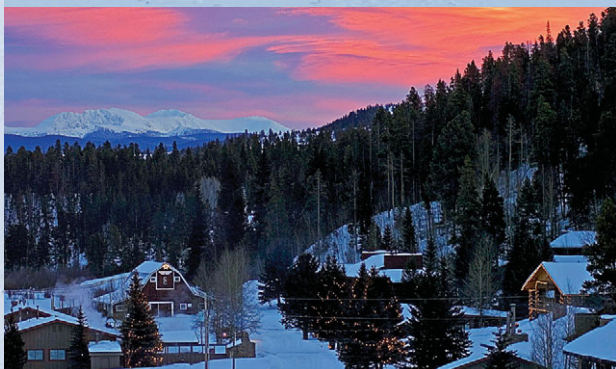




CAT RANCHES

Luxury needn't take a backseat when you're traversing uncharted terrain. Several upscale dude ranches in Colorado offer winter guests private cat-skiing.

The Lodge and Spa at Three Forks Ranch, a five-star property on the Colorado/Wyoming border with just 15 guest rooms, has 200,000 acres for its snowcats (threeforksranch.com). **Devil's Thumb Ranch Resort & Spa**, near Winter Park, also offers guests full-day cat-skiing nearby (devilsthumbbranch.com). And the highly regarded **C Lazy U Ranch** (pictured) in Granby has private cat-skiing (clazyu.com).



I've been heli-skiing a few times and cat-skiing several times but usually just for one day per trip, and I've never had to go far out of my way from a full-service resort. And yes, it is awesome — because of all that powder. I'd find myself laughing halfway down because I couldn't believe my good fortune. The average heli-skiing operation puts a couple dozen skiers per day in an area several times the size of Vail (the nation's largest single-mountain ski resort). Not to mention, there's also a permanent grin on my face when I'm skiing powder like that every run.

"You might go to Telluride, get a couple of days in at the resort and say, 'Hey, let's try heli-skiing tomorrow,'" says Dan Sherman of Ski.com. That's what Pat Gallagher, a financial executive in New York, did. "I'd always wanted to try heli-skiing, but I was not about to ditch my family and go off on a week's vacation I might not even enjoy. We were all in Jackson, and I learned you could heli-ski by the day, right from the resort. Conditions weren't great on the trails — it hadn't snowed in a while — so I tried it. There was so much acreage and so few people that we still had untracked powder from the last storm, over a week before, every run. It was my best ski day ever."

I went cat-skiing for the first time a decade ago and the change in equipment since then has been phenomenal. "Ten years ago skiing was divided

between resort skiers and backcountry skiers,” says Sam Moulton, executive editor at *Outside* magazine. “In the last decade everyone has been racing toward the middle ground. Today’s fatter, rockered skis have made powder skiing much easier — and much more fun — for everyone, expert or intermediate. And resorts have wisely latched onto that.” Some resorts now offer these experiences in even smaller doses, as little as a single snowcat run or half-day heli-trip.

There are three main alternatives to lift-served skiing you can find at resorts. Heli-skiing, the *crème de la crème*, has more vertical runs starting above treeline and faster ascents (about \$1,000 per day). Snowcats, basically buses with treads, offer the same great powder conditions, but with slower ascents and shorter runs. They usually begin below treeline and are typically less technically demanding, rarely affected by weather, and cost from \$400 to \$500. A few

resorts offer private, guided “side-country” programs that take skiers into the wilderness adjacent to the ski resort, sometimes using lifts for easier access. In general, cat-skiing requires the least expertise and is often available to solid intermediates, but even daily heli trips are not as daunting as they might appear, with some aimed squarely at intermediates.

In all three cases, guests are provided fatter powder skis and avalanche transceivers and are led by experienced guides. And in all three cases the reward is the same: deep, unbroken powder on every run. “Anyone who has ever taken a turn in real resort powder knows how great a feeling that is — and how hard it is to find,” says Sherman. “But with heli- or cat-skiing, it is going to be like that every turn, every run, all day-long. If you take a week’s vacation, there is no way to guarantee it will snow 20 inches, but with these day trips, that powder is almost guaranteed.” ❏

