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Boomers Hit the Slopes

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Break out the skis, dust off the snowboards, and get ready to plow the powder.

by Lois Friedland



After classes to improve skills, midlife skiers uniformly express how comfortable they are skiing terrain that they previously thought was beyond their capabilities.

Wiping snow off his graying mustache, the man in a cobalt blue, weatherproof jacket said to his friends, "Are we crazy or what? It's really snowing."

"Yeah," the other replied, as he slid toward the lift. "Just look at that powder."

All three were obvious mid-lifers, as was more than 70 percent of the lunchtime crowd in Jack's, a slopeside restaurant at Copper Mountain, Colorado.

Although ads in ski and snowboard magazines suggest that everyone on the slopes is younger than 35, the reality is that a significant portion of the skiing population (and even a number of snowboarders) is older. An increase in visitors 45 and older and the continuing aging of the visitor base are among the most prominent trends in snow riding, according to the 2008 national demographic study done by the National Ski Area Association in conjunction with research firm RRC Associates of Boulder, Colorado.

More-mature slope runners have different needs and wants. Here's a guide:

Tips for the first day on the slopes

Midlife skiers and riders navigate those first ski days of the season more gingerly than they did when younger. You'll see them stretching their quads and hamstrings either at the base or the top of the lift before that first run. For specifics on how to warm up an stretch properly, visit winterfeelsgood.com.

Savvy skiers and riders in this age group wear helmets and take a Camelbak or another hydration system on the slopes and sip water while riding lifts.

Once heading downhill, some mid-lifers confess they plot their days on the slopes differently than they did in past years.

"Now, I take a few warm-up runs before trying anything more difficult. And I find places I'm familiar with more than I used to because gives me a sense of security," one baby boomer admits.

"I no longer ski a full day because I prefer quality" over cost per run, says another. "Now I'm willing to take more time for lunch."

So when do you decide your ski day is over?

"If at any time I think I'm going to take 'just one more run,' I've already taken it," he says.

Peer-grouping in packages, classes, and clinics

Classes, clinics, and multi-day packages for mid-lifers are booming. Some, such as Sun Valley's Prime Time weeks, are excuses to rat-pack for a week. Others offer opportunities to improve one's skiing significantly. For example, in programs such as Bumps for Boomers run by Joe Nevin at the Ski & Snowboard Schools of Aspen/Snowmass, smart boomers are learning to flow like water through the bum instead of knocking aging knees. Participants use ski boards (equipment considerably shorter than conventional skis) during the two- or three-day sessions.

"We teach aging baby boomers the three essential skills that enable them to quickly move off groomed runs and safely ski the entire mountain," says Mr. Nevin. "We emphasize balance and control rather than fast skiing, and we use techniques that reduce both fatigue and stress to aging joints."

Does it work?

Dr. Rose Ries, 52, a Philadelphia-based psychiatrist who has taken three clinics and a private Bumps for Boomers lesson from Nevin, says, "The beauty of it is that he is teaching advanced stuff — that is, how to ski moguls — yet it is sort of a return to basics concept because I can tell you that many students show up thinking they're solid intermediates, and it turns out that they had not grasped the fundamentals prior to signing up for the course. I was one of them.... It has made skiing bumps safe for me. To know that I will not hurt myself in the bumps from lack of control is to know that I will have many more happy years of skiing ahead of me."

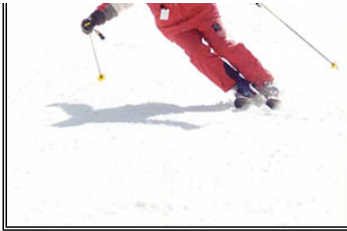
All together now

The 50-plus ski-and-ride crowd plays and parties in large numbers. Membership in Over the Hill Gang International (othgi.com) is open to individuals and couples if one spouse is at least 50 years old. The group runs weekly ski days at several Colorado resorts every wint and has a directory with hundreds of benefits, including discounts on lift tickets, lodging, and equipment rentals.



Gear for boomers

Toss out your old gear, because the newer equipment is so much more body-friendly. The new-technology equipment allows baby boomers and older skiers to use much less effort, because the skis are easier to turn and more stable. With these skis, you need only make small, precise movements to steer them through bumps or make wide carved turns.



After 30-plus years in corporate America, ski instructor Joe Nevin applied his experience to better understand how to get boomers off overcrowded groomed runs and on to mogol and powder terrain.

Today's boots are also designed differently to mesh with the new-shaped skis. The newer boots have a softer forward flex but are stiffer laterally, so it takes only a small movement to take the ski from one edge to the other. The bonus: Boots are more comfortable because there's less need for a continuous forward lean.

Try out new models of skis or snowboards on your next trip. Unless you ski more than 15 days a year, renting the latest high-performance skis and snowboards is more economical than owning your own gear. If you're taking a short trip, it may actually be cheaper or equal in price to rent versus paying checked baggage fees for bringing skis or a snowboard.

If you decide to rent equipment, rentskis.com has outlets in dozens of ski resorts in the Western United States and Canada. Choose from a variety of packages you can order online or via toll-free numbers so that the equipment is waiting for you at a local ski shop when you arrive at the resort. Contact skibutlers.com if you want rental gear brought to your lodging at more than 25 resorts.

Photos: Courtesy Bumps for Boomers

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