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SKI GUIDE 2010

Affordable Skiing: Wolf Creek



Scott Smith/Wolf Creek Resort

Jonathan Bell skis through heavy snow at Wolf Creek Ski Resort near Wolf Creek Pass, Colo.

By CINDY HIRSCHFELD
Published: December 13, 2009

Wolf Creek doesn't get much buzz, but [Colorado](#) skiers know this family-run gem gets some of the heaviest snowfall in the state. The mountain may sport a modest 1,604 feet of vertical, yet almost every cranny of its 1,600 acres is skiable, with terrain ranging from perfectly pitched groomers to hair-raising steeps, and all sorts of natural gullies and jumps beloved by snowboarders. Sure, you won't find megaresort amenities like electronic ticketing or fancy lodges (the base area has just five humble structures). But you won't find megaresort prices, either. Rather, Wolf Creek is a charmingly retro alternative that is supremely affordable.

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HOW TO GET THERE Wolf Creek is in rural southwestern Colorado, and getting there may be the biggest expense. The nearest commercial airport is Durango-La Plata County Airport, about 80 miles west, which services three routes: **Frontier** and **United** from Denver and **US Airways** from Phoenix. A recent Web search showed airfares from Kennedy Airport on United starting at about \$340 for travel in January. A rental car is required to get around Pagosa Springs, the quiet town where most of the hotels are situated.


WHERE TO STAY There are no hotels or condos at the base of Wolf Creek. The nearest lodging is in the blink-and-you'll-miss-it town of

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Related: [2009 Ski Guides](#) » South Fork, 18 miles east of Wolf Creek. But Pagosa Springs, in the other direction, has more restaurants and other amenities. Rooms for under \$100 are easy to find.

In Pagosa Springs, the charming **Fireside Cabins** (1600 East Route 160; 888-264-9204; www.firesidecabins.com) has 15 log-style units that offer Old West touches like spurs and saddles, without the kitsch. Each cabin, which sleeps from four to six, is equipped with a kitchenette and gas fireplace and starts at \$114. Ask for a cabin set back from the highway.

For more contemporary digs, try the **Mountain Landing Guest Quarters** (345 Piedra Road; 877-301-4129, extension 5345; www.mountainlanding.net). Occupying three low-slung buildings, the hotel has 13 suites, each equipped with kitchenettes and simply furnished with quilts on the beds. A one-bedroom starts at \$90.

In South Fork, the 43-room **Allington Inn and Suites** (182 East Frontage Road; 800-285-6590; www.allingtoninn.com) is a newer, chain-style motel with clean but generic rooms, indoor pool and hot tub. Rooms start at \$72, but specials for as low as \$57 can be found on its Web site.

LIFT TICKETS Daily lift tickets are a very retro \$52, and on 14 days the price drops to \$31 for no apparent reason except that it's Local Appreciation Day (no proof of residency required). The deal is even better for cross-country skiers: free access all season to six miles of groomed trails adjacent to the base area. [Ski](#) rental is just \$14 a day (\$35 for three days).

WHERE TO EAT Before you snap into your skis, stop at the **Junction** restaurant on the east side of Pagosa Springs (401 East Pagosa Street; 970-264-5729), where two massive elk heads greet diners and you can fuel up on big breakfast dishes like a Spanish omelet with hash browns and toast (\$6.95).

Wolf Creek has two ski-in cafeterias that offer hearty fare on the cheap. The best deal is arguably the daily skier's special (\$7.50), which includes an entree like spaghetti or pork loin, a side and your pick of homemade desserts. Brown-baggers are welcome in the base camp picnic building.

For dinner, **Kip's Grill & Cantina** (121 Pagosa Street; 970-264-3663; www.kipsgrill.com), which looks like a surf shack tucked inside a red-shingled cottage, serves seven types of Baja-style tacos (\$6.95 to \$9.95), as well as elk, buffalo and beef burgers (\$5.95 to \$8.95). The margaritas (\$5) are good, too. If après ski at the **Pagosa Brewing Company and Grill** (see below) spills over into dinnertime, order the crispy wild salmon fish and chips with a beer-laced batter (\$8.95), or one of the specialty pizzas (from \$12.95), topped with mozzarella and Manchego cheeses.

APRÈS SKI The base lodge doesn't offer much of an après-ski scene; it closes at 4:30 p.m. You're better off in town, where **Pagosa Brewing** (118 North Pagosa Boulevard; 970-731-2739; www.pagosabrewing.com) brews a dozen varieties of beer, including the popular Powder Day IPA (\$5 a pint). On busy evenings, outdoor fire pits are set up in the garden area. Happy hour, when pints are \$1 off, starts at 8 p.m.

Even the spas are cheap here. The **Springs Resort and Spa** (165 Hot Springs Boulevard; 800-225-0934; www.pagosahotsprings.com) has 23 hot springs pools, where you can soak for as long as you want for \$20. The

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WHERE TO SHOP For stocking up on groceries, the two full-service **City Market** stores in Pagosa Springs are your best bet for price and selection (65 North Pagosa Boulevard; 970-731-6000; and 755 San Juan Drive; 970-264-2217). **Treasure Sports** (970-264-4310) at the base of the mountain stocks essentials like sun block, goggles and souvenir T-shirts with photos of the ski patrol's six avalanche dogs.

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