

They Don't Call It Big Sky (Montana) For Nothing!

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By Anita Paul

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Admiring the expanse of the sky might not be possible amid the skyscrapers of most large cities. But when city dwellers visit Big Sky, Montana, they soon understand that its not called big sky for nothing. Located 48 miles north of Yellowstone National Park in the Rocky Mountain West region, Big Sky is a winter paradise that offers breathtaking views of the raw, natural beauty of Montana. And the sky really does seem bigger there!

Nestled between Madison County and Gallatin County, Big Sky is ski country at its best. With temperatures ranging from the low 40s to the high 50s in the fall and winter months and an average annual snowfall of 400 inches, Big Sky is a welcome sight for snow bunnies of all ages.

Activities

Big Sky is a winter haven for families, offering something for everyone. Big Sky Resort (800-548-4486) offers winter activities for children including arts & crafts, games and nature exploring. The die-hard skiers in the family can hit the slopes and enjoy seemingly endless acres of downhill runs and cross-country trails with lots of elbow room for beginners to advanced skiers.

With breathtaking scenery and unbelievably un-crowded trails, Big Sky Resort can seem like a forgotten winter wonderland. But make no mistake, this world-class ski oasis has been wowing winter vacationers since 1973, and features some of the best skiing in the west. And with a variety of ski packages feature lodging, lift tickets, breakfast and resort fees, planning your family ski vacation is easy.

For those families a bit out of practice on the slopes, the resort offers ski lessons for beginners and for groups, as well as snowboarding lessons for those in search of a more extreme experience. Whether your interest is powder or moguls, instructors can customize your lesson for maximum benefit and fun. Reservations with the Snowsports School are recommended for all lessons.

Don't want to travel with your skis? Not to worry. Big Sky Sports Rental has snow gear for rent for adults and children, including snowboards, snowshoes, skis and more.

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For a 360-degree view of Big Sky that will cause your jaw to drop, take a ride on the Lone Peak Tram. This 15-passenger tram lifts thrill seekers 11,150 feet during a 3-minute ride to the top of the mountain, exposing miraculous views of the surrounding mountain ranges—including the Grand Tetons on a clear day. From there, intermediate and advanced skiers hop on the Lone Peak triple chair for a run down to the tram station and then back to the mountain base.

Accommodations

For the complete ski experience, stay at one of the hotels at Big Sky Resort. The Huntley Lodge, Summit at Big Sky and Shoshone each provide a unique and luxurious perspective of skiing at Big Sky. The mountain also offers nine condominium complexes to choose from.

But if you want to get a feel for the town of Big Sky, simply venture down the mountain away from the resort and discover some slightly different, yet equally beautiful scenery. Amid the expanse of tall pines and snow-lined highways that trace the trail of the Gallatin River, rests a variety of lodging choices—from romantic bed and breakfasts to family friendly budget hotels.

The Rainbow Ranch Lodge (800-937-4132) is a cozy inn overlooking the Gallatin River. With a rustic cabin-like look, the lodge features 16 elegantly appointed rooms with fireplaces and balconies. To accentuate the romantic experience, the lodge features an extensive wine list and exceptional dining including hand-cut Montana beef, homemade pastas, fresh fish and seafood.

The Gallatin Gateway Inn (800-676-3522) is a stunningly restored 1927 grand railroad hotel with a historic flair located between Bozeman and Big Sky. Restaurant choices include fine dining, a casual pub, and complimentary continental breakfast.

Comfort Inn (800-228-5150) offers family accommodations at an affordable price, with ski and stay packages available. Rooms available in standard, deluxe, family suites, and hot tub suites, each including a complimentary deluxe continental breakfast every day, and ski lockers. The Inn offers free snow shuttle to the mountain from the front door.

Restaurants

You can't visit Big Sky without enjoying at least one meal featuring succulent prime-cut Montana beef. And with over 25 bars, restaurants and eateries offering an array of tastes from around the world, you can have it served up just the way you like it. From elegant dining to casual faire to quick picks from the grill, the restaurant scene in Big Sky includes standalone bars and grills as well as fancier eateries located in many of the area's lodges and hotels.

The Bugaboo Café (47995 Gallatin Rd., Ste. 101, Gallatin Gtwy., MT (995-3350) offers comfort food with a gourmet flare in a fun, family-oriented atmosphere. While Dante's Inferno (406-995-3999) features an array of dinner options including pasta, steaks, seafood, salads, pizza, and a children's menu, as well as quick lunches and nightly entertainment.

The Cabin Bar & Grill (406-995-4244) is located in Big Sky's Mountain Village, and features rustic Montana elegance in a warm and inviting atmosphere. Lunch and dinner are served in a fine dining setting enhanced by the enormous windows and deck overlooking the snow covered ski runs.

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Getting There

Billings (BIL) is the largest and busiest airport in Montana, but there are also regular flights into Bozeman (BZN). From either airport, rent a car and hit the open road to explore the beauty and vast open landscape of this unique state. You'll reach Big Sky in about 2 ½ hours if you fly into Billings. The drive is only about one hour from Bozeman.

Anita Paul is a freelance writer, marketing consultant and owner of The Write Image, a marketing communications company that caters to small businesses and non-profit organizations. With over ten years experience in marketing and public relations, she is the author of "Take The Mystery Out Of Marketing" a guide to help business owners create, execute and evaluate a strategic marketing plan. She can be reached at www.thewriteimage.net.

Montana Casinos

By Adel Awwad

Montana is impressive in size as the fourth largest state in the entire country. It spans approximately 94 million acres. Montana boasts a sizeable mass of natural forests and millions of acres of protected wilderness. Wildlife is abundant in Montana, including bears, deer, elk, wolves, and antelope. In fact, Montana is home to about 500 species of wildlife. Winters in Montana are usually cold, but without extended periods of freezing weather. In the summer, temperatures typically hover in the 70s.

There are plenty of attractions in Montana, including the National Bison Range, Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park, the Charles M Russell National Wildlife Refuge, and Yellowstone National Park. Montana actually shares Yellowstone, the oldest national park in the world, with Wyoming and Idaho. Montana is also home to breathtaking mountains, pristine waters, and relaxing hot springs. Visitors to Montana can enjoy a plethora of activities, from hiking and skiing to dining and shopping. Furthermore, for many visitors, as well as residents, Montana casinos also hold great appeal.

Montana is truly a gambler's delight. Gamblers can enjoy video poker, bingo machines, and keno in Montana. The maximum bet for these games is \$2 and the maximum payout is \$800. Many live games are also legal in Montana casinos, such as raffles, keno, bingo, rummy, whist, hearts, cribbage, and bridge. Also available in Montana casinos are fantasy sports leagues and sports pools.

In Montana, bars and taverns are permitted to have and operate up to 20 video gambling devices, allowing patrons to enjoy bingo, poker, and keno. These machines do not pay out cash, as law does not permit that. Instead, machines located in bars and taverns supply the user with a paper receipt, which is redeemed by the establishment's cashier. Bets are capped at \$2, with payouts of \$800. As required by Montana gaming regulations, these machines return at least 80 percent.

There are several Indian Montana casinos. These casinos also provide users with paper receipts, redeemable from a casino cashier. The maximum bet in Indian Montana casinos is \$2, with a maximum payout of \$1000. However, there are no minimum or maximum payout requirements for Montana casinos on Indian reservations.

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There are many casinos spread throughout Montana, allowing for quite a large selection of games to play. The names of Montana Casinos, as well as locations and descriptions, can be found quite easily online. To gamble legally in Montana, you must be at least 18 years of age.

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