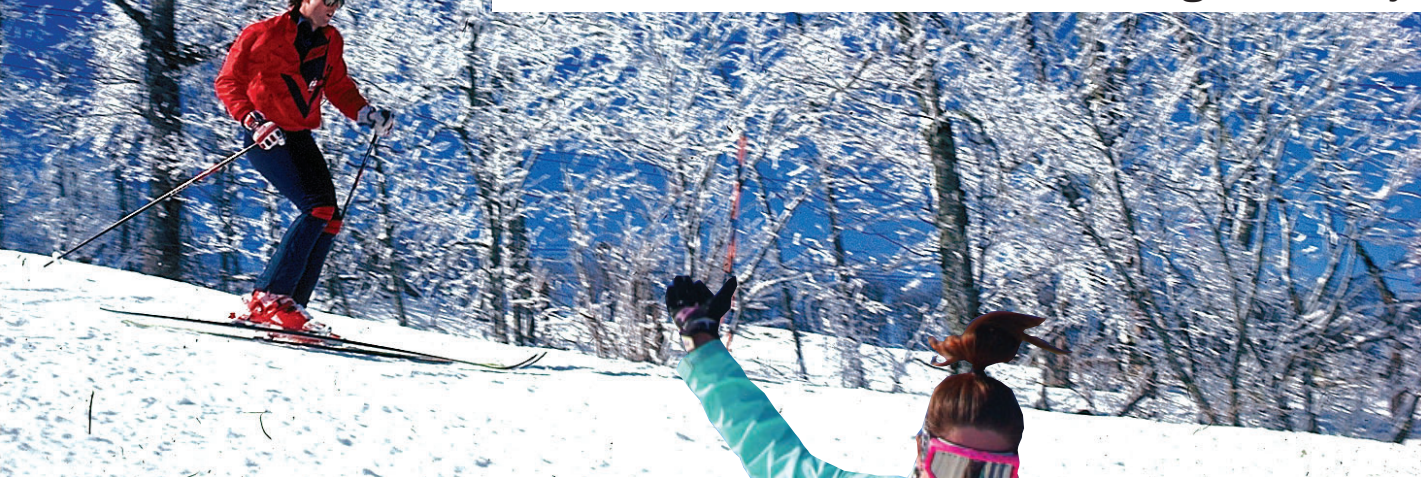


ICE, ICE BABY

Get snowed in North Carolina High Country



PHOTOS COURTESY OF NC DIVISION OF TOURISM, FILM AND SPORTS DEVELOPMENT

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

Snow flurries in Atlanta typically signal the race to Kroger to stock up on essentials like toilet paper and milk. But snow accumulation in the mountains of North Carolina doesn't drive folks indoors; it attracts crowds to its slopes.

Even for a non-skier like me, the sight of snow while driving up the mountains was invigorating. I began anticipating how fun it would be to play in the snow instead of worrying about how cold I might get. I was planning to explore entertainment options beyond skiing when, to my own surprise, the white stuff inspired me to get outdoors instead of heading for indoor diversions like spas and shopping malls (though there are plenty of those in the region, too).

The North Carolina High Country boasts four ski resorts within 30 minutes of one another; I had time to visit three of them.

While each ski resort offers similar amenities, such as ski rental and lessons, every slope is different, and each resort has a unique character. Visiting more than one, especially from shortest to longest ski run, provided the chance to find new thrills.

On the first day, I took an hour-long ski lesson at the French-Swiss Ski College on Appalachian Ski Mountain, the oldest and best-

known ski school in the South. While I struggled to walk in the heavy, awkward rental ski boots, little kids swooshed by on skis and snowboards, making it look easy. I remained upright throughout the lesson and maneuvered down a small hill, building confidence. Not bad for one lesson. "Our philosophy is that three lessons in a short period of time can turn you into a skier," said general manager Brad Moretz. (Others in our group who continued to take lessons did rapidly gain skills.) In addition to 10 slopes, a 4,000-foot elevation and a 365-foot drop, Appalachian Ski Mountain offers two terrain parks for freestyle skiing and snowboarding, with features like a 16-step stairset, tabletops, boxes and rails. If the ski lesson hadn't enticed me, I'd have spent the afternoon at the ice skating rink.

