



Fun Runs

Skiers enjoy themselves on Mount Bachelor's superlative slopes

By Paul Frichtl

We've found what we came for. Standing beside a cluster of stunted alpine spruce on a jagged cinder ridge, my kids and I heave heavy breaths through broad smiles. Above and behind us is the funnel-shaped upper bowl of the Devil's Backbone, barely visible through a thick fog that's driving across the upper shoulders of Mount Bachelor. Below us, the Devil's Backbone is pinched between stands of spruce in a narrow gully that sparkles with last night's six inches of white velvet.

"Nice," is all I can muster after careening through acres of sparse moguls and ice crystals that sting my face. But here, just below treeline, the air is suddenly very still, the wind deflected by the trees, the sound absorbed by the snow. And the sun streams across a glorious vista of high mountain lakes and the towering peaks of central Oregon's Cascades. On our third day at Bachelor, it's as if a curtain has lifted—just partway, but what a show we find beyond. Now, beneath the weather cap, atop the first substantial snowfall the Northwest has seen in months, our patience is rewarded.

"Yeah," Kristin chirps, but she's not interested in talking. She turns her snowboard to the fall line, and I watch her carve turn after joyful turn, sending a delicate arc of glittering snow from the tail of her board.

As Kyle and I follow, setting light ski edges through morning shadows that stretch blue across the gully, there are a few other tracks in the snow, but we see no one as we glide among the laden trees. When we catch up with Kristin, we're all out of breath again, but we can hear through the trees the enthusiastic, fleeting hoots and yelps that always occupy the black-diamond fringes of a ski resort.

We've found our slopes for the day, and we work Bachelor's Northwest Express runs hard. On the far west edge of the mountain's maintained ski area are the Sparks Lake and Brookie's runs, and we ski them until we're sure we've explored all of their little sidetracks down streambeds and over steep rockfalls. Then we work our way back east, through the Outback Express runs: Kangaroo, Downunder and all their offspring.

I first skied the Outback in the late '70s, on a spring-break trip with a bunch of high school buddies. The Outback wasn't served by the high-speed quads that now slice through the forests. Back then, you paid a couple of bucks to ride a snowcat to the lodge. There were no named runs, just hundreds of acres of unmarked terrain, and each trip turned out to be different than anything previous. Each time I skied into the snowcat clearing, I'd just had my best run ever.

Mount Bachelor's ski terrain has grown in the nearly 30 years since—all for the better.

What started as Bachelor Butte and a single Poma lift in 1958 has become a world-class ski resort with a huge amount of terrain wrapping around nearly half of its treed skirt. Ten chairlifts—seven of them express quads and the others triples—serve 3,683 acres. The high-speed Pine Marten Express quad runs right up the middle of that acreage, uploading to the centrally located mid-mountain Pine Marten Lodge and to a series of intermediate runs with names such as Coffee, Thunderbird and Grotto—broad, fast cruisers with plenty of fun to be found along the edges, and in the drops and trees between them.

The top of the mountain nudges the sky at 9,065 feet, an altitude that can make lungs work overtime, especially for those who plunge down the double-blacks that drop directly through the precipitous slopes of The Cirque. There are kinder, gentler (blue-square) routes down, as well, so that on a bluebird day everyone can take the Summit lift to enjoy the views: from the vast high desert to the east to an eye-level perspective on the tallest peaks in the Oregon Cascades. To the north are the Three Sisters—Faith, Hope and Charity—restless, rambunctious (volcanic) siblings that wear their ragged snow coats all year. There's also aptly named Broken Top, and beyond, the steep spire of Mount Jefferson, and even towering Mount Hood. From the vantage point of Bend to the east, these peaks all line up in a tidy row marking the spine of the Cascades, the dividing line between east and west, dry high desert and coastal rain forest. These sentinels of central Oregon—all ranging higher than 9,000 feet—catch the weather blowing in from the coast. When heavy clouds meet that dry eastside air, snow drops as a delightful fluff. Lots of it: In a typical year, Mount Bachelor will collect 370 inches of the kind of powder most other Northwest ski resorts pine for.

Just below Bachelor, to the west, are the clear, trout-rich alpine lakes that are the region's summer playground—Sparks, Elk, Cultus and other lakes—though backcountry skiers, snowshoers, snowmobilers and dog-sled tours keep the roads and trails of the area busy in winter, as well.

Most winters.

