

New up north

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White stuff ... a skier enjoys the powder at Steamboat Springs.

As our season draws to a close, skiers will find new features and challenges being unveiled in the other hemisphere, writes Rachael Oakes-Ash.

With the Winter Olympics taking place in Vancouver this northern winter, all eyes will be on all things snow and not just in Canada. There are new terrain, new chairlifts and new hotels in the US, Canada, Japan and Europe snowfields.

Telluride in Colorado is already known for big-mountain terrain with super-steep pitches. Blue runs in Telluride are black runs in most other resorts. This season the resort opens up even more "EX –

Extreme Terrain" at the top of the Revelation Lift, itself opened last season. Expect cliffs, steep slopes, rocks and goat trails that will challenge your wits and have you crying for your mummy. See tellurideskiresort.com.

Still in Colorado, the Four Seasons is opening a hotel in Vail, the first Four Seasons in that state. The resort is only the third Four Seasons hotel in a mountain environment and will feature 121 rooms and 35 apartments. Services include ski valets, a spa, outside pool, fine dining restaurant and apres bar lounge. See fourseasons.com and vail.snow.com.

The celebrity-favoured Sun Valley resort in Idaho launches a new gondola, the largest Doppelmayr project in North America, with 56 detachable cabins capable of taking 1800 passengers an hour. Bruce Willis's Soldier Mountain, also in Idaho, has rebuilt its burnt-down lodge, with new dining facilities, ski rental and more ski school facilities. See sunvalley.com.

Good news in Utah for those who like a tippie. If you thought you couldn't get a drink in the Mormon state, think again. The alcohol laws have taken a turn for the better in the ski town of Park City, with no holds barred on purchase and consumption. Gone are the "private club" rules and half shots disguised as full shots. Park City Mountain Resort is celebrating with the opening of the High West Distillery, the world's only ski-in, stumble-out distillery. A century-old stable has been revamped to hold the distillery, which brews both whiskey and vodka. See highwestdistillery.com.

The Canyons Resort, also in Park City, opens the Dakota Lodge and Golden Door Spa doors for its first winter. A 1500-square-metre Japanese-inspired day spa offers 15 treatment rooms and a fitness centre to help soothe the head from too much time in the distillery. See thecanyons.com.

Further north, in Canada, Marmot Basin launches a \$C8 million (\$9 million) lift. The longest high-speed quad in the Alberta Canadian Rockies features a vertical rise of 596 metres and slope length of 2.3 kilometres and is capable of transporting 2400 skiers and boarders an hour. See skimarmot.com.

Revelstoke Mountain Resort in British Columbia boasts North America's longest vertical, with 1713 metres from top to bottom. The resort is a mix of resort skiing, cat skiing and heli skiing, with half a million accessible skiable acres. The Freeskiing World Tour will be held at Revelstoke for the first time from January 6-10.

The resort also launches its Revelstoke Outdoor Centre at the foot of the gondola, in Nelsen Lodge. The one-stop shop offers programs from snow school to avalanche awareness courses, guided ski touring and, new this year, the First Tracks Cat Skiing, including breakfast and an early morning ride up the mountain. See revelstokemountainresort.com.

In Asia, Japan is still a hot ski spot for Australians, with Niseko still leading the field. The Vale ski-in, ski-out apartments will open this season. The luxury apartments are the largest in Niseko and come with private onsens overlooking the ski run, plus a communal thermal complex for guests. It is available for short-term holiday accommodation through Travelplan and investment through Nisade. See travelplan.com.au.

Over in India it's all about Gulmarg, Kashmir, where skiing comes in 4000-plus-metre peaks for intrepid snow travellers. Himalayan Cat Skiing offers cat skiing day trips, and this year Gulmarg Heliski launches the region's first official heli ski operation, with fully trained guides, experienced pilots and fully inclusive snow tours, including accommodation. See gulmargheliski.com.

If you prefer a more established approach, you can't go past St Anton, the home of European skiing in Austria. You could be the first to ski St Anton all on your lonesome on the first day of the season. The winner of this competition to lay the first tracks of the 2009-10 season will be given champagne and canapes and will be the first down the hill. See stantonamarlberg.com.

Valfrejus, in the Maurienne valley near the Italian border with France, is an intimate, family-friendly resort with extensive intermediate terrain. This little-known resort is close to the Three Valleys, with access via the Orelle cable car to Val Thorens. A new eight-person gondola and detachable six-seater chairlift joins the Valfrejus fold for next year. See www.valfrejus.com.

Last but far from least is the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics, from February 12-28, when Whistler takes on the role of host mountain resort. With 3240 hectares of skiable terrain and 1500 metres of vertical, you will be sharing the mountain with the world's elite winter sports athletes. Festivities, celebrations and parties are guaranteed. See vancouver2010.com and whistlerblackcomb.com.

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