

TRAVEL

SKIING

Fun and snow at Pennsylvania's Seven Springs



Uncrowded slopes on a recent weekday at Seven Springs Mountain Resort in southwest Pennsylvania. The resort was recently sold to Vail Resorts. Susan Glaser, *The Plain Dealer*

Vail's newest acquisition is just a short trip from Cleveland.

One tip — go on a weekday.

Susan Glaser sglaser@cleveland.com

CHAMPION, PENNSYLVANIA — After one final late-afternoon trip up Polar Bear Express, I stood atop the mountain, surveyed the landscape and considered my options:

- › I could continue to ski, enjoying great conditions on surprisingly uncrowded slopes.
 - › I could give my aching legs a rest and head for the hot tub.
 - › I could go snow tubing, book a massage, play putt-putt, go bowling, have a beer.
- Seven Springs Mountain Resort, an easy three-hour drive from Cleveland, has a little something for everyone on its long roster of activities.



Fun on the slopes at Seven Springs Mountain Resort in Pennsylvania. *Seven Springs*

Its marquee attraction, of course, at least in winter, is its 3,000-foot-elevation ski mountain, with 33 slopes and trails, including a variety of terrain for beginners and experts. But even nonskiers will find plenty to like here, outside and in — from snow tubing and snowshoe tours to a full-service spa, roller skating, retail and some terrific fine dining.

New this year: eight axe-throwing lanes inside the popular Foggy Goggle bar at the base of the mountain.

I'd been to Seven Springs before, years ago, but figured a return trip was warranted with the news late last year that Vail Resorts was buying the historic property.

Vail, based outside Denver, is acquiring property at a rapid pace. In 2019, it pur-

chased Northeast Ohio's three ski parks — Brandywine, Boston Mills and Alpine Valley — in a move that local skiers largely viewed favorably at the time, hopeful for some significant capital investment from the multibillion-dollar company.

The Seven Springs acquisition, which also includes Hidden Valley and Laurel Mountain ski areas, provides Vail with a key geographic link between properties in Ohio and resorts farther east.

To say that Vail Resorts, which now owns 40 ski properties in three countries, has had a difficult few months is an understatement. The company has been the subject of widespread criticism across the U.S. for its inability to fully open numerous resorts this season, including those in Ohio, due to labor shortages and other pandemic-related issues.

Despite the spate of bad headlines, most folks I spoke with during my visit to Seven Springs were cautiously optimistic about the future. Many said they were excited about Seven Springs joining Vail's vast network of resorts, all linked together via the company's Epic Pass — a season pass that allows skiing across North America for one price.

Although some skiers said they were worried about possible price increases, others were excited about an increase in capital investment.

"I think this place could use a cash infusion," said Nicholas Bellicini, a longtime Seven Springs skier from Pittsburgh. "It's time for a change," said Jason Kollar, also of Pittsburgh.

SEE SKIING, K2

SNOWMOBILING 101

No experience (or sled) required for this exciting snow venture

Susan Glaser sglaser@cleveland.com

CHAMPION, PENNSYLVANIA — I pressed the throttle gently, squeezed a bit harder, then finally added some juice. And I was off, a foot and a half of snow beneath me and Forbes State Forest all around.

There's more than one way to slide down the mountain. At Seven Springs Mountain Resort, visitors can ski, snowboard or hop on top a snowmobile for an adrenaline-pumping tour of the region.

Winter enthusiasts in Ohio who want to try snowmobiling before making a major investment don't have many options. You can rent sleds in northern Michigan and upstate New York. Or you can travel to Seven Springs, where the use of a sled comes with a guide and instruction.

Guide Tom Crowe called it

"snowmobiling 101." And indeed, in our group of four, I was the only one who had ever ridden a snowmobile before (once, on a similar tour in western New York years ago).

Seven Springs has offered snowmobile tours for years, and they're super popular, often selling out well in advance — that is, when they're able to be offered.

Unlike the ski slopes, where man made snow supplements what Mother Nature provides, the snowmobile tours require all natural frozen precipitation, and lots of it. Crowe said a minimum of 6 inches of snow is needed to offer the tours, which run on multiuse trails that start on Seven Springs land but also travel through nearby Forbes State Forest and Laurel Hill State Park.

We were lucky, with more than a foot of natural snow on the ground during our visit in late January.

Before we got started, Crowe went over some basics, pointing out the throttle, the brake and the emergency stop button. Almost as important — the button that turns on the heated seat and hand grips.

Lean into the turns, Crowe advised. Do not pull out your phone to take photos. And no racing.

"For those of you who think you signed up for a speed tour, you didn't," he said, noting that we were unlikely to go faster than 25 mph.

Then he went over a few hand signals: stop, slow down and — a thumbs up — ready to go. And off we went.

Joining me and my husband on our one-hour tour were John and Donna Polakovic from suburban Pittsburgh. Due to knee and back injuries, the couple said they no longer ski, but were looking for

some high-adrenaline winter fun. I believe they found it.

