



Skiing in North America can be ‘extortionate.’ Here’s where to save money while not scrimping on snow and stoke

By Terry Ward, December 23, 2024

Anyone who’s skied at a major North American resort in recent years might have experienced as much sticker shock as fresh snow.

Lift ticket prices at many resorts in the United States and Canada are dynamic, which means they adjust in real time according to demand. And price points are often alarming – especially compared with what it [costs to ski in Europe](#).

Peak-day pricing for single-day lift tickets at Colorado’s [Beaver Creek](#) over the upcoming holiday period shows more than \$300 for same-day lift tickets on December dates leading up to Christmas Day. That’s true at [Vail](#) and at [Park City](#) in Utah, too.

“If you don’t plan ahead, in the US especially, it becomes prohibitively expensive for families to go skiing. It’s become extortionate,” says Julia Schneemann, senior editor of online ski magazine [SnowBrains](#).

She points to 2008 and the introduction of Vail Resorts’ Epic Pass (an unlimited season pass for use at multiple resorts) as the point in history when [daily lift ticket prices](#) at many US resorts “exploded.”

Indeed, season pass holders – who can save substantially on the amount they end up paying per visit – [made up 50%](#) of skier and rider visits across the United States during the 2023/2024 season (compared with 31% of visits from standard day or multiday ticket holders), according to [National Ski Areas Association](#) statistics.

North America-bound skiers should look to smaller, independently owned resorts in the United States and Canada to get the best prices, Schneemann says.

“Smaller resorts have a lot to offer people who want to go for a spontaneous trip and don’t want to end up spending two or three thousand dollars for a family,” says Schneemann.

Today’s widespread dynamic pricing model on lift tickets takes its lead from the airline industry, says Dan Sherman of ski travel agency [Ski.com](#), which sells ski vacation packages that include lift tickets, lodging and more. The greater the demand, the higher lift ticket prices soar.

“The worst thing people can do is walk up to the ticket window and buy a lift ticket the day that they’re going skiing. And that is intentional,” Sherman says.

But there are many resorts across the United States and Canada where the snow is great and lift ticket prices — even the last-minute walk-up ones — are well below the \$300 mark that many of the big-name resorts are commanding.

Many max out at roughly \$125 a day for walk-up lift tickets and can often cost quite a bit less.

Here are some stellar mountains to consider.

Brundage Mountain, Idaho

Vertical drop: 1,921 feet

Skiable acres: 1,920 acres lift-accessed terrain

Max ticket window lift ticket price: \$125 per day

Just north of the lakeside resort town of McCall in west central Idaho, [Brundage Mountain](#) is a favorite among freeride skiers and snowboarders. Guided snowcat trips into [18,000 acres](#) of backcountry terrain within Payette National Forest make untracked bowls and powdery tree-lined glades accessible. The resort’s six lifts access 70 named trails where snowy conditions are standard — the base area averages 320 inches (813 centimeters) of annual snowfall, with steeper and deeper conditions the higher up the mountain you go.

While there’s no lodging at the base of the mountain, you can stay 15 minutes away in McCall at the [Shore Lodge](#) on Payette Lake. There are thermal waters to dip into at the hotel, but it’s worth heading out on a [snowmobiling tour](#) (the only way there in winter) to reach [Burgdorf Hot Springs](#), where balmy water pumps out from springheads into rustic pools.