

TRAVEL

Ski season is on its way (c'mon, snow!) and Anthony Lakes resort awaits your arrival

By Terry Richard
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Times have hardly changed on the ski hill high in eastern Oregon's Elkhorn Range, that line of jagged peaks that looks like a bad set of molars.

Back in the winter of 1968, Ski magazine assigned its correspondents to determine America's most lovable ski area. Their choice was Anthony Lakes Mountain Resort, which nestles in those same set of mountains on the back side of Baker City.

The magazine no longer bestows that particular honor. But if it did, Anthony Lakes would long ago have had the award retired in its honor, because it still has the same kind of friendliness the magazine noted 46 years ago.

That nugget of information, dug up in the mountain range known for its gold, is contained in a 1971 book, "Anthony, A Tale of Two Skis," written by Stan Ingram.

Much of the book rings as true today as when it was published. The book tells how the ranching and town families of northeast Oregon came together to bring the first tow to Anthony Lakes in 1962, an exciting moment for valley residents who had been walking up the hill to ski since the 1930s.

Yes, there have been some upgrades since then, but nothing as important as getting that first lift. These days, the poma lift has been swapped for a chairlift, a first-rate cross-country center complements the downhill skiing and Baker City-brewed beer far outsells national brands in the resort's Starbottle Saloon.

But, other than that, just like back in the 1960s, strangers strike up a conversation, just to find out who the new person up skiing is; skiers in the lift line actually wait their turn, or wave others ahead; and the pickled asparagus that garnishes a Sunday morn-



ANTHONY LAKES RESORT

The view from Variety Ridge. Scenes from Anthony Lakes Ski Area, in the Elkhorn Range west of Baker City, Oregon.

ing Bloody Mary is grown and canned by a woman down the valley.

The ski crowds have picked up a tad since the 1960s, too, but a skier visiting from western Oregon may not notice. As general manager Peter Johnson points out, a season total of 23,000 downhill skiers at Anthony Lakes is about as much as a busy weekend at Mt. Bachelor or Mt. Hood Meadows.

And those ranching and town families still love the place, maybe even more than ever.

Over the years, the resort had seen various owners, but now it seems to have found its way into the right hands. Back in 2010, ownership led by a dentist from Vancouver decided it was time for a change and offered to gift the resort to Baker County.

The county didn't want to be in the ski business, but the people in charge also knew they couldn't risk closure of the resort. So the county accepted the ski area as a gift, then turned it over to a nonprofit

Anthony Lakes

How to get there: 45 miles southwest of La Grande, 35 miles northwest of Baker City, 315 miles east of Portland; 47500 Anthony Lake Highway, North Powder, OR 97867; 541-856-3277

Web: anthonylakes.com

Stats: 8,000-foot top elevation, 900-foot vertical drop; one triple chairlift, one beginner handle tow, one wonder carpet; 21 named runs; 1.5-mile longest run; 1,100 acres of skiable terrain.

Nordic: 30K groomed track, \$13 trail fee; one lift ride for snowshoeing \$6; Nordic center is in a U.S. Forest Service building and serves a small selection of fresh, local food; cross-country trails also reach to the downhill daylodge.

Lift cost/hours: \$35; 9 a.m.-4 p.m., open Thursday through Sunday and during school holidays; full day snowcat skiing \$199 (book seven days in advance); half-price Thursdays begin in December.

Lodging: Discounted lift tickets are available with lodging at motels in Baker City, La Grande, Union and North Powder. For details, contact La Grande/Union County Visitors Bureau at 800-848-9969, visitlagrande.com, or Baker County Visitor & Convention Bureau at 800-523-1235, visitbaker.com. Groups can rent two yurts for overnight stays among the cross-country trails. RVs welcome overnight in the resort parking lot.

company to manage it.

"It's worked out great," Johnson said. "A lot of people feared that the ski area would go away if the county hadn't accepted it. To show their sup-

port a lot of people bought season's passes that first winter, even if they had no intention of skiing."

Johnson said Anthony Lakes has been working to return the

favor.

"We spend all of our dollars locally on goods and services, at least as much as we can, in Baker, Union, Umatilla and Wallowa counties. We even make sure to purchase embroidery of resort clothing locally. And the local population provides our workforce."

In addition to its gorgeous location and small-town friendliness, Anthony Lakes has another ace in its hole: it has the highest base elevation for a ski area in Oregon, higher than most anything east into the Rockies.

The ski area sits at 7,100 feet. It's a bit of a steep drive, but the road gets good care, being part of one of Oregon's most pleasant summer drives, the Elkhorn Drive Scenic Byway of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest.

Admittedly, Anthony Lakes has a major drawback. Since the mountain only rises 900 feet above the bottom of the lift, the ski area's only chairlift covers much of the terrain.

But that one lift serves some mighty fine skiing, often the

best powder skiing in Oregon. Experts can spring for more advanced skiing, with a snowcat to fetch them after a run down the back side.

