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Utah's Epic Ride

By STEPHEN REGENOLD

UP high in the sunny Wasatch mountain range, above the tree line at 10,000 feet, the Highway to Heaven is just 500 yards long.

That's the distance, at least, that our guide, Deb Lovci, cited as we approached the entrance gate. "Just 500 yards, a quick traverse to Twin Lakes Pass, then we'll jump back into the powder," she said.

It was a springlike Sunday in January in the mountains above [Salt Lake City](#), where a cluster of six [ski](#) resorts occupy adjacent valleys of granite, thick forests and deep powder snow. The Highway to Heaven — an exposed backcountry route connecting two alpine valleys — traversed the steep slope ahead, cutting a track along an avalanche-prone ridge.

"Keep moving — don't get off the route," Ms. Lovci yelled out, a line of skiers shuffling past. Ski edges sliced against the slope for a 20-minute traverse. Then it was back to the trees, back to the glinting powder and giant sweeping S-turns, flying downhill, skirting boulders and stumps, the wind in my eyes again on another epic ride.

The Ski [Utah](#) Interconnect Adventure Tour had started for us five hours earlier, with an 8:30 a.m. chairlift ride at Deer Valley Resort, the first ski area our group would visit that day. A daylong guided trip, the Interconnect Tour follows a circuitous route of in-bounds ski trails and steep backcountry runs. Chairlift rides are combined with out-of-bounds traverses, or skiing across slopes, to connect the resorts that sprawl through this part of the Wasatch Range.

In a single day, Interconnect skiers travel about 25 miles through the mountains, carving more than 15,000 vertical feet of turns on the slopes and adjacent backcountry at Deer Valley, [Park City](#) Mountain Resort, Brighton Resort, Solitude Mountain Resort, [Alta](#) Ski Area and Snowbird Ski and Summer Resort.

Deep and airy powder snow, fast groomed trails, knee-busting mogul runs and rocky chutes are among the tour's challenges. Runs range from high-intermediate to the most difficult double-black, linking one valley to the next via backcountry detours that drop downhill, one

unrelenting mile after the next.

“Nothing I've done outside of [Europe](#) compares to this tour,” said Mike Carroll, a 45-year-old real estate developer from [Richmond](#), Va., one of the 10 clients Ms. Lovci and a co-guide, Pat Ormond, led on the recent Interconnect tour. “This valley-to-valley thing is very French or Austrian, very Euro-style,” Mr. Carroll said.

Indeed, at no other place in the Western Hemisphere can you find a similar concentration of ski resorts. All six areas — plus the Canyons Resort, a nearby 3,700-acre behemoth touted as the biggest ski area in the state — have property lines that fall within a 10-mile radius. The Wasatch resorts are so close and tidy — glades, bowls and fluted ski runs from one area nearly abutting the next — that airline passengers flying overhead might mistake the whole network as a gigantic unified ski resort. (A Wasatch megaresort that connects up to seven existing ski areas via cable cars, chairlifts and tunnels is a decades-old conversation in local ski-business circles — a project that, if completed, could create the largest ski resort on the planet.)

The Interconnect Adventure Tour, which runs daily all season long, through early April, is a sampling platter where skiers can taste the immensity of the area's chairlift-accessible terrain.

Backcountry parts of the trip — wide and untracked powder bowls, rocky chutes and steep-gladed runs through towering pines — add the adventure component to the tour.

“There is nowhere else in the [United States](#) you can do this without getting on a helicopter,” said Ms. Lovci, who has guided backcountry ski trips for almost two decades.

In the age of \$80 daily lift tickets, the Interconnect Tour is relatively economical, too: Its \$195 per-person fee includes a pair of professional ski guides to lead the trip; lunch at Solitude Mountain Resort; a free (and compulsory) avalanche transceiver for use during the day; lift passes to all six areas on the schedule; shuttle-bus transportation at the end of the day back to your point of origin; and a finisher's pin to prove you've done the trip.

