



Feature Article

CRYSTAL MOUNTAIN, MICHIGAN

By Jim Neff

Online publication February 1, 2007.

Written in 2006: Please go to www.crystalmountain.com for the latest updates.

Crystal Mountain is a vision built around a simple theme: "We believe customers should be treated as family members, as if they are guests in our home." That's why in spite of all the changes the resort has undergone in its fifty year history it remains a place where every employee is on a first-name basis with the owners and smiles come easy. And it's also why Midwest skiers flock to Crystal at a rate of over 2600 per skiable acre every winter. A good time is always had by all.

Good times are no accident at the compact resort in northwest lower Michigan, because the vision drives the plan, and the plan by 2010 is to have \$70 million in improvements in place: pedestrian walkways, a new core village with eateries and shops, underground parking, and additional ski slopes. "We are dedicated to planning," says current co-owner Chris MacInnes, who started skiing at Crystal when she was a kid and it was called Buck Hills. "We try to do every little thing right and then we move on to the next goal," she says.

That attention to detail is evident as each building block has been put into place over the past decade. From the Crystal Center where you get your lift tickets and rentals, to the blending of several discrete lodging options at the base and top of the mountain, to the Scottish-themed Kinlochen Lodge, to 20 new runs and several new lifts, every season skiers find classy upgrades to an already top drawer operation. Up on the mountain, every nook is wrung out to the max on the fun-o-meter and every cranny is groomed to within a millimeter of its life.

Coming to Crystal Mountain skiers know they're almost home when Loki and Thor pop up in the windshield, all double-black and storm cloud ominous, signaling an ETA of about ten minutes into Crystal Mountain's parking lot at the bottom of the resort's two most imposing ski runs. It's a sight that tends to quicken the heartbeat.

In this case anticipation is good, though, because when you do arrive at Crystal you'll need all systems on go. What you see from the highway is just a teaser.

On most ski days and particularly on weekends, the few steps from your car to the Loki lift launches you into action central. Events like the annual Telemark Fest, Women's Ski Weekends, Boarding for Breast Cancer, Music Madness in March, and spring's annual Jiggle Jump into a gelatin-filled pond (lime the preferred flavor) keep that buzz humming at ten on the volume knob.

Plus, when it comes to the skiing, Crystal Mountain has a 45-run layout that squeezes maximum variety out of every inch of terrain and snowflake. Perhaps most unique is the opportunity for skiers to actually ski into the sun all day long.

Mornings on the east-facing front side of Crystal afford sun-splashed descents down toughies Loki and Thor, as well as blue cruisers on Buck and Lower Gorge. Smack in the middle of these four is the NASTAR race course on Cheers, the half-mile green thoroughfare called Main Street, and a terrain super park, all fed by the high-speed Crystal Clipper quad.

Afternoon skiers can catch some rays on the west-facing Ridge runs, eight blue-tinged green trails serviced by a triple. Easy on the legs, but with spectacular sunsets for inspiration.

On powder days, the newest area at Crystal, the North Face, is a veritable catcher's mitt for lake effect flakes coming off nearby Lake Michigan. The dozen tree-lined trails on this north side are a magnet for the region's growing number of telemark skiers who pay homage to the ski gods by genuflecting into the area's deepest freshies.

Beginners aren't left out of the Crystal mix either. The self-contained Native American themed Totem Park, with two carpet lifts and a small army of instructors, has an array of unique learning programs for sliders and riders of all ages.

Families from downstate Michigan, Indiana and Illinois also funnel into Crystal because boredom isn't on the resort's list of other activities. From the Mountain Adventure Center kids can scatter to see falcons and owls in a Wings of Wonder presentation, create a stuffed bear in the Build a Buddy workshop, or imitate their favorite Red Wing on the hockey rink. Parents can partake in a yoga workout, get a therapeutic massage, or relax in the Water's Edge outdoor hot tub. And the whole family can dive into the indoor pool at the Peak Fitness Center, play bingo and watch a movie, cross country ski over to the Betsie River, roast marshmallows by the rinkside bonfire or be whisked through the woods on a horse-drawn sleigh ride.

Vision, planning and home spun hospitality is a tough combination to beat. That's why Crystal Mountain continues to be at the top of the list for Midwest family ski destinations.

THE REGION

Tucked into the northwest corner of lower Michigan, the pace of life in Benzie County is geared more toward wildlife than nightlife. There's no hustle or bustle in the villages of Benzonia, Beulah, Frankfort or Thompsonville, which explains why the entire county has only one stoplight. There's no need for more. It's a lifestyle thing.

Sixty miles of Lake Michigan forms the county's entire western border, where the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore nestles at the water's edge. The Platte and Betsie Rivers meander through vast tracts of forest, and 57 inland lakes dot the countryside. The abundance of water makes the region a prime summertime escape for tourists from downstate Michigan and other points in the Midwest.

