

TRAVEL

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A skier goes down a trail at Breckenridge Ski Resort in Breckenridge, Colorado. Most of the largest ski resorts in the US are in the western part of the country.

PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

EAST vs WEST: WHICH RESORTS HAVE THE BEST SKIING?

Eastern and western North America offer vastly different skiing experiences

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Long before settling amid the soaring peaks of southwestern Colorado, where she helped create a ski experience unlike any other in North America, Jen Brill learned to carve turns on blue ice at some of the better known ski resorts in the east.

"I remember seeing sheets of ice for hundreds of feet [meters] and just trying to hold on," Brill recalled.

No longer does Brill concern herself with what eastern skiers sometimes refer to with a bit of humor and hyperbole as "bullet proof" ice.

At Silverton — the ski area Brill opened with her husband, Aaron, 10 years ago — the only ice she sees is a snow-dusted frozen cascade she sometimes cruises past on her snowboard while in powder up to her waist.

Silverton is buried under about 1,000cm of natural snowfall each year, so the only question about conditions there each day concerns the depth of snow on hill — belt-high or only knee-deep? The differences between skiing in eastern and western North America are significant and many: altitude, acreage, snow and weather are all different, starkly so at times.

Eastern skiers all have stories of fighting through miserable, face-stinging icy winds and generally wetter conditions that are more common at Appalachian elevations (usually between 300m to 1,200m) than in the higher, drier climes of the Rockies, where lifts carry skiers well beyond 3,000m above sea level.

But some of the best competitive skiers the US has ever produced — World Cup champion and Olympic medalist Bode Miller, for example — grew up carving turns in the Northeast, where skiers learn by necessity at an early age the kind of knee angle and weight transfer required for setting an edge in hardpack or ice.

Brill grew up in New York and her parents normally drove north for ski vacations in New England at places like Killington, Vermont.

If the wind-chill factor dropped close to minus 18° Celsius, or if skiers were getting pelted with sleet or freezing rain, she bundled up and got out there anyway.

"We drove four hours ... so my parents were like, 'You're going skiing no matter what,' and it made me tougher," Brill recalled.

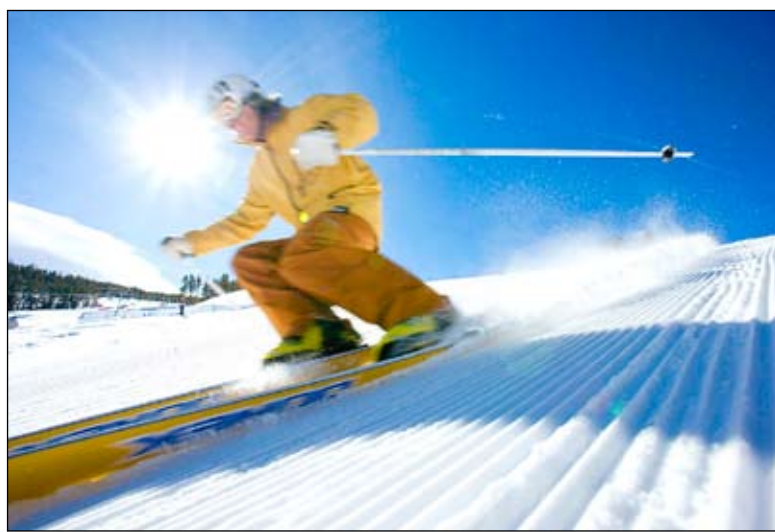
There are big-mountain experiences to be had in the east at places like Sugarloaf USA in Maine (860 vertical meters), where Miller and snowboard cross Olympic gold medalist Seth Wescott trained.

Most of the trails in the east are carved out below the tree line and are well defined. Because eastern ski areas rely heavily on snowmaking, venturing into the trees, even for the best skiers, can be difficult and dangerous much of the year, though certainly possible after a blizzard or later in the season during a good snow year.