But first you have to ski the Highway to Heaven.

Skiers on the Interconnect traverse backcountry routes like the Highway to Heaven, which connect valleys via out-of-bounds alpine passageways. The group moves steadily all day long, flying down in-bounds trails at the resorts to make time, ducking ropes (with permission) or passing through boundary gates, and then again heading downhill through the backcountry.

For now, only skiers are allowed on Interconnect trips, as snowboards are shunned at two

resorts on the list.

Interconnect groups radio in and out at each area with ski patrollers. Avalanche conditions are continually assessed.

The guides — one always up front, one always in back — keep the group on pace to ensure that all six ski resorts are tagged by 3 p.m. The trip's final run, a drop of more than 3,000 vertical feet from the top of Hidden Peak at Snowbird into Little Cottonwood Canyon, is the capstone to the day.

My Interconnect experience began on a midwinter Sunday with an early-morning drive to Deer Valley, where the day's 10 Interconnect clients — all men, aged 28 to 45 — met at 8 a.m. for a briefing.

“Conditions are variable out there,” Ms. Lovci told the group. “We're going to be tiptoeing through the backcountry today.”

Significant snow had not fallen on the Wasatch in two weeks, leaving the backcountry solid and sunbaked, rocks poking out from a mantle of icy snow. But Ms. Lovci still promised some powder.

“We can always find good snow,” she said.

The first hour of the day was filled with fast runs on groomed trails, 12 skiers skimming perfect snow at Deer Valley and Park City, which essentially share a border. We slipped under a rope atop Empire Canyon to sidestep and then stride a couple of hundred feet from one resort to the next.

McConkey's Bowl, a mogul-strewn double-diamond run at Park City, was the day's first challenge. I skied the pitch with Dave Wysnewski and Mark Richardson, a lawyer and a landscaper, who are friends from the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

Spindrift snow whipped up with each carved turn. I hopped rocks, exposed little black teeth in hardpack snow.

Rooster tails of mist arched from ski tips and tails as we slipped through McConkey's moguls, knees knocking and chugging like pistons, poles planting atop each icy mound, from mogul to mogul to mogul on down.

“Wow, steeper than it looked,” said Mr. Wysnewski, breathing hard at the bottom of the bowl.

The exit from Park City put us into the first real backcountry of the tour, a tract of old mining land called Mill F. An hour of outback terrain would shoot us deep into Big Cottonwood Canyon, home of Solitude Mountain Resort and Brighton.

“O.K., come through one at a time, 20 feet or more between you,” Ms. Lovci instructed as we ducked the orange rope at Park City's boundary to ski into the trees. It was time to check avalanche transceivers before dropping into the deep unpatrolled snow beyond.

Holding out her sensor, Ms. Lovci scanned all 10 clients at the chest, double-checking for a signal from the transceiver beacons strapped against our bodies. In a worst case — a deep burying avalanche — guides and mountain rescuers can locate submerged skiers via these blipping radio beacons.

But avoiding avalanche-prone slopes is job No. 1 for Ms. Lovci and her colleagues, who study seasonal snow pack, monitor weather patterns, and dig onsite snow pits to assess slide conditions.

“We're good to go,” Ms. Lovci said after scanning the last skier passing by. “I'm sensing some powder ahead.”

Ms. Lovci was right. The next 50 turns — giant S-curves through trees on a foot of shimmering fluff — were the best of the day.

Little snowballs tumbled by as I stopped to catch a breath. The white and towering mountains of Big Cottonwood Canyon cut a silhouette on a backdrop of blue all around.

Aldo Stanton, a businessman from [Boulder](#), Colo., swooped past my stance. “Yodel-eh-he-hoo,” he belted out, not a smidge of irony in his coo.

Near the end of the Mill F segment, which had descended thousands of feet and more than two miles toward the Big Cottonwood resorts, we entered a glade of quaking aspen and pine. Untracked snow sparked in the sun.

