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SANDPOINT, Idaho – Relaxing in the jacuzzi on the roof of the Selkirk Inn, a group of visiting skiers were savoring the joys of the day's adventures on the adjacent Schweitzer slopes.

Rarely are there surprises when skiers are bragging about their exploits in the jacuzzi. But the accents of several of the skiers caught us by surprise. We could regionalize them as coming from the Deep South. We were surprised to learn they were part of a 25-skier contingent from the Knoxville Ski Club in Tennessee.

Talk about a long way from home. But the Tennessee skiers were loving their trip about as far across the continental United States as you can imagine, considering Sandpoint's location near the northern most part of the Idaho Panhandle. What brought them to Idaho, we wondered.

"Our club takes at least one major trip every year, and sometimes more, and most of us have been to all the big-name ski resorts," explained our new friend. "We were at a ski show and the representative from Schweitzer talked about the great snow, the great pricing and the lack of crowds. That sounded pretty good to us. The best thing is, they weren't stretching the truth. Most of our members will tell you this is a great trip for us."

Whether you're coming all the way across the country, or just up the coast from Southern California, Schweitzer is a challenge to get to, but well worth the effort. Coming from Southern California, the most direct route is to fly to Spokane, Wash., via whatever hub your airline uses (in my case, United through San Francisco). You then drive from Spokane into Idaho (Coeur d'Alene) and up to Sandpoint and Schweitzer. The drive is about 90 minutes from the airport, weather permitting.

Once you arrive, Schweitzer is a pleasant surprise in so many ways, starting with the size and diversity of the ski mountain, but also including the amenities available if you stay at the resort in properties like the Selkirk. Schweitzer offers more than 2,900 acres of skiable terrain (Mammoth is 3,500 acres to offer a comparison. It is also in the midst of an excellent year for snowfall. More than 300 inches have fallen and it snowed both of our days there in late January.

“It’s been a tough winter for many resorts across the western U.S.,” said Sean Mirus, director of sales and marketing. “But Schweitzer has received consistent snowfall throughout the season.”

That included more than 100 inches in January, and Schweitzer is known for major snowfalls in March, suggesting a great reason to consider a trip this season. The base depth at Schweitzer Resort village is currently more than five feet, with about 10 feet of base on the ground at the 6,300-foot summit.

Our new friends from Tennessee marveled at the grooming, the lack of crowds, and the length of the skiing runs. Schweitzer is an efficient ski area, with one high-speed detachable 6-pack lift, two detachable quads, and four other chairlifts.

Because it was snowing consistently on our two-day visit, we found the long cruising runs that led down to the Stella 6-pack were the best combination of visibility, grooming and wide-open skiing. One morning a few of us ventured into some of the off-piste tree runs off the Great Escape chair that serves the mountain summit. We found the conditions excellent and a good challenge. Our new friends from Knoxville marveled at our interest in tree skiing, but we explained it was a West Coast specialty.

Schweitzer also benefits from the town of Sandpoint, which is a year-round destination on its own and which offers dining and nightlife and a chance to experience the mountain lifestyle.

“People ask about Schweitzer but they’re also interested in Sandpoint, because it’s such a great time and things are very unique up here,” said Dig Chrismer, marketing manager for the mountain, and a hearty skier in her own right. “You may come here for the skiing, but you stay for the lifestyle. This is a great place to visit but an even greater place to live.”

About a decade ago, we skied Schweitzer as part of a ski trip that was headquartered in Coeur d’Alene, and we found the mountain quite attractive. At the time, we wondered what it would be like to stay at the resort, rather than make a hefty drive for your turns. But at that time, the base was not as developed and the lodging offerings were minimal. Now the resort has grown into the two of attraction that would lure a group of skiers from Tennessee – and others from many other states, by the way – to experience one of the best undiscovered ski areas in the west.

Oh, and if you’re looking for the snow that has missed the Sierras this year, they’ve got it. Storms stayed north and continue to allow Schweitzer to experience what will likely be a record season for both snowfall and skier visits.

Pricing, by the way, is more Idaho than California or Colorado. An all-day adult lift ticket is \$79 (you know the comparisons), while kids ski for \$50. There are also discounts for seniors, students, and military. Kids under 6 or over 80 ski for free.

Information: www.schweitzer.com (<http://www.schweitzer.com>), or 877-487.4643.

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