Snowmaking has made the conditions at larger eastern resorts like Sunday River in Maine, or Stowe or Sugarbush in Vermont, very dependable. At Sunday River, more than 90 percent of the resort is open for skiing for about four solid months. Although there is snowmaking in the west as well, if it's a bad snow year, skiers may not be able to get to some of the best terrain in open bowls or in the trees, the things that make skiing in the west special.

Darcy Liberty, who grew up in Maine and now handles public relations for Sunday River, spent several years living in Colorado, working part of that time at Winter Park.

She describes eastern and western ski areas as "two different products." "I don't consider there to be direct competition between ski areas in the east and out west," she said. "Every ski area in the world is competing for skiers and snowboarders interested in the sport, but when it comes to daily operations, you're mostly looking for skiers in



A skier glides down a groomed run at Keystone Ski Resort in Keystone, Colorado. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

a specific radius." With its 1,900 snow guns, Sunday River was able to open as early as October this season.

As snowmaking capacity and grooming techniques have improved over the years, as lifts have become more modern, and as mountains have expanded their trail selections, skiing in the east has become progressively better, from places like Snowshoe, West Virginia, to Mont Sainte Anne in Quebec.

Snowmaking also allows eastern mountains to offer freestyle skiers and snowboarders half pipes and terrain parks as good as anywhere.

And certainly, the east has its share of glorious ski days — even a power day here and there. Spring skiing, when the snow really softens up, can be exceptional in the east and last into May in Maine.

Both sides of the continent have breathtaking scenery, but with differing contours — softer and more tree-lined in the East, while western ranges like the San Juans or Tetons inspire awe with their sharply rising rock-faced, above-tree line peaks.

Neither side of the US has a monopoly on charming mountain towns, though again, there are differences.

Just outside Sunday River sits Bethel, a more than 200-year-old community which "epitomizes the cute New England town," Liberty says. In the White Mountains of New Hampshire, Jackson and North Conway are both renowned for their rustic appeal, stunning views of the famous Presidential Range and proximity to ski areas like Wildcat and Black Mountain.

A number of ski towns in the Rockies — such as Crested Butte, Breckenridge or Aspen — were initially founded as mining towns, the legacy of which are main streets lined with impressive Victorian-style facades. Some western towns like Steamboat, Colorado, also have natural hot springs nearby.

Still, most of the largest ski areas in the US are out west.

Jackson Hole, Wyoming, for example, has a new tram on which skiers glide in only nine minutes up 1,200m of vertical. From the top, wide-open snow-filled bowls await, offering the impression that one could take countless runs, choosing their own ways down each time, without covering the same ground twice. And because the snow is so deep and forgiving, dropping two stories off a rock ledge into a renowned chute known as Corbet's Couloir is not quite as scary as it looks, though still not advisable for anyone other than an expert.



People ski down a freshly groomed trail at Beaver Creek Ski Resort in Beaver Creek, Colorado. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

Skiers looking for a more manageable drop from 2.5m to 3m cornices into dreamy fields of power can always head for the back bowls of Vail.

The moguls are much bigger and, perhaps more importantly, softer, in the west. The Mary Jane section of Winter Park, Colorado, is known for moguls sometimes referred to as "VW Beetles." At Silverton, the snow is so deep that skiers aren't allowed on the slopes without wearing a homing beacon and a backpack that includes a small shovel and extendable pole called a probe.

Silverton staff use a helicopter to plant explosives which clear avalanche dangers, then let skiers willing to pay a little extra ride the helicopter for quick access to areas not served by the mountain's lone lift.

Brill has skied in the east only once in the last decade, to meet an old friend for a day. Yet, as far as learning to ski in the east when she was young, she sees that as a badge of honor.

"Skiing back east gave me confidence and comfort in all conditions," she said. Remembering a day when life attendants in Vermont handed out trash bags for skiers to cover themselves in the rain, she added: "Skiers back east aren't as picky." In the end, though, those who truly love snow sports will be happy on slopes in either region.

"Learning to ski and snowboard in the east was beneficial to going out west. It made me better at both," Liberty says. "Once you have those skills down pat, it's another fun playground."