We started on top of the mountain, got comfortable on our sleds traveling through a nearby field, then headed into Forbes State Forest, where a multiuse trail is groomed for snowmobile use.

We traveled a total of about 15 miles, through both open and forested terrain, parallel to a creek and along a narrow path with dropoffs on either side. I held my hand grips steady, eyes to the front.

My machine glided easily over the snow, offering a smooth, exhilarating ride, thrilling but not terrifying.

At one point, I looked down at my speedometer and saw I was traveling 33 mph — which felt much faster than it sounds, and plenty fast for me.

SEE SNOWMOBILING, K2

SKIING

Fun and snow at Pennsylvania's Seven Springs

Continues from K1

They spoke to me while finishing breakfast at the Slopeside dining room, inside the main lodge, with large windows overlooking the slopes. They weren't planning on skiing, however. They were shooting clays at the Highlands Sporting Clays facility at the top of the mountain.

ONE OF THE NATION'S OLDEST

The resort dates to the mid-1930s, and is one of the oldest ski areas in the United States, founded by German immigrants Adolph and Helen Dupre. The couple bought 2.5 acres in 1932 and dubbed it Seven Springs Farm, so named because of the seven springs on the property. Not long after, the Dupres opened their farm to local skiers, building a tow rope powered by a Packard automobile engine.

The resort took off, with chairlifts, night skiing and lodging added over the years.

Herman Dupre took over the resort in 1955 after his father's death, and became a pioneer in snow-making technology, earning dozens of patents and founding HKD Snowmakers.

In 2006, Dupre sold Seven Springs to the Nutting family, owners of the Pittsburgh Pirates and Ogden Newspapers, a chain of mostly small publications, including more than a dozen papers in Ohio.

The Nutting family acquired nearby rival ski resort Hidden Valley Resort in 2013. In 2016, the Nuttings announced they would reopen and operate nearby Laurel Mountain Ski Resort, which is on the grounds of nearby Laurel Mountain State Park.

The family has invested millions in the properties over the years, adding new lifts and terrain, updating hotels and lodges, and building the sporting clays facility and Trillium Spa, among other improvements, according to Alex Moser, director of marketing and communications for the resort.

All three ski resorts were included in the \$118 million purchase to Vail Resorts, which was official on Dec. 31.

The Nutting family has retained most of the non-skiing assets, including two golf courses, the sporting clays facility, a small grocery store and real estate company.

As an aside, if you want to feel better about the Dolan family's tepid investment in the Guardians, ask a Pirates fan about the Nuttings. One thing I heard over and over again during my visit was, "Why couldn't he have sold the Pirates?"

To ensure a smooth transition, and because the sale occurred during the middle of the ski season, Nutting's company negotiated to retain operational control of the resorts through April. That means that some controversial policies in place throughout the Vail Resorts system are not in place here.

Visitors to Seven Springs, for example, do not need to be vaccinated against COVID-19 to dine indoors here, as they do at other Vail resorts (including those in Ohio). In addition, employees here aren't required to be vaccinated.

Like many other ski resorts — and the hospitality industry in general — Seven Springs has had challenges finding employees to staff the resort. Tahoe Lodge, for example, at the top of the mountain, hasn't been open all season.

In addition, the 414-room hotel at the bottom of the mountain isn't fully open during the week because of staffing shortages. Several eateries and shops were closed or operating with reduced hours during my visit.

However — and this is certainly most important for a ski resort in January and February — almost all of the skiing terrain was open during my visit, and most lifts were operating, offering access to all areas of the mountain.

CHECKING OUT THE MOUNTAIN

With a 750-foot vertical drop, no one would mistake Seven Springs for a major resort out West or East. But considering its proximity to Cleveland — perfect for a weekend jaunt — it's hard to beat.



Skiers contemplate where to go next at Seven Springs Mountain Resort in southwest Pennsylvania. Susan Glaser, The Plain Dealer

Holiday Valley, about the same distance from Cleveland in western New York, is just a bit larger in terms of skiable terrain.

I spent only one day skiing on my recent visit, a Thursday in late January. A strong recommendation, if you're able: Visit Seven Springs during the week. This place can get crazy busy on weekends, with day skiers descending from Pittsburgh, about 60 miles away. I talked to several pass-holders who said they never come on Saturday.

Even for a weekday, the slopes felt strangely uncrowded on the day I visited, perhaps because of the brutally cold temperatures to start the day (zero degrees at 8 a.m.) But the day warmed up nicely, and the conditions were terrific, with an abundance of natural snow from the previous two weeks.

Seven Springs offers terrain for all levels, with 35% green (easy) slopes, 40% blue (intermediate) and 25% black (advanced and expert).

The mountain offers two main areas for skiers and snowboarders — Front Face and North Face, with the latter having somewhat longer runs, including the resort's longest, a meandering green trail called Lost Boy that runs a mile and a third. It was a great place to get my ski legs back.