And skiers who like to mix it up on the downhill and cross-country trails will love Anthony Lakes. The two trail systems are right next to each other and the ski area's main lodge is the only one in Oregon where the two types of skiers can so easily begin their day, meet for lunch and end by bragging about it in the Starbottle Saloon.

The venerable watering hole in the lower level of the day lodge takes its name from a sign used in "Paint Your Wagon," which was filmed in the 1960s in the Baker Valley and at the ski area.

Despite starring Lee Marvin and Clint Eastwood, the film was so bad that it pretty much ended future attempts at interesting the public in Western musicals. The film's leading actress, Jean Seberg, described listening to Marvin's voice "as like rain gurgling down a rusty pipe."

Waiting for ski season

If it's mid-November, it must be time for ski season on Mount Hood. Some of Oregon's resorts are getting more involved with the making of artificial snow, but none yet has enough snowmaking equipment to open a chairlift without help from Mother Nature. Mt. Hood Skibowl does have enough snow guns, however, to set an opening date of Thursday, Nov. 27, for its tubing hill. Keep an eye on the sky and hope that you need earmuffs the next time you walk out the door. That means ski season will soon be here. Until then:

SkiFever: The annual Portland ski and snowboard extravaganza takes place at the Portland Expo Center Friday through Sunday, Nov. 14-16. It brings together enough industry types to fill 400 booth spaces, with the year's biggest ski sale, plus resorts that can fill your travel plans. Look for details at portlandskifever.com.

Mount Hood Meadows: New this year at Mount Hood's busiest resort, among other things, are a new flow park the length of a chairlift, plus a new rope tow to serve Shipyard rail park. The website has also been upgraded, so give it a look and make some plans to ski this winter: skihood.com.

Timberline Ski Area: Running this winter is an Instagram hashtag campaign, #save100. Send in a photo and you could see it displayed on a special poster, or even win a season's pass for next winter. Also, the Mt. Hood Express bus line from Sandy to Timberline Lodge has new state-of-the-art buses this winter; timberlinelodge.com.

Mt. Hood Skibowl: The big news is that the parking lot rope tow at Skibowl West has been replaced by a user-friendly conveyor lift. The rental shop has also been upgraded so guests can pay online and be remembered for repeat visits; skibowl.com.



Asit Rathod skis deep powder on a partly sunny day at Mt. Hood Meadows Resort.

RANDY BOVERMAN



After skiing, it's time to refuel

By Terry Richard
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Eastern Oregon's bars have been wetting whistles with the best of them since the 1870s mining era. And the tradition has not faded.

Many still go out of their way to keep another thirsty crowd happy: skiers and snowboard-

ers. Some who ride the slopes don't consider the day to be over until they quaff a cold one with friends in the saloon. Note that a cold one doesn't have to contain alcohol, because there are some mighty fine small batch sodas that do the trick, too. Après-ski is more family-friendly these days.

Here are the best après-ski bars in eastern Oregon:

1889 Saloon at Geiser Grand Hotel, Baker City

The stagecoach doesn't disgorge passengers for overnight stays anymore and the bank across the street doesn't get robbed, but you can be forgiven if your visit harks back to those days. Eastern Oregon's rich history of mining and ranching is embraced throughout Baker City. These days, those century-old buildings are fixed up and are home to modern businesses.

Vibe: The Geiser Grand and its 1889 Saloon are downtown. Lovers of restored historic hotels travel great distances just to stay at the Geiser Grand. The saloon is kid-friendly until 4 p.m., when winter's after-ski hours kick in. The youngsters can sit just a few steps upstairs in an adjoining room and listen to the Friday-night fiddler right along with their parents. Other nights' entertainment may feature piano, comedy or dinner theater.

Location: Downtown, about one mile west of Interstate 84 Exit 304; 1996 Main St., 888-434-7374, geisergand.com.

Hours: 4-10 p.m. (till midnight on weekends), but the door to the lobby is open for a look-around at other hours.

Menu: The selection of happy hour appetizers includes fundido with house-made chips and crispy green beans with honey mustard sauce. Micro favorites are Shredder's Wheat from Baker City and Blonde Bombshell from Redmond. Connoisseurs of fine Oregon spirits will opt for a shot of Stein straight rye whiskey from Joseph, the first eastern Oregon distillery since Prohibition.

Lodging: The hotel's 30 nicely appointed guest rooms are just upstairs.

Starbottle Saloon at Anthony Lakes

The first stop for après-ski fun in eastern Oregon is usually Starbottle Saloon, the bar at Anthony Lakes. Starbottle takes its name from an old sign used as a prop in the 1969 film "Paint Your Wagon," which chose Baker County as its primary outdoor location.

Vibe: Friendly. Don't be surprised if a local strikes up a conversation. The main bar is over-21 only, but the divider is a mesh fence so families can still see one another and listen to the same music. Various ages can sit side by side at the outer edge, where the brown bag room abuts the bar. When someone gets up to dance, it's a good chance the first couple will be Creston and Dovey Shaw. He hits 92 this year and still skis, though he gave up ski patrol duties a couple of years back.