High overhead, thousands of feet in the air on the opposite side of the canyon, the rocky ridge of Solitude Mountain Resort and the alpine face of the Highway to Heaven were just visible through the trees.

Pat Ormond, the guide, pointed it out. “That's our big traverse after lunch,” he said, a ski pole pointing to the sky.

The trees below were tight, branches reaching out like arms. The Interconnect crew paused to pick a line, 12 skiers silent for a moment above the forest of fluff.

"Follow my tracks," Mr. Ormond said before pushing off and disappearing downhill.

The entrance to Solitude Mountain Resort was a few hundred feet ahead. I tucked for speed in a meadow before slicing an edge into the white.

Two dozen more turns and we'd approach Solitude's base area, a tangle of lifts and lodges under high craggy peaks.

Before noon it would be three ski resorts down, and just three more to go.

VISITOR INFORMATION

LONG sunny days and stable mountain snow make spring the best season for backcountry excursions like the [Ski Utah](#) Interconnect Adventure Tour, which runs daily through early April.

Skiers on the one-day Interconnect Tour follow guides to sample the slopes at up to six resorts in the Wasatch mountain range in Utah, where the ski areas can be linked by backcountry routes. You ride chairlifts inside the resort boundaries and [hike](#) or sidestep along the connecting routes.

Included on the tour are Deer Valley Resort, [Park City](#) Mountain Resort, Brighton Resort, Solitude Mountain Resort, [Alta](#) Ski Area and Snowbird Ski and Summer Resort.

Ski Utah, the company that operates the Interconnect Tour, takes a maximum of 12 skiers out each day. The company (www.skiutah.com) allows advanced skiers in good physical condition to sign up; no previous backcountry experience is required. Last year more than 700 skiers completed the Interconnect Tour, which costs \$195 a person. Information: (801) 534-1907.

In [Wyoming](#), [Jackson Hole Mountain Resort](#) (www.jacksonhole.com) abuts the mountain wilderness of Bridger-Teton National Forest, where resort guides lead backcountry trips through April 8.

From the top of 10,450-foot Rendezvous Mountain, Jackson Hole skiers have access to thousands of acres of backcountry terrain, including bowls, chutes and nearby mountain peaks — all accessible with minimal hiking or climbing.

The daylong trips include runs through the backcountry that end in traverses returning to the ski area, where chairlifts and gondolas bring groups back up Rendezvous Mountain. A full day of guided skiing at Jackson Hole costs \$520 for a group of three skiers or snowboarders, with an additional \$100 a person up to a maximum of five. Information: (307) 733-2292.

Another Wyoming backcountry option is [Grand Targhee Resort \(www.grandtarghee.com\)](http://www.grandtarghee.com), where the SnowCat Adventures program incorporates tracked vehicles (snowcats) in lieu of chairlifts. Up to 24 skiers a day are treated to Peaked Mountain, a private ski area within a ski area that has gladed tree runs, north-facing bowls and famously deep powder snow.

Two guides lead SnowCat Adventures groups, which run laps on the 1,000-acre mountain face. Up to 20,000 vertical feet of turns in a day are common.

Grand Targhee Resort runs its SnowCat Adventures through mid-April. The cost is \$349 a person for a full day, including a picnic lunch (held in a yurt when the weather demands it). Details at (800) 827-4433.

[Silverton Mountain in Colorado \(www.silvertonmountain.com\)](http://www.silvertonmountain.com) is a hybrid ski area with just one chairlift and terrain that is entirely at the advanced and expert level. Most skiers ride the lift — which tops out at 12,300 feet — but then continue on with short hikes and traverses to reach the backcountry chutes and bowls that flank the mountain.

Silverton Mountain requires all skiers to travel with guides from Jan. 18 to April 1. (A guided ski day costs \$129 per person.) From April 5 to closing in May, a period when avalanches are less of a concern, guides are not required, and lift tickets cost \$49. Details at (970) 387-5706.

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