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Winter Games - Ski resorts are designing more programs and services for the 50-plus crowd

By Sonja Ryst - Wall Street Journal- February 23, 2004

In 1994, when the Stratton Trailblazers Ski Club, a group for people age 50 and older, gathered for its first meetings, the entire club could sit around a single table.

Today, the group, based at the Stratton Mountain ski resort in Vermont, has 1,000 members across the U.S. Activities include downhill racing on Fridays and a two-hour ski clinic that runs five days a week.

See resources of interest for skiers age 50 and older.

"We all know each other, and you aren't pushed over your head," says Mark Katzman, a 61-year-old retired chief executive officer and the club's president. "You're skiing with contemporaries."

The 50-plus crowd is getting more attention, and more respect, on the nation's slopes. And it's not surprising: They're the generation that helped define "skiing as we know it in the U.S.," according to Bill Jensen, chief operating officer for Vail Resorts in Colorado.

Clubs for older skiers are booming, and real-estate developers are chasing after seniors who want second homes near ski resorts. Meanwhile, resorts themselves are designing programs and services that cater to visitors who still recognize the name Jean-Claude Killy. (He turned 60 last August.)

Time to Play

At Vail Mountain, "our biggest customer group is the 45- to 60-year-old guest," Mr. Jensen says. He estimates that about two-thirds of the revenue at Vail Mountain is generated by baby boomers.

It's not that younger skiers have been forgotten. Twentysomething snowboarders, after all, are the industry's future. For the moment, though, it's that generation's parents and grandparents who have the time -- and the money -- to play in the snow.

"The trick for these resorts is to hang on to your existing baby-boomer customer," says Michael Berry, president of the National Ski Areas Association in Lakewood, Colo.

One effort to indulge older skiers can be found in Colorado, where Joe Nevin, a retired Silicon Valley executive, has started a program called "Bumps for Boomers," for skiers age 50 or older. Using "ski boards" (equipment that's considerably shorter than typical skis), students at Aspen Snowmass, Aspen Highlands, Aspen Mountain and Buttermilk are learning the art of navigating moguls, as well as slopes where grooming might be an afterthought. Mr. Nevin's program puts more emphasis on speed control than one would in a class for younger people.

Form -- and not speed -- is what's important to older skiers, Mr. Nevin explains. "We're looking at skiing from a different angle," he says. "You don't have to go fast to be a hero; you can get out and be balanced and have people say, 'Wow, that person looks good.'"

Sandy Karp, a 60-year-old lawyer in Glenwood Springs, Colo., tried the program last winter. About 10 years earlier, he had been diagnosed with a neuromuscular problem that weakened his legs. Skiing became a trial: After a day on the slopes, he could barely climb a set of stairs because of pain in his knees and back.

"At a certain point I thought [skiing] wouldn't be worth doing," Mr. Karp recalls. "But I didn't want to give it up."

On the verge of quitting, he enrolled in Mr. Nevin's classes. Mr. Karp first turned in his six-foot skis for a pair almost half their length; he then spent hours learning about balance and control. (Typically, older skiers are more concerned about falls than are younger skiers.)

Today, Mr. Karp is able to spend four to five hours on the intermediate runs at Aspen Snowmass -- and later walk up the steps of his home without any problems. "I find it very invigorating to be out now," he says.

Getting Together

Ski clubs designed for so-called veteran skiers are becoming more popular, expanding in scope and size. Over the Hill Gang International -- which organizes ski vacations in the U.S. and overseas, among other activities -- has ballooned to about 5,000 members from 1,500 in the early 1990s. Based in Colorado Springs, Colo., the group has added programs this year at Aspen Snowmass, Loveland Ski Area, and Arapahoe Basin, in which skiers age 50-plus meet one day a week to ski together with an Over the Hill guide.

"Our purpose is to unite senior skiers," says Sherrie Beasley, 62, who runs Over the Hill with other members of her family.

After Connie Fitzgerald retired from her job as a buyer at Caterpillar Inc. in 1991, she joined Over the Hill as a way to meet people who had the time to ski often and on weekdays. The 73-year-old from Peoria, Ill., had tried joining a local ski club years before -- but says sharing a bus and lodging with young skiers (and drinkers and smokers) was "ungodly." Now, she gets e-mails daily from Over the Hill members across the country and has been on ski trips to Utah, Colorado and Austria.

"If everyone has as much fun as I do in retirement, they'll be so lucky," Ms. Fitzgerald says.

Real-estate developers are eager to join in the fun as well. Intrawest Corp., which builds and operates

village-like resorts in the U.S. and Canada, has veteran skiers in mind for its new Storied Places projects -- developments of no more than 25 homes each that are adjacent to ski resorts, among other settings.

