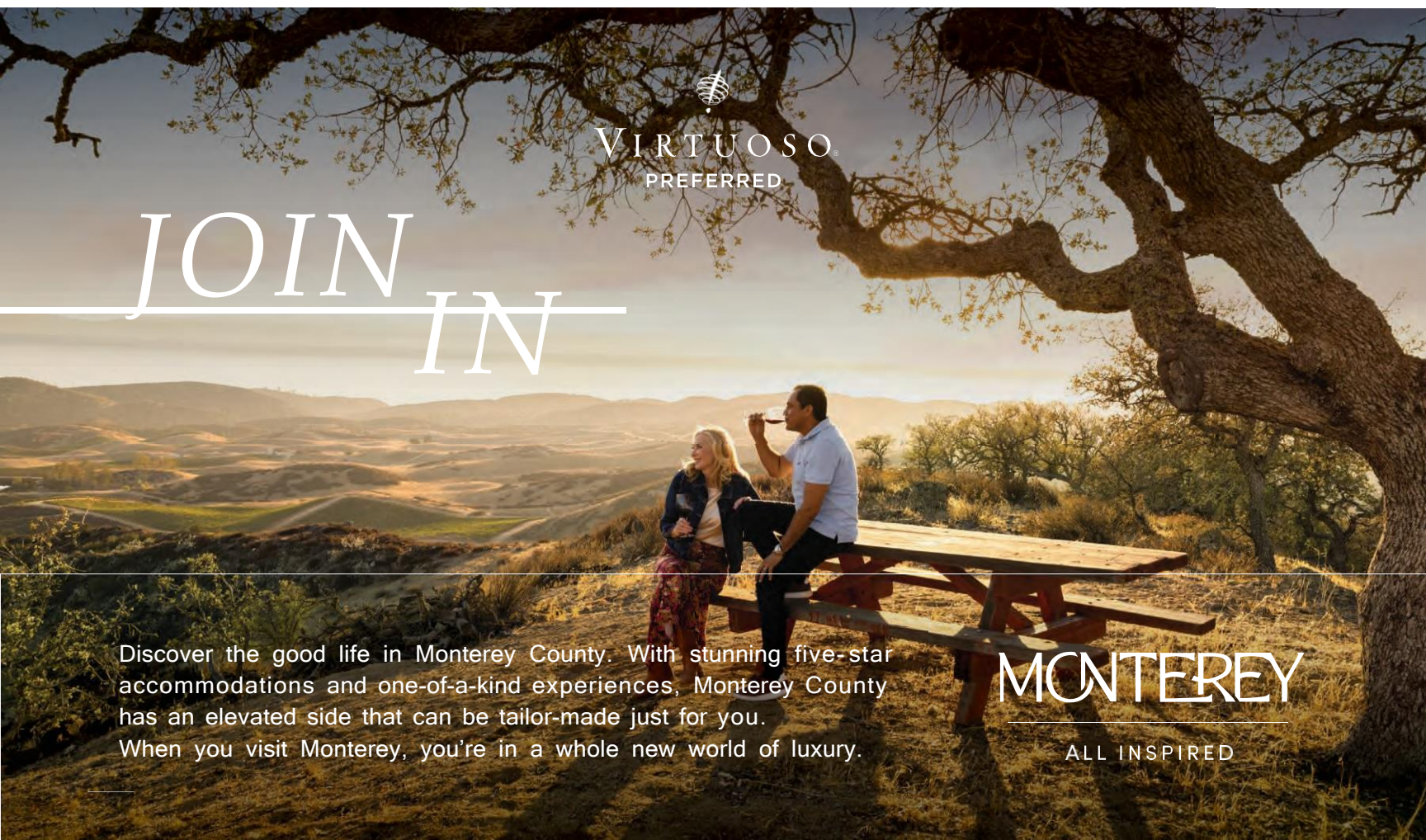
By the time I drive back through Town Center, the local-favorite craft brewery, top Neapolitan pizzeria, and sushi lounge have long since called it a night. Big Sky goes to bed early and rises a little more fresh-legged for it – a rarity among ski resort towns. Staring down from Lone Peak, an occasional hoot rising from someone unseen below, I'll take every advantage to get in on its secrets.



Break for Big Sky

STAY The 39-room Montage Big Sky opened as the mountain's sole luxury resort, with indoor and outdoor pools, a spa, and fine-dining Cortina, featuring northern Italian dishes and Montana fish and game. This season, the resort will offer kids' group lessons at its on-site ski hill during the holiday season and Presidents' Day weekend; on other dates, kids' club staff will provide round-trip transportation to the ski school's base at Mountain Village. *Doubles from \$570, including breakfast daily and a \$100 resort credit.*

GO Snow-sports specialist Alpine Adventures arranges custom ski vacations for groups of any size - from couples to entire ski clubs - at resorts in more than 22 countries. Sample Big Sky trips include six nights for two adults at Montage Big Sky or a condo for a family of four on the edge of Mountain Village - both are ski-in/ski-out and include five days of lift tickets, ski or snowboard rentals, and a rental car from Bozeman. *From \$18,989 and \$11,979, respectively.*



VIRTUOSO
PREFERRED

JOIN
IN

Discover the good life in Monterey County. With stunning five-star accommodations and one-of-a-kind experiences, Monterey County has an elevated side that can be tailor-made just for you. When you visit Monterey, you're in a whole new world of luxury.

MONTEREY

ALL INSPIRED