Location: Lower level of the Anthony Lakes ski lodge, about 30 miles northeast of Baker City; 47500 Anthony Lake Highway, North Powder; 541-856-3277; anthonylakes.com.

Hours: Around 10 a.m. to 5-6 p.m., or when the last patron leaves. On live music Saturdays the fun pushes 7 p.m.

Menu: The upstairs cafeteria is the main dining room, serving ski lodge food with beer and wine, while Starbottle downstairs features light bites and snacks, plus the full-service bar. Popular items in the saloon are pizza and pork sliders.

Lodging: There is no hotel at the resort, but the ski area provides free electrical plug-ins for about a dozen RVs in the parking lot. Also, two yurts nestled among the cross-country ski trails can be rented.

Vote online

To kick off the ski season, online readers will be voting for the best après-ski bar in Oregon. To weigh in on the best of eastern Oregon, visit oregonlive.com/travel.



TERRY RICHARD/THE OREGONIAN

Barley Brown's Brew Pub, Baker City

Some places have hit the magic formula. This is one of those places. Try to get a seat at the Baker City landmark at 7 p.m. on a Friday and you likely will be waiting. Which isn't all that bad, because you could do that across the street at the pub's new Tap House. The dining crowd thins out after 8 p.m. Barley Brown's packs in the crowd because it has good food, great beer and is a community gathering spot.

Vibe: If you don't know someone at Barley Brown's, you soon will. A half-dozen patrons chatted me up during my recent visit. The business buys a corporate season pass to Anthony Lakes, so employees can ski up there. The Tap House is for 21 and older only, but the restaurant section of the pub is family friendly at all hours.

Location: 2190 Main St. in downtown Baker City; 541-523-4266, barleybrownsbeer.com.

Hours: Restaurant pub: 4-10 p.m. Monday-Saturday. Tap House: 2-10 p.m. Monday-Saturday, noon to 4ish on Sundays.

Menu: The Tap House has 22 house-made beers on tap, while the pub usually has another four or five not available across the street. Local Larry Mack swears by the Flat Iron Steak (\$20), from Country Natural Beef. "It's the most flavorful steak I've ever had," he said.

Lodging: The Geiser Grand Hotel is a short walk away. The Bridge Street Inn (134 Bridge St., 541-523-6571) is the other downtown lodge.

LG Brewskis, Union

Sometimes a name says it all. A beer and wine bar named LG Brewskis simply has to be on the list of top après-ski bars in eastern Oregon. It's been open for a bit more than five years, on the slow road between Anthony Lakes and Union.

Vibe: LG Brewskis is for 21 and over at all times. The tavern is clean and tidy, with a wall of beer posters and signs. In addition to video poker machines, entertainment was available at one pool table and a shuffleboard table. A nice, fenced patio out back beckons during good weather.

Location: Downtown Union at 267 S. Main; 541-562-6286; unionnor.org.

Hours: Tuesday to Sunday, 1-10 p.m.

Menu: Bar food includes burgers, quesadillas and the like, but skiers making their way into La Grande for dining later usually opt for the Notcho Average Nachoes. LG doesn't mind undercutting the Bend resort on its namesake beer, Red Chair Northwest Pale Ale from Deschutes Brewing: \$4 in Union, compared to \$5.75 at Mount B.

Lodging: The Union Hotel (326 Main St., 541-562-1200, thehistoriunionhotel.com) is within walking distance. It's a restored historic hotel, not quite to the same standard as the Geiser Grand in Baker City, but still very comfortable.

Ten Depot Street, La Grande

La Grande doesn't quite rock like Baker City, but it has one après-ski bar worth seeking out. You can't go wrong with a place owned and managed by one of the five board members at Anthony Lakes ski area, plus a bartender who splits time tending at the ski area and then obtaining the ski movies he shows each winter Wednesday night downtown.

Vibe: Ten Depot Street is primarily a restaurant, with a bar as a hangout place for the college community. Few would argue it's the finest place in town. The bar itself is said to have been shipped around Cape Horn in the late 19th century.

Location: Downtown La Grande, but 1.5 blocks west of the main drag (Adams Avenue); 10 Depot St., 541-963-8766; tendepotstreet.com.

Hours: The bar opens at 4 p.m. and the dining room at 5 p.m. Dining goes until 10 p.m., with the bar serving later. Both are closed on Sunday.

Menu: The Bar Bites change, but we ordered all five plates: chip dip, spaghetti, salad, potatoes and shrimp, an amazing amount of food for \$12.50 (each goes for \$2.50 from 4-6 p.m. and after 8 p.m.).

Lodging: The Royal Motor Inn (541-963-4154) is within walking distance downtown, but most motels are out on the main Island Crossing freeway interchange (I-84 Exit 261). For a ride, call Arc Cab Co. at 541-663-9572. Check with Union County Tourism, visitlagrande.com.

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