Northwest skiers will long remember the ski season of 2004-05, mostly for its lack of skiing. Most ski areas in the Northwest opened briefly and closed before Christmas. Our family trip to Bend and Mount Bachelor was planned the summer before, and in February and early March, we began shifting our focus to spending a quiet few days at Sunriver Resort, reading rather than skiing. But Bachelor remained open, and in the weeks leading up to this trip, Web checks showed a base holding at just more than 60 inches. By the time we arrive in the third week of March, that's 56 inches. Bachelor typically is blessed with a plenitude of sunny days, but this winter has produced far too many of those.

Yet, Bachelor has never let me down, and for our first day on the slopes-our first ski outing of the year-56 inches are groomed to sweet powder. Likewise for Day 2, as we explore the blue cruisers off the Pine Marten and Skyliner Express lifts, and watch the aerial shows in the Air Chamber terrain park. We venture over to the Outback lift late in the day under menacing skies. As we ride back up the mountain, hunkered against wet, blowing snowflakes, each of us notices a movement in the snow below us, along a crop of rocks. A weasel, maybe a fox. Then, as the silhouette of the mountainside lodge emerges from the storm, we decide that, of course, it must be a pine marten scurrying into its den. Surely, that must be our good-luck omen for the following day.

I've been to Mount Bachelor and Bend many times over the years. In fact, I spent my first 10 years here, and now my children, after a half-dozen trips, groan at the mention of driving down Burnside Avenue to check out the old neighborhood. We come for the outstanding skiing in the winter; we come for the crisp, clean air, purity of sunshine and multitude of recreational opportunities in summer. But we also come for a dose of small town.

Downtown Bend looks much the same as it did in the late '60s, when my family moved away. The old stone library still sits at the south end of Wall Street, where my dad's office was just a block away. In the center of town is the Tower Theatre, where the kids from my neighborhood watched Disney matinees. The Pine Tavern Restaurant is still a focal point, sitting a half block back from Wall. The community Christmas tree always stood in the square out front, and Santa spent every December weekend at his post.

Now, as I walk along Wall and Bond streets with my window-shopping family, I look up to the second floor of a building next to the Tower, certain it was the department store where my mother took me each fall to get my salt-and-pepper corduroys for school. We walk by a one-story brick storefront that once was the local utility office where I got a Reddy Kilowatt lapel pin-a little electro-humanoid made of red lightning bolts. And somewhere along here was a fabric and sewing-pattern shop that my mother, sisters and I spent way too much time in.

Each summer, my friends and I walked the length of Wall Street as part of the Pet Parade-one year as a six-boy dragon pursuing Saint George, another as growling Vikings under sail, and another as wild-animal tamers with our ferocious pets.

If I forget for a moment that these one- and two-story storefronts are now trendy coffee shops, art galleries, gift shops and fine restaurants, then downtown Bend seems to have changed little. And I'm thankful for that. The Main Street America of my youth remains intact and, in fact, it is livelier and more prosperous than ever.

Yes, the national retailers are here, as well, most notably in the Old Mill District. This relatively new outdoor mall rose on a site along the Deschutes River that for decades embodied the livelihood of this area: two gigantic lumber mills. Today, big-name specialty retailers, from REI to Victoria's Secret, serve a diverse range of locals and visitors where pine logs once were stacked high, where giant saws produced a constant whir and where steam billowed from the drying kilns. The Shevlin-Hixon and Brooks-Scanlon names that were stamped on the ends of sawn lumber are now better known in conjunction with community landmarks, parks and real estate development in central Oregon. But from the early 20th century until the last major mill in town closed in the early 1990s, timber and lumber jobs drove the local economy.

Bend was originally settled by ranchers, along a pioneer route that crossed the Deschutes River here in the mid-19th century. By 1905, the community of Farewell Bend had grown to 300 residents, who decided to incorporate. This year marks the city's centennial. Among those early settlers was A.M. Drake, who came from Michigan and set up camp along the river where Bend's Drake Park is now located. He bought land in the area and set about platting a modern city. Lumber companies from the Midwest were already making trips to the region for timber, and by the mid-1920s, companies such as Brooks-Scanlon had moved to the area and become a major force in development.

Wood products are still central Oregon's primary business, but Bend has much going on these days-high-tech businesses, a busy community college, booming hospitality and retail establishments. The travel industry also has become a major influence. That's evident not only in the atmosphere downtown, but also in the communities springing up around the Bend/Redmond area that cater to second-home owners, retirees and vacationers.

Mount Bachelor is much like several other Northwest ski areas: Because it is situated amid the scenic forests and dramatic lava lands of the Deschutes National Forest, it can't offer on-mountain accommodations. It might seem that skiers miss out on the ski-village atmosphere that makes Whistler, for example, so popular. Not so: The town of Bend and resorts such as Sunriver go a long way to compensate.

