

2W West

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Eureka! Real Home-Style Skiing



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Ski Stowe ... Ski Sun Valley ... Ski Eureka...

Ski Eureka? Three years ago, I snorted when somebody opened a ski area in Eureka. I'm from Vermont, where the skiers now outnumber the dairy cattle. Vermont has snow and mountains. Eureka has the Urethane Roller factory. Opening a ski area in Eureka seemed outlandish.

But last Friday morning's sun, fresh snow and nippy air pulled me westward on Interstate 44 toward the Hidden Valley Ski Area. I went to see and to scoff. But I came away thinking that maybe somebody had a neat idea there.

Mind you, Hidden Valley is no Killington. The Killington ski complex rises just east of my hometown of Rutland, Vt., and boasts of being the biggest in the East. Check the numbers: 7,000 acres, 17 ski lifts, six lodges and a network of trails that run as long as 10 miles and drop as much as 3,060 feet. On peak days, Killington draws more than 15,000 skiers.

Judged against Killington, Hidden Valley comes to small change indeed. Hidden Valley covers a mere 110

acres. Its longest trail spans only three-tenths of a mile and drops a humble 282 feet. One short lift and two old-fashion rope tows serve peak crowds of 1,000 (although evening and all-night skiing can boost the daily total to 3,000). Snow-making machines labor to overcome God's indifference.

Last Friday, as I stood outside the new but modest lodge and scanned the horizon of low limestone ridges, I thought how different Hidden Valley was from Killington.

And how much nicer.

The trip to Hidden Valley from I-44 covers five miles, the same length as the Killington Access Road. Skiers bound for Killington pass through a landscape of A-frame subdivisions, barnboard boutiques, fancy restaurants and trendy wine bars. The architecture is phony rural or ersatz Bavarian.

To get to Hidden Valley, you pass through a landscape that looks as peaceful as Killington must have looked before the ski boom. Along Missouri Highway 109, the major man-made feature is a Marianist novitiate; what goes on there contrasts starkly with the *apres-ski* action along the Killington Access Road. You turn left off 109 onto Alt Road at a field where the wheat stubble poking through the snow lends an especially Midwestern flavor. And the only remotely Bavarian touch is the name "Ed Holthaus" on a string of acreage-for-sale signs.

At Killington's lodges, New Yorkers glitter in designer ski clothing. At Hidden Valley, fashion runs to blue jeans, fatigue pants, flannel shirts and tavern jackets. At Killington, the skiers project an Eastern cool. At Hidden Valley, they fall on their fannies and laugh at themselves.

"Sure, we get beginners for the most part," says Hidden Valley's Kent Graham. But in its three seasons, he says, Hidden Valley has introduced 50,000 St. Louisans to skiing. Those with enough money can move up to weekends at places like Aspen, Colo. The rest can return to Hidden Valley, where \$29 will get you parked, outfitted in rental equipment and issued a lift ticket.

For the *apres-ski* stuff, you can head into downtown Eureka for chicken-fried steaks at Hanephin's cafe or draft Busch at Joe Boccardi's pizza place. True, you won't rub elbows with glittering New Yorkers. On the other hand, you won't pay those glittering New York prices.

Funny: Killington, in quaint Vermont, has all the personal touch of the reception center at Fort Benning. And Hidden Valley, set down in a metropolitan area amid the smokestacks and soybeans of the Midwest, offers the kind of home-style skiing you associate with a Norman Rockwell painting.

Ski Eureka. Hey, it has a ring to it.