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SOUTHWESTERN DISPATCH: Prime Time In Taos

Jordan Whitley



Cristof Brownell guides the way

Go [HERE](#) for a gallery of images from her trip.

Date: January 21, 2008. Time: 7:00AM. Location: Taos, New Mexico. Base elevation: 9,207 feet. Windchill: 2° F.

With head pounding, stomach growling, and toes rapidly losing circulation, the ascent begins.

I hop on the backseat of a Polaris sled for the three-mile vertical charge up to Wheeler Ridge. Trepidation comes and goes as we round cliffs and catch air, but when the trail ends and the valley expands before me, all fear and discomfort melts into pure excitement.

The rising sun illuminates Kachina Peak (12,481 ft), and my bird's eye view of Taos has me jonesing for first chair on Lift 1.

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"See that? Just to the right of Kachina is where you'll find the best, soft, steep conditions," Cristof Brownell, owner of the soon-to-open Northside backcountry ski operations, tells me as he points to across the valley to Highline Ridge.

Although Taos hasn't seen snowfall in over a week, the 67-inch snowpack still provides optimal terrain for the early season, thanks to a blistery Arctic freeze. Temperatures rarely rose above 20° Fahrenheit last Thursday and Friday, keeping the powder in stable condition.

In fact, the entire mountain seems to be one giant playground right now. More than one fellow skier called the terrain "super fun." Now, this in no way implies the runs are easy; Taos is one of the steepest and most challenging spots in the U.S.

As Cristof and I speed back to the village, I decide that the best way to get the most out of this mountain is to drill the hardcore locals. We pull into the base, and I immediately zero in on Seth Bullington, a regular on the steeps.

"If you want to get a feel for how you'll ski for the day, take Pollux trees. It's varied and will really test your ability." This run is just off Chair 2, which also leads to West Basin Ridge, which Bullington says is a safe bet for a soft ridge. As for



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nice moguls and killer views, he recommends Lorelei Trees.

Alejandro Blake, born and raised in the valley, tends to agree. But for some good drops, he says Bamboo Nose has the best cliffs with smooth landings. For an extreme ride, he advises taking Trescow off of Highline. Blake warns however that, "these runs are for experts only." Anyone looking for wide open, traffic-free blues should try Totemoff on the backside.

After all this talk, I ski Taos for myself. I find Hunziker Bowl to be both challenging and fun, and the new "Out-to-Launch" terrain park is surely the most entertaining. It sits just below Chair 7, where freeskiers can hit four jumps, ten rails, and various boxes.

And for anyone who doesn't know, the skiers-only days are rapidly coming to an end. On March 19th, joint custody of the mountain goes to the world of snowboarding.

So head over now- while the lift lines are short and the air is calm...

Go [HERE](#) for a gallery of images from her trip.



Taos has many easy runs too

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