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Extreme Ogden — Railroad city rebuilds itself through extreme sports

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OGDEN — The idea was simple enough. Replace the railroad, once the lifeblood