Sunriver is kind of an off-campus ski village. Located just a 20-minute drive from Bachelor or from Bend, it's a complex of private homes, condos and luxury-lodge units along the Deschutes River that bustles year-round. It has three quality golf courses, including its prized Crosswater Golf Club, and in the summer guests enjoy swimming, tennis, horseback riding, canoeing and fishing, and hiking and biking the resort's 35 miles of paved paths.

Two summers ago, when we were here for a family reunion, a ski jump exhibition set up on Sunriver's Village Mall-with snow trucked in from the mountain-entertained thousands of guests, in shorts and T-shirts, late into the night.

In the winter, the focus moves to the mountain. The resort itself quiets for several hours during the day, with book readers and nonskiers strolling its paths until skiers begin to return. Tired and hungry, they search out the comfort of the steaming outdoor hot tubs scattered throughout the resort. Refreshed and rejuvenated, skiers and their families flow into the village and its wide range of restaurants, from pizza parlors to ethnic restaurants to fine grills. Sunriver's main lodge-an inviting peeled-log and natural- wood structure-offers a dining experience that works equally well as a treat for the whole family or as an intimate evening for two.

Sunriver, a World War II Army training camp converted to a resort and residential community in 1968, is the granddaddy of the central Oregon resorts. Not far behind it came The Inn of the Seventh Mountain (now Seventh Mountain Resort), Black Butte Ranch near Sisters, and a parade of others, all bringing golf courses, luxury accommodations for visitors and resort-style homes for those who wanted to indulge year-round. Most recently, private residence communities such as Pronghorn have seen huge success, and a great deal of anticipation surrounds new resort properties such as Brasada Ranch and Cascade Highlands.

One of my personal favorites for Bend lodging, however, is a bit old school. Literally. On the southern edge of downtown, the St. Francis Catholic School educated many a Bend youth over the course of seven decades: myself included-at least for four years. But the needs of the parish outgrew the aging red-brick building, and the school moved to the suburbs in 2000. Vacant and boarded up for a couple of years, the school was eventually rescued by a Portland hospitality and brewpub company-the McMenamins Brothers-that specializes in reviving historic, often offbeat, buildings as lively public inns.

As we walk down the dim hallway, Old St. Francis seems even more familiar than I thought it would. Historic photos line the dark wood walls, and I pause for a slurp from the old drinking fountain designed to accommodate four kids at once. We check into my old first grade classroom, which has been divided into three guest rooms: Ours is named for Katie O'Rourke, an inspired and inspiring fifth-grade teacher in the mid-80s and '90s, rather than Sister Bernice Marie, who presided over this room, and the school, when I last sat politely and attentively in this space 40 years ago.

The blackboard has been replaced by dark honey-colored plank walls, and a bureau with a television sits where Sister Bernice Marie's desk used to be. Where the first couple of rows of my classmates would have sat at attention is a comfy bed laden with pillows. I've brought along a bottle of Oregon pinot noir, and we toast the sisters of St. Francis before dinner at the hotel's pub.

McMenamins Old St. Francis School was an instant success when it opened in Bend last November. Not just for the pub, but also for the old gym next door that now houses another, more intimate, bar; catered meeting rooms; live music events; a theater; and a Turkish bath. The theater shows popular movies nightly, viewed from homey sofa seats, with pizza, snacks and adult beverages available. The steamy St. Francis Soaking Pool glows turquoise from the elaborate tile-mosaic pool and murals that celebrate the patron saint of animals. Water cascades from a fountain and spouting lions. And faintly through the mist, with heads tipped back against the sides of the soaking pool, we see stars flash beyond the open roof.

Each time I return to Bend, I can't help but regret that I didn't ski when I lived here. The older boys in my neighborhood had just started skiing, and I had a friend at St. Francis whose dad managed Bachelor Butte. On winter Sundays, the back row or two of pews at St. Francis Church seemed to be reserved for skiers, dressed in their stretch pants and ski sweaters, although the women wore church hats rather than stocking caps.

We even had a local ski celebrity in town whom everybody talked about, Kiki Cutter. She competed in the 1968 Winter Olympics in Grenoble, France, at age 18, and finished fourth in overall World Cup standings the following year. She was the first American skier, male or female, to win a World Cup event title (in the slalom in 1968). In those days, the whole Olympic ski team came to Bend to train because they could ski Bachelor into late June.

Yeah, tough break for me that this all happened without me. But on this March day, with my skis buried in the Outback powder and our good-luck pine marten enjoying the sun on the ridge behind us, it's all about this run. And the next. And another glorious day on the slopes of Mount Bachelor.

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