Crystal Mountain sits on the high ground of the Buck Hills range and is the county's largest employer. When winter comes to Benzie, Crystal may not be the only game "in town," but it sure is the main one. "We try to give families a quality place where they can relax and have some fun together," says Crystal co-owner Jim MacInnes.

Most of the skiers who come to Crystal elect to stay on property, so the resort has been on a recent mission to augment its 1,300 guest capacity with expanded amenities,

lodging, and dining options. By 2010, a resort village with retail shops, restaurants, and services will be in place, part of a \$70-million master plan that will also bring another dozen ski trails into the mix.

WHERE TO STAY

>**MountainTop Townhomes** Stay here and you always get first tracks because they're perched above the trails and lifts. These are three-bedroom/three-bath units with a private deck, living room with fireplace, kitchen, two levels, a master suite with whirlpool, and sleeping space for up to ten. Package rates at (800) 968-7686 or online at crystallmountain.com.

>**Kinlochen Lodge Condominiums** At the foot of the Buck quad chair, each unit is thematically linked to a great castle of Scotland and contain features like a living room with fireplace, whirlpool tub, full kitchen and view of the slopes. The Thistle Pub & Grille is on the lower level and the cross country ski trailhead is just outside the door. Package rates at (800) 968-7686 or online at crystallmountain.com.

>**Cottages at Water's Edge** Arranged like a separate village, these bungalows line small ponds and streams, but are across the street from the Peak Fitness Center and within a few minutes walk from the lifts and central resort core. The living-dining areas are cozy with gas-log fireplaces and there is sleeping room for up to 8. Package rates at (800) 968-7686 or online at crystallmountain.com.

WHERE TO EAT

>**Thistle Pub & Grille in the Kinlochen Lodge** A unique menu influenced by the flavors of Scotland. The Angus Burger or Pot Roast Sandwich paired with a draft Guinness-Bass Black & Tan is the perfect ski day topper. Or just sit by the fireplace with a single-malt scotch in hand. 800-968-7686 ext. 6040.

>**Wildflower in the Main Lodge** Good spot for families because while mom and dad savor planked salmon or pancetta grilled chicken with cavatappi pasta, the kids can gnaw on a grilled ball park hot dog or a plate of noodles and butter. Everyone's happy. 800-968-7686 ext. 6040.

>**Brookside Inn in Beulah** Just 20 minutes from Crystal, the Brookside features entrees cooked on stones taken from the Matterhorn, a German wine cellar, and desserts like brownies a la mode with hot fudge. (231) 882-9688; brooksideinn.com.

>**Karlin Inn** For authentic northern Michigan ambiance you can't beat the Karlin Inn, a local watering hole since 1934 about 20 minutes from Crystal. On Friday and Saturday evenings, the fish fry -- perch with homemade slaw, French fries and house made garlic toast for \$9.95 -- is a killer. 231-263-7995.

OTHER ATTRACTIONS

>**The Vista Lounge** on the upper-level of the Main Lodge with picture windows overlooking the slopes, après ski munchies, and live entertainment on weekends.

>**Michigan Legacy Art Park**, a unique 30-acre outdoor "art gallery" that features over 35 artworks nestled along a woodland trail. Snowshoe and cross country ski tours at 800-YOUR-MTN, ext. 7000.

>**Gwen Frostic Woodland Workshop** on River Road two miles west of Benzonia (20 minutes from Crystal Mountain). No trip to this region is complete without a visit to this world-renowned nature artist's studio where you can view and buy block prints, stationery, poetry collections and more. 231/882-5505; gwenfrostic.com.

STATISTICS

Crystal Mountain 375 vertical feet; 1,500 resort acres and 86 skiable acres; 45 downhill runs, 27 lighted for night skiing; 125 annual inches; nine lifts, including one high-speed quad, two fixed-grip quads, two triples, two doubles and two carpet surface tows; annual skier visits over 225,000.

Getting there: From Detroit (234 miles) take I-75 north to US-10 west exiting at M-115 west (to Cadillac). Follow M-115 70 miles. From Chicago (280 miles) follow I-94 E/NE to US-196 north to Grand Rapids, getting on US-131 north (to Cadillac) exiting at M-115 west and follow M-115 39 miles. Major airline fly into Cherry Capitol airport in nearby Traverse City, so from Traverse City (28 miles) take US-31 south to Thompsonville Rd. (County Rd. 669), 10 mi. past Interlochen. Follow 669 south to Thompsonville. Turn right at blinker light, two miles to Crystal. Detailed directions are on the resort's website.

Information (800) 968-7686; www.crystallmountain.com ; snow report: (800) 968-7754.

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