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Everything under the sun

Idaho's Sun Valley is the place to put on your family's ski and snowboard radar in upcoming seasons, writes Aussie-born, US-based **BRIAN THACKER.**

Sun Valley has a lot to celebrate. This season (2020/21) marked the 85th anniversary of Sun Valley being the oldest destination ski resort in the USA (and home to the world's first chairlift). It also added 153 hectares of new terrain – featuring expert-level chutes, glades and bowls – along with the new high-speed Broadway quad lift. And the icing on the cake? It was voted the number-one ski resort in North America in *SKI Magazine's* 2021 Annual Ski Resort Awards, the Oscars of skiing, topping the list in an impressive five categories, including Grooming, Lifts, Character, Overall Satisfaction and Kid-Friendly.

This remote yet idyllic pocket of Central Idaho has so much to offer, including a charming town with rural flair, a crazy amount of vertical, skiing history around every corner, a dedicated kid's mountain and no crowds. In fact, sometimes it feels as if you have the entire mountain to yourself.

Under the radar

On my first day I went skiing with Cooper Morton, **Sun Valley Resort's** Director of Stoke (yes, as in 'get stoked'). Cooper heads up the resort's social media and knows the mountain back to front. We cruised all morning around Sun Valley's main ski area, Bald Mountain (or 'Baldy' to the locals), skiing down long tree-cut runs and wide-open bowls under the jagged, snow-capped peaks of the Sawtooth Range.

"It isn't easy to get to," Cooper told me when I asked why the resort was so quiet. "So we get a lot of people from Los Angeles and Seattle because there are direct flights, but not many international visitors. Sun Valley is just under the radar."

Not for that much longer, methinks.

Bald Mountain is a great place for kids (and intermediate adults) to practice their turns. "It has the perfect constant pitch," Cooper commented – and it certainly does. Plus the runs are ridiculously long, which means you



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Jingle bells

Book a 30-minute sleigh ride (cuddled under a heap of warm blankets) through the countryside to the log-cabin-turned-restaurant Trail Creek Cabin for dinner. It's a multiple course dinner, but also includes dishes like burgers and chocolate cake for the kids.

Sun Valley Report Card

Info sunvalley.com

Getting there and around There are short non-stop flights direct to Hailey Airport from LA and San Francisco and it's only 20 minutes by shuttle to Ketchum (both Sun Valley Lodge and Limelight Hotel offer free shuttles to and from the airport). There is no need to rent a car in Sun Valley either, as Mountain Rides' buses are free and include regular services. mountainrides.org

Where to stay

Step back in time at the luxurious and glamorous Sun Valley Lodge. sunvalley.com

Stay in the centre of town and just a four-minute drive to Bald Mountain at the ultra-modern, family-friendly Limelight Hotel Ketchum.

limelighthotels.com/ketchum

Heli-skiing Sun Valley is one of only four ski resorts in continental America with heli-skiing, and Sun Valley Heli Ski was the first (over 50 years old) and features the largest acreage of any operator. With terrain to suit even intermediates, it's the ultimate ski experience and, with a maximum of four guests, you could make it a family day out that you'll never forget. sunvalleyheliski.com

ski a lot. Add to that no lift lines (the longest I waited was about two minutes), and I managed to rack up 12,000 vertical metres (a personal record) on my first day.

The golden age of Hollywood (and skiing)

You can't escape the history and understated glamour of Sun Valley. From the moment I walked into the 1930s-inspired foyer of Sun Valley Lodge, I felt like I was walking onto a classic Hollywood set. When the lodge opened as America's first dedicated ski hotel in 1936, it immediately became a hot spot for A-list celebrities, including Clark Gable, Marilyn Monroe and Ernest Hemingway – who finished *For Whom the Bell Tolls* while staying in room 206. I spent ages wandering the corridors of the hotel gazing at framed photos of stars, which included Bing Crosby performing in the courtyard and Tom Hanks drinking at the bar.

There is certainly enough at Sun Valley Lodge to keep the whole family amused, with an ice rink, bowling alley, extensive spa and fitness centre, and the famous signature round heated outdoor pool – where I spent a blissful hour trying to soak away my tired muscles.

Kid's mountain

It's actually called Dollar Mountain, but at Sun Valley, kids (and beginners) get their very own mountain. Over the years, Dollar Mountain has repeatedly been ranked among the best places to learn to ski, and it's easy to see why. Rising just 150 vertical metres and virtually treeless, there is no trail to veer off and very little to hit.

"Parents don't lose their kids, either," Cooper remarked as we sat in the sun outside Carol's Dollar Mountain Lodge – one of the rather grandiose day lodges on the mountain – looking up at children sliding happily down the mountain. He added, "This is paradise for kids."

I couldn't agree more. ●