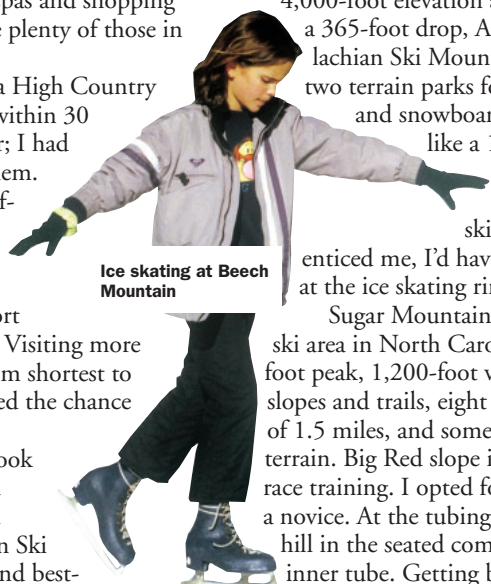
Sugar Mountain Resort, the largest ski area in North Carolina, has a 5,300-foot peak, 1,200-foot vertical drop, 20 slopes and trails, eight lifts, a longest run of 1.5 miles, and some of the area's steepest terrain. Big Red slope is used for racing and race training. I opted for activities suited to a novice. At the tubing park, I raced downhill in the seated comfort of an inflated inner tube. Getting back uphill couldn't

be easier: After sliding down the hill, you ride a conveyor belt back up to the top. Once I'd been on a few exhilarating trips, I headed to the new 10,000-square-foot outdoor ice skating rink, laced up rental skates, took a few laps around and kept warm despite the cool weather. If I'd had the time, I would've tried snowboarding, too.

At 5,506 feet above sea level, Ski Beech is the highest ski resort in eastern North America. With 15 slopes and 10 lifts, there's terrain suited to beginner as well as expert skiers, plus a freestyle area for snowboarders. There's also a 7,000-square-foot outdoor skating arena and winter guided hikes on eight different trails that offer breathtaking views.

It's also rewarding to hike Grandfather Mountain, which isn't a ski resort. Recognized by the U.N. as an International Biosphere Reserve, Grandfather Mountain is home to 66 rare and endangered species—easier to spot in winter when foliage is thin. The view of the southern Appalachians from the Mile High Swinging Bridge is spectacular, worth the knee-wobbling walk across. The museum and small zoo provide further lessons about the mountain and its wildlife.

Whether you're an experienced skier or a novice, the North Carolina High Country's unique topography makes for a fun winter getaway. **SP**



Ice skating at Beech Mountain



IF YOU GO

■ GETTING THERE

North Carolina's High Country region is approximately 275 miles from Atlanta or 100 miles from the Charlotte airport.

■ WHERE TO STAY

Blueberry Villa at Banner Elk Winery

60 Deer Run Lane
Banner Elk, NC 28604
828-260-1790
www.blueberryvilla.com
Rates start at \$175 per night.

Crestwood Inn, Spa & Resort

3236 Shull's Mill Rd.
Blowing Rock, NC 28605
877-836-5046
www.crestwoodnc.com
Rates start at \$115 per night.

■ WHERE TO EAT

The North Carolina High Country is home to more than 20 percent of all certified chefs in North Carolina. Among the great dining options:

Banner Elk Café

119 Central Way SW
Banner Elk, NC 28604
828-898-4242

Dominic's Table

at Crestwood Inn, Spa & Resort
828-963-6646, ext. 117
www.crestwoodnc.com

Jackalope's View at Archer's Inn

2489 Beech Mountain Parkway
Banner Elk, NC 28604
828-898-9004

Storie Street Grille

1167 Main Street
Blowing Rock, NC 28605
828-295-7075
www.storiestreetgrille.com



Appalachian Ski Mountain