

# Cheap Skiing Guide™

Special Adventure Edition

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**B**arring weather, which is inarguably beyond any open-air resort's control<sup>1</sup>, what *is* it that makes a skiing or riding experience awesome? The answer typically considers variables such as surface conditions, accessibility, and accommodations but the principal one is invariably the individual skier or rider's preference. The inexperienced downhill enthusiast may be most comfortable on the long, wide cruisers that meander circuitously from top to bottom. To the intermediate, the answer may be broad, open, and moderately or somewhat sharply sloped corduroy pursuing a consistent and resplendent downward path and offering spectacular vistas from peak to base. The more advanced may prefer the steep, soft, bumps underneath the chairlift where one can silently boast (or publicly humiliate) his or her skills. Or, to the extreme skier or rider, it may be the challenge of ungroomed, naturally covered terrain falling precipitously through sheer chutes or glades—those steeps that make the feint-of-heart, weak-in-the-knees.

This year, we discovered that Crested Butte Mountain Resort (CBMR), although noted for having some of the steepest and the most lift-served extreme terrain in North America, has something to offer everyone. Trail names like Headwall, Banana Funnel, Dead End Chute, and Body Bag (NOT posthumously named for those who died trying it) conjure intimidating images that might cause the less-than-confident gravity-rider to consider his or her options but, surprisingly, CBMR also has much larger areas of intermediate and beginner terrain than we expected.

Mineral Point, Roller Coaster, Keystone, and several other trails under the Red Lady Express detachable quad offer wide and gentle, green-circle laps for beginners or those practicing new skills. Twenty-three percent of the mountain's trails are



*The trees in Flat Iron are less intimidating than the pitch of the trail.*

beginner terrain. Most of the trails through Paradise Bowl or under the East River lift are groomed daily and offer stunning views and a great cruising environment. Over half—fifty-seven percent—of CBMR's trails are intermediate. And, there are plenty of black diamond laps, like International, Crystal, Twister, and Jokerville that are respectably steep but groomed from top to bottom—perfect for those who enjoy carving high-speed GS turns. For you powder hounds, even without a fresh storm, we found gently sloping, hidden treasure troves of unscarred snow through the trees between the intermediate runs under Teocalli lift. But, if adrenaline is your drug of choice, CBMR offers some of the most extreme, lift served terrain on the continent.

The ultimate heavenly blessing for most skiers and riders is cornucopian snow; warm, clear sunny days are a close second. Our arrival at CBMR followed several record-breaking storms but a cloudless, deep-blue Colorado sky escorted us through our four-day tour. The bright, high-altitude sun cut through the cold air like a laser beam through darkness and, for us, venting heat was more of an issue than staying warm, especially while tearing up their extreme terrain (our weary legs might beg to differ about which tore up what). Timing was such that fresh, deep powder was harder to find but, without poaching closed trails or venturing out-of-bounds, we managed to locate some hidden caches. Our powder sensitive noses led us into thickets (thin by eastern standards) where shin- to knee-deep fluff was hiding. Occasionally, the terrain would level out and we'd immediately realize why there were no other tracks but we left only a few footprints on the mountain. We also found a few dead-ends, blocked by fallen trees, impenetrable thickets, or other progress obstructing challenges. Fortunately, CBMR provided us with an escort.



*North side view of Crested Butte from Painter Boy beginner area.*



*Crusing in the sunshine.*



*Massive halfpipe; spectacular vista.*

Annie Dyar, our accomplished guide (she placed third in the 2005 U.S. Extreme Freeskiing Championships), showed us all that Crested Butte has to offer. We followed her down a few black diamond groomers to warm up and get a feel for our loaned equipment. Crested Butte's rental shop put me on a pair of Salomon Guns and equipped Rob Vaughan, our esteemed photographer, with a Burton Air 165. The skis were fat underfoot and floated well but were also gnarly in the trees and bumps. Rob didn't offer a critical review of the board but was frequently heard generating puerile sounds of jubilation. Eventually, Annie led us to Headwall, a steep, challenging face that empties into Paradise Bowl and it was everything we'd hoped for—perhaps a bit more. The surface conditions were well-skied but consistent, always edge-able and never icy. Headwall looks a little intimidating on the way down but absolutely terrifying glancing back up from whence we came. Our photographs don't capture the sheer gradient. Sufficed to say, it was an adrenaline rush.

The Town of Crested Butte is a short, complimentary shuttle ride from the mountain and offers eclectic dining, intriguingly distinctive shopping, and characteristically western ambiance. Our first evening, we dined at The Secret Stash; an unusual avant-garde pizza parlor furnished with knee-high tables and

comfortable floor cushions. The steeply sloped walls were adorned with Hindu chintz and Asian tapestries. They make unique and exquisitely delicious food but I couldn't shake the feeling that I had somehow traveled back in time to my college years, some three and a half decades ago. Cuisine in the Town of Crested Butte is top notch but, surprisingly, we found some of the most notable gourmet food right on the mountain. Our first day out, we had lunch at Rustica, an elegant restaurant located at the base of the Paradise Express lift serving remarkable Italian food with a large selection of fine Italian wines, full bar, and an outdoor fire pit. We abstained from bar-beverages until après-ski. On another occasion, we ate at the Ice Bar and Restaurant situated at the base of the Twister Lift. It has an outdoor, full-bar made entirely of ice and, within a few steps, is the restaurant's spacious sun deck. From the outside, the adjacent A-frame restaurant appears almost prosaic but inside is a formal and stylish dining room serving haute cuisine.

Like many Western ski towns, the Town of Crested Butte has a rich anthropic history, born from Ute Indians, fur traders, and precious metal miners. Millions of dollars worth of gold was panned out of surrounding creeks and gulches and, soon after the gold began to peter, silver was discovered, during which time, the county's population swelled to nearly 40,000. Crested Butte survived many of the mining recessions as a railroad depot and supply town. Dick Eflin opened CBMR in 1961 with only one T-bar. It changed hands to Bo Callaway and Ralph Walton less than a decade later and eventually grew to over 1100 skiable acres with 15 lifts. In 2004, Tim and Diane Mueller, owners of Okemo Mountain in Ludlow, VT, bought CBMR and have poured (and continue to pour) millions into improvements, real estate development, and renovations. "Their investment and thoughtful approach to this resort have revitalized the entire valley." said April Prout, CBMR's Communications Director.

One of the more salient memories of our adventure was the infectious affability, pervasive everywhere we went. No one, except our gracious hosts, April Prout, and her assistant (our guide) Annie Dyar, knew we would be writing about them but everyone consistently expressed a sincerely warm welcome. Perhaps their friendliness was in response to the fixed grin we wore during our four-day outing. I think we even smiled in our sleep.

We have more images to share but couldn't fit them on these pages. Click [here](#) to view our gallery and if you'd like to download a short video of what it looks like riding through the trees, click [here](#). If you suspect this report is dubious and would like to check out Crested Butte Mountain Resort for yourself, call (888) 728-3575 and mention the Cheap Skiing Guide. They'll offer you a 15 percent discount on your ski package (possibly more depending on when you'd like to visit).

#### **(Footnote)**

<sup>1</sup>We thought our first sentence might beg the questions: Aren't all ski areas open air resorts? No; there is an indoor ski resort in Dubai and a couple in Japan.