

Travel & Vacations

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Ski schools resort to extremes to attract snow-loving teens -- but be aware, they're pricey

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"I'm not going, and you can't make me!"
Melanie said.

Certainly that's not what any parent wants to hear, especially on vacation. When she was 3, I could try to reason with her, but if all else failed, I could pick her up and take her where she needed to go, even kicking and screaming, confident she'd be fine once she calmed down. But at 13, that wouldn't work. Neither would reason, as any parent of a teen knows.



LEARNING TO SKI: Ski School's group lesson for teens at Aspen/Snowmass.

You'd think I was forcing her to spend all morning reading *The Odyssey*.

All I wanted her to do was go back to a much-lauded ski school program designed especially for teens and packed with kids her age who skied at her level. But after trying it one day, she proclaimed it to be boring. Even worse, "All of the kids were annoying!"

So there I was, faced with the same dilemma as many skiing parents. Mel didn't want to ski with me (I'm too slow, and I refuse to jump off rocks and rails) and I didn't want her cruising a big, unfamiliar mountain on her own.

That's exactly why ski school directors at resorts are working so hard to develop programs that will appeal to this notoriously fickle market -- teen aprs-ski hangouts, special teen-only clinics (some just for girls), and an ever-growing array of terrain parks and special ticket prices.

"Resorts know this is a huge market" and the future of the industry, said Michael Berry, president of the National Ski Areas Association and himself the dad of a snow-loving 13-year-old. Nearly one-third of those hitting the slopes these days are 24 or younger, Berry said, while more than 9.4 million skiers and boarders in America are in their teens or younger.

"We want them to fall in love with snow sports at 13 or 15 so that they'll stay in it for the next 50 years," Berry said.

Be forewarned that snow sports, whether for toddlers or teens, aren't cheap. Lift-lesson packages can cost more than \$100 a day.

That said, here's what's hot this season: "Anything extreme," said Katie Fry, managing director of the Ski/Snowboard Schools of Aspen.

"Not hanging out with mom and dad!" said Sherry McDonald, manager of Vail's Children's Ski and Snowboard School. "We recognize that teens are looking for some adventure and independence."

Safely, of course.

"We're aiming at kids who have traditionally lost interest in ski school," said Jackson Hole's Lexey Wauters.

Here's a sampling of the most innovative offerings out there this season:

- Extreme skiing champion and former Olympian Wendy Fisher is back with her Fishski clinics (www.fishski.com) just for teen girls at Crested Butte, Aspen and California's Sugar Bowl. "I figure this would be a more relaxed and comfortable learning environment," Fisher said. "It would get rid of any head games that can take place if boys are around." For snowboarders, the clothing company Roxy (www.roxy.com) hosts camps around the country for girls of all ages and abilities.
- The Teens Too Cool for School program operates all season at Snowmass in Colorado, with special clinics for young experts who want to attempt the steepest terrain. At Aspen Mountain, teens can join Othello's Rail Rider Clinic to focus on jumps and rails -- safely. (Melanie gave that program a decided thumbs-up.) There are also special clinics at Snowmass for children who have never boarded or skied before (www.aspensnowmass.com). Vail (www.vailresorts.com) also runs teen clinics daily.
- Explore the backcountry on skis or boards with Jackson Hole's Team Extreme (www.jacksonhole.com), learning avalanche safety and navigating off-piste terrain.
- Enjoy the teen aprs-ski scene at Smuggler's Notch in Vermont (www.smuggs.com), where there are two teen clubs, including one for kids 16 and older. The resort also hosts special teen parties, with activities ranging from karaoke to big-screen movies.
- Learn life lessons in former extreme skiing champion Kim Reichhelm's Freeski teen camp (www.skiwithkim.com) at Aspen Highlands and Crested Butte, Colo., designed for teens who want to ski extreme terrain. "There's a lot beyond skiing -- setting goals, meeting challenges, that it's OK to fall," said Reichhelm.

Before you decide where to take your teen this season, call and ask what teen-only programs they have. Even if your teens aren't very proficient on the slopes, you don't want them stuck in a class with younger kids or adults. One tip: If you have several teens in your gang, you may be able to book a private lesson for the group at less per child than a ski school would cost.

Once you arrive, expect your teens to spend much of their time in the terrain parks, whether they're on skis or boards. These areas have become the unofficial teen hangouts at many resorts, said Berry, and resorts are pulling out all the stops to make them better. Keystone Resort (www.keystone.snow.com) in Colorado is revamping its kid-friendly terrain areas, including the expansion of a beginner park.

Mammoth Mountain Resort in California (www.mammothmountain.com) has more than 70 acres devoted to terrain parks.

Vermont's Mount Snow (www.mountsnow.com) has four terrain parks.

Invite one of your child's friends. You'll feel more comfortable letting them explore the mountain together.

Melanie would be all for that idea. She didn't go back to ski school, nor did she head out on her own. She spent the morning sleeping.