

MONTANA

Whitefish Mountain Resort's Hell-roaring Basin

Like Skiing, northern Montana's Whitefish Resort (formerly Big Mountain) also celebrates its 60th birthday this year. Cheers. The rugged 1,000-acre forested Hellroaring Basin opened in 1995 and is the perfect place to throw down. Here's how to explore it. —BRIAN SCHOTT

1 SLING SHOT

When ski patrol drops the rope to the basin, dive into Sling Shot, but only if you get there first. This popular stash offers 500 feet at a sustained 35 degrees. Lay down 10 or 12 fast GS turns, then dial back, hit the high traverse, and veer right for creamy powder on the apron under the Picture Chutes.

2 PICTURE CHUTES

From the Hell Fire Traverse, carefully carve your way through the short open shot toward the chutes. Stay far skier's left for 30-foot cliffs or billygoat to the right, down one of six 10-foot-wide chutes that drip through a 100-foot vertical band of rocks. But do yourself a favor and scout the lines from below before you ski them.

3 GRAY'S GOLF COURSE

Veteran ski patroller John Gray wore the red jacket for 33 years and helped open Hellroaring in 1995. His Golf Course drops 1,000 feet and offers a variety of options, like the 10-foot drop off the Diving Board skier's left, or the sparse fir forest skier's right.

4 THE BACK 9

This area of tight trees and hidden passageways is the least explored in the basin. When the traverse bends right, hook left into the woods and navigate some of the lichen old-growth spruce glades. The snow piles up back here, which can help kill speed in the thick trees.

5 HELLROARING PEAK

Whitefish has an open-boundary policy that adds thousands of acres to the map. Duck the ropes off the traverse just past Gray's (it's legal) and skate the snowmobile tracks above the Hell Fire trail to an obvious saddle. Shoulder your skis for the 15-minute hike to Hellroaring Peak (not pictured), then take your pick of wide-open lines that dump you back inbounds, onto Hell Fire. Bring a friend, beacon, shovel, and probe, and check the avalanche conditions before you go. (glacieravalanche.org)

6 RADIO TOWER

The tower marks the basin's 6,830-foot summit. Tuck from the top of Chair 1 and point 'em onto the snowmobile trail before the Hell Fire Traverse breaks left. Hike out-of-bounds for five minutes, up 200 vertical feet past rime-encrusted trees. Then sample the powder between the tree wells and snow ghosts back to the traverse. It's a short shot, but the view from the towers is worth the effort.





KNOW THIS


Top elevation: 6,817 feet
 Bottom elevation: 4,464 feet
 Total vertical: 2,353 feet
 Total acreage: 3,000 acres
 Website: skiwhitefish.com
 Avy Info: glacieravalanche.org







 There are two ways back to the resort: a dicey 1.4-mile-long traverse called Highway to Heaven at the bottom of the Picture Chutes, or the lower half of Glory Hole and Hell Fire, a two-mile-long thigh burner.


 Whitefish Mountain Resort sits squarely in the northern Rockies. Catch it on a sunny day and you'll see the last of the glaciers clinging to sharp peaks in nearby Glacier National Park.


 On Wednesdays, ski patrol pours free beer and awards a prize to the resort employee who did the stupidest thing on the mountain that week at the dark Bierstube.

 Whitefish has a reputation for fog. But clouds mean snow, and they also preserve the south-facing slopes from sun melt.

 Sure, the resort celebrates its 60th birthday this winter, but ski pioneers

have climbed and schussed the mountain since the early 1930s.

 Hellroaring doesn't refer to the speed reached when you ski here. It's the creek that flows through this valley from the headwaters in the basin to Whitefish Lake.

 Grizzly bears emerge from hibernation around April 1—just five days before the area closes to skiers.