

# Breckenridge beckons vacationers

## Skiers and others find pandemic relief at 5-peak Colorado resort

**David McKay Wilson**  
USA TODAY

Winter sports enthusiasts have found a new normal in COVID-19 times at Breckenridge, Colorado, one of North America's most popular destinations for skiers and riders from around the world.

We visited the first week in February when a snow-storm left fresh powder across the five-peak resort in Colorado's Rocky Mountains, and shopkeepers breathed easier with the expiration of Summit County's mask mandate.

The masking requirement for entry into shops and restaurants expired in late January, though you still need to cover your mouth and nose and show proof of vaccination up on the mountain to enter slopeside restaurants.

Philip Butterfield, 25, of Alma, Colorado, who sells clothing at Lululemon on Main Street, said the expiration of the mandate would allow him to sidestep the contemptuous COVID-19 culture clashes between Coloradans and visitors from southern states with fewer restrictions.

"It's nice we don't have to enforce the mask mandate anymore," Butterfield said. "Now I don't have to kick people out of the store."

It was Breckenridge's 60th anniversary, a time to look back at the resort's storied history in an exhibit at the town's Welcome Center, when it all started with one chair lift and a T-bar on Peak 8, lift tickets were \$4 a day, and you could stay in a bunkhouse for \$10 a night.

Today's lift ticket at Breckenridge can cost as much as \$199 a day, making it worth my while to buy an Epic pass from Vail Resorts for \$583.

The mountain was in top condition in early February, with Breck's Imperial lift taking you to almost 13,000 feet to North America's highest light-served terrain, with two tiers of wide-open steep bowls opening up far above the timberline along the western ridge. The groomers held up all week too, with the 4 inches of fresh snow that fell mid-week making for sweet turns throughout the resort's extensive beginner and intermediate terrain.

We spent most of our time up high, away from the crowds, skiing the woods and bump runs on Peak 10, and cruising down the bowls on peaks 6, 7 and 8, where the above-timberline bowls capture windswept snow when the winds blow a gale.

I'd returned to Breck with my son, just a year after I'd skied there on assignment from USA TODAY in February 2020. That's when you needed a reservation to get on the mountain even if you had an EPIC pass. There was limited indoor seating, we ate outside in single-digit weather, and had to mask up waiting in lift lines.

Much has changed. There's room to eat inside now on the mountain, though you need to make a reservation on the Breckenridge mobile app at most on-



Intrepid skiers hike up to the peak at Breckenridge, Colo., to find fresh snow. DAVID MCKAY WILSON/USA TODAY

mountain restaurants. The sole exception was the Pioneer Crossing lodge atop Peak 7, where you only had to show a vaccination card to find a seat.

We stayed with friends in a multistoried townhouse in the alpine village's premier mountain road, a block up 4 O'Clock Road from the Snowflake lift, and a block from the 4 O'Clock Run that takes you down at the end of the day.

We walked downtown, which was hopping in early February, the 31st Annual International Snow Sculpture contest drew crowds to downtown Breckenridge, as nine teams from four nations carved sculptures from blocks of compressed snow.

You could watch the open-air carving over one week, and then enjoy the completed sculptures the second week, especially at night, when there were bathed in colorful lights. The victorious sculpture by a Wisconsin team, called the Digital Divide, featured a human hand and robot arm, on either side of a wall of 1s and 0s – the binary code for computer.

Downtown you have your pick of fabulous restaurants and world-class breweries. We loved the sea bass and scallops at Rootstalk and enjoyed our vegan pizza dinner in a private plexiglass globe outside Pianta Pizzeria on Main Street. We decided that the Snowblind Double IPA at the Broken Compass Tap Room was the best among the 10 IPAs we sampled on our Pandemic II ski vacation.

When temperatures lingered below zero one morning, I opted to visit the Breckenridge Nordic Center up Ski Hill Road, using the town's Free Ride bus system.

I rented ski gear and headed out on the center's immaculately groomed trails. You can kick-and-glide through trails that bypass winter homes, then head up gentle climbs into the woods, warming me up on a frigid day. You then circle back through Beaver Meadows, where I took a rest as I peered up at the alpine resort,

thinking how cold it was up on the hill.

Joe Donzella, 49, of Wheeling, West Virginia, was skiing that morning with two friends, finding some relief from the stress of working as family practitioner during the pandemic.

"Cross-country is a fabulous way to get outside and stay socially distanced," he said. "I love being out in the fresh air and sunshine."

You are high up in Breckenridge, with downtown Breck at 9,600 feet above sea level, and the ski area rising from 10,000 feet at the base to almost 13,000 at the top – above the peak of most ski resorts in North America.

Oxygen cafes along Main Street help visitors like Mike Denning of Eastchester, New York, who stopped at The O2 Lounge to get a 15-minute shot of oxygen through nasal cannulas, just an hour after he arrived with his East Coast buddies for a week in the high alpine destination.

When we're in Breckenridge, we leave the car at a hotel by LaGuardia International, and take the Summit Express door-to-door in two hours from Denver International, at \$96 each way. I'd learned my lesson during COVID-19 times last year when I went cheap and rented a Toyota Corolla instead of a four-wheel-drive SUV costing \$1,000 a week to handle the Loveland Pass in a snowstorm. Upon my departure in a snowstorm, I needed to call AAA to tow my car out of the parking lot, which allowed me to drive to the Walmart in Frisco to purchase chains and pay a guy \$40 to put them on.

Once in town, you can ride the Breck Free Ride to downtown restaurants, to chairlifts heading up to the resort, and to Airport Road to drink Breckenridge's best IPA at the Broken Compass Brewery or find some THC-laced delights at the Green Dragon Recreational Marijuana Dispensary.