Along the route, I stopped to check out skiers and boarders playing inside The Alley, one of Seven Springs' seven terrain parks. Renowned for its terrain parks and pipes, Seven Springs was named the top resort in the East for its parks in 2017 by Transworld Snowboarding magazine.

I generally steer clear of terrain parks — that's not my demographic — but it's always fun to watch the (mostly) younger boarders and skiers ride the rails and boxes and launch airborne over jumps. I enjoyed the show with my skis planted firmly on the ground.

After Lost Boy, I explored more of the North Face terrain, discovering Lost Girl — another fun, meandering green trail — at the far end of the resort. I tested the health of my knees on the black-diamond North Face slope before heading over to the Front Face area.

SEVEN SPRINGS MOUNTAIN RESORT

WHERE

Seven Springs, 777 Water Wheel Drive in Champion, Pennsylvania, is about three hours from Cleveland, east on the Ohio and Pennsylvania turnpikes to Exit 91 (Donegal).

WHAT

The all-season resort features downhill skiing and boarding, snow tubing, snowshoeing, snowmobile tours, sporting clays and more in the winter. Summer activities include golfing (on two 18-hole courses), a zipline, alpine slide, fishing, boating and more.

HOW MUCH

No denying that downhill skiing is expensive. One-day, all-day lift tickets here run \$74 during the week and \$95 on weekends. Rentals are another \$56. For multiple days of skiing, consider a Highlands Pass, which includes access to the slopes at Seven Springs, Hidden Valley and Laurel Mountain.

WHAT ELSE

Other activities include the full-service Trillium Spa; an indoor pool; private, for-rent outdoor hot tubs (\$49 per half-hour — ouch); bowling; roller skating; miniature golf; axe throwing; and several retail shops, including Willi's, a massive ski and snowboard shop.

The resort recently added a high-speed chairlift along the black-diamond Avalanche slope in the Front Face area. That brings the total number of high-speed lifts here to three, including Polar Bear Express, which launches from just outside the ski lodge, and Gunnar, in the North Face area.

For skiers trying to maximize their time on the snow, the more high-speed lifts the better. The new four-person Avalanche lift, which debuted in January, cuts down travel time to the top of the hill by more than a minute — always a good thing when temperatures are hovering in the single digits.

From the Avalanche lift, I explored

Most indoor activities are conveniently located inside the sprawling main lodge at the bottom of the mountain. Once we parked our car at check-in, we didn't need it until it was time to leave.

WHERE TO STAY

Overnight options include the 414-room slopeside hotel in the main lodge, plus more than 1,000 condos of various sizes throughout the resort. Hotel rooms start at about \$250 a night during the week, increasing to \$330 on weekends.

WHERE TO EAT

Though some restaurants are closed this season, there are still numerous dining choices, including Slopeside and the Bavarian Lounge in the main lodge, and the Foggy Goggle and First Tracks at the Ski Lodge. The Grille at Sporting Clays, at the top of the mountain, requires a trip in the car, but is worth the effort.

The best dining experience, however, is at Helen's, in the Dupres' original cabin at the bottom of the hill, featuring three- and five-course meals on the weekends, and a la carte options on Sunday, Wednesday and Thursday. Reservations are required; don't miss it.

MORE INFORMATION

7springs.com, 800-452-2223

Front Face terrain, enjoying the easy Boomerang and Village trails at the far southern end of the resort, as well as more challenging Tyrol, Stowe and Wagner slopes.

Then I headed back north, zigzagging across the mountain, which is how I found myself at the top of Polar Bear Express in late afternoon, contemplating my next move.

The sun was setting, my legs were aching. So I skied one more run and hit the Foggy Goggle for a beer and early dinner. I played a game of bowling before an early bedtime.

And then I got up early the next morning, ready for another day of fun.

SNOWMOBILING

No experience (or sled) required for this exciting snow venture

Continues from K1

Some machines can travel 80-100 mph, according to Crowe, who promised that snowmobiles are safe when operated correctly (at appropriate speeds and with sober drivers).

My only complaint: I declined the use of a snowmobile helmet in favor of my ski helmet. Big mistake. The sled helmet came with a visor, which would have protected my face on the freezing day we toured. Instead, my face transformed into an iced-over, wind-burned orb after an hour on the trails.

My frozen face notwithstanding, the snowmobile tour was a blast — a perfect way to raise some heat on a frigid afternoon.

IF YOU GO

Snowmobile tours at Seven Springs Mountain Resort in Champion, Pa.

Where: Tours leave from the Highlands Sporting Clays facility at the top of the mountain

When: One-hour tours are offered daily at 9:30 a.m., 11:30 a.m. and 2 p.m., weather permitting

How much: \$100 per driver, \$55 per passenger. Drivers must be 18 years old with a valid driver's license

More information: highlandssportingclays.com/snowmobile-snowshoe-tours, 800-452-2223, ext. 7899



Snowmobile touring at Seven Springs Mountain Resort in southwest Pennsylvania. Seven Springs