

Skiing by Moonlight

Moonlight Basin becomes Montana's newest ski area

BY BRIAN SCHOTT



The lodge at Moonlight Basin

In a wide-open bowl near Big Sky, Montana's newest ski area has taken shape. Moonlight Basin opened for skiing this winter with three lifts, including Montana's only high-speed six-passenger chairlift and nearly 1,500 acres of terrain. Total lift-served vertical descent in the resort's first winter of operations is about 1,850 feet. In-bounds hiking terrain, offering guests access to an additional 1,200 feet of vertical descent, is also available. A new beginner lift will service terrain for novices.

The resort has been blessed with good snow and ample skier visits in its premier season. "It's been going great," says Laura Cox, director of marketing. "We're really excited about our first year," said Rich Hohne, vice president of sales and marketing for Moonlight Basin. "Our terrain is beautiful and all north facing, and there are some incredible hiking areas. The variety covers the whole spectrum - from Mom, Dad and the kids on the corduroy to triple black diamond runs for the experts."

The new resort is on the north face of Lone Mountain, a peak that also serves as a landmark to Big Sky Resort. Moonlight Basin will share the Iron horse lift with Big Sky, as well as a few trails. >>>

Moonlight Basin is the brainchild of Montana natives Joe Vujovich and Lee Poole, and their Fort Lauderdale-based partner, Keith Brown.

Eleven years ago, the team acquired a 25,000 acre parcel of land from Plum Creek, a former subsidiary of the Burlington Northern Railroad. The land adjoins the Lee Metcalf Wilderness Area. The owners' goal is to preserve the land and "return as much of it as possible to its natural state, and ensure that development of select portions was carried forward in a responsible manner," Poole said.

The partners have set aside a large portion of the acreage as a preserve. About half of the land has already been placed in permanent conservation easements, and the ownership group is considering plans to provide permanent protection to additional areas.

The owners have begun making limited real estate development on the property, concentrating development on the northern edge of their property, which neighbors Big Sky.

Even before they opened Moonlight Basin, there were chairlifts built to provide access to a limited amount of ski terrain, and to provide access to Big Sky's trail network for homeowners. Big Sky resort had operated those lifts and

provided trail maintenance and patrol services, but after closer consideration, the partners felt the timing was right for the creation of Moonlight Basin as its own resort. This year, the resort added the six-passenger detachable chairlift and operated its growing lift and trail network independently of Big Sky.

When completed, the Moonlight Basin ski development will include approximately 2,500 acres of terrain and nearby homesites. The remainder will be preserved as forest and wildlife habitat.

"We're going to strive for a level of service that we think will be extraordinary," says Hohne. "We are also very affordable and



FACE FULL O'FLUFF: A skier drops into Moonlight Basin

Joe Irons

Montana-centered. Montanans are known for their friendliness - there will be a lot of touch points with our guests."

With \$39 adult lift tickets and a loyalty program that allows guests to bring back a pass from a previous visit to get \$5 off their next ticket. "We want to be the type of ski resort that people visit and say, 'I want to come back,'" says Hohne. •

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