The first such community, At Nature's Door, opened this year at Whistler Mountain, a ski resort in British Columbia. Others are to follow at Aspen and North Lake Tahoe in California in the coming years.

Older skiers are looking for "an enhanced service experience," says Michael Coyle, senior vice president of marketing at Intrawest, which is based in Vancouver, British Columbia. At Nature's Door, for instance, resembles a chateau and has resident innkeepers, who can help with such chores as booking ski lessons or having rental equipment delivered to a skier's door.

In the case of At Nature's Door, individuals pay about \$250,000 for interval or time-share ownership: the right to spend at least five weeks a year in their homes, two or three of which fall during the ski season. The three- to four-bedroom homes have hot tubs and media rooms, among other comforts.

"There's a high convenience factor to the place," says Brian Bernstein of Vancouver. A 45-year-old vice president of an investment firm, Mr. Bernstein bought into At Nature's Door in part because a similar investment for full ownership would have gotten him and his family a "shoe box," he says. His living room has a large window with a view of the mountains, and he can walk to the ski lifts from his front door.

Catering to a Niche

Some older skiers are exercising their entrepreneurial muscles, as well. Bill Chaffee, age 49, has skied for most of his life and even quit college as a young man so he could work at various resorts in Colorado. He subscribes to six ski magazines -- and started to think that the industry could spend more time dealing with veteran skiers' questions and interests.

"No matter where I go, I can't find anything that addresses me as a maturing athlete," Mr. Chaffee says.

With his friend Sharon Bray, Mr. Chaffee ended up co-founding the Global Over 50 Ski Club, an Internet-based discount club for skiers and snowboarders. For \$50 a year, members get ski discounts at dozens of resorts in the U.S., as well as savings on ski travel packages in North America, South America, Europe and New Zealand. GO50 is now over a year old and has about 100 members.

Like Mr. Chaffee, Richard Lambert started his own club for older -- much older -- skiers. At age 75, Mr. Lambert -- president of the 70+ Ski Club, based in Schenectady, N.Y. -- organizes jaunts in Vermont, California and elsewhere for veteran skiers. He's even arranged summer trips to New Zealand for people who can't bear waiting on the Northern Hemisphere's winter.

"It's better than sitting in front of the TV," Mr. Lambert says. And how long does he plan to stay on the slopes? His father, he notes, skied until age 94.

-- Ms. Ryst is a reporter for Dow Jones Newswires in New York.

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Heading Downhill Resources of interest for skiers age 50 and older

Regional

• Bumps for Boomers

Aspen, Colo.

www.bumpsforboomers.com

970-989-2529

Ski clinics designed for older skiers. Group and private lessons available.

• **SkiCentral**

Orleans, Ontario

www.skicentral.com/seniors.html

Specialty search engine. Offers free information for all skiers, as well as a page for seniors. Chart compares senior discounts at various ski resorts in the Western U.S.

- Ski NH

North Woodstock, N.H.

www.skinh.com/programs_seniors.cfm

603-745-9396

A statewide association representing 36 resorts and more than 200 lodging properties in New Hampshire. Provides free information about skiing in the state, including senior programs and discounts in various areas. Programs highlighted include the Attitash Bear Peak-New Hampshire T.G.I.F. (Thank Goodness I'm Fifty) group.

- Stratton Trailblazers Ski Club

Stratton, Vt.

www.strattontrailblazers.com

802-824-6405

Annual membership: \$25. Activities for skiers age 50 and older including downhill racing, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, parties and bridge.

National and International

- Global Over 50 Ski Club

South Hadley, Mass.

www.go50.org

866-879-4650

Annual membership: \$50. Discounts available on lift tickets, lodging, instruction and equipment at ski resorts across North America. Members also save on travel packages to ski destinations in the U.S., Canada, Europe, South America and New Zealand.

- Over the Hill Gang International

Colorado Springs, Colo.

www.othgi.com

719-389-0024

Annual membership: \$50. Organizes trips and identifies discounts for skiers age 50 and older in the U.S. and world-wide.

- 70+ Ski Club

Schenectady, N.Y.

www.skiinghistory.org/70plus.html

518-346-5505

Annual membership: \$10 for singles, \$15 for couples.

Organizes activities for skiers 70 and older, including periodic group tours to resorts around the world. Newsletter includes a list of ski areas offering discounts to older skiers.

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Corrections & Amplifications:

The phone number for the Over the Hill Gang International ski club is 719-389-0022. A graphic accompanying the article above listed the club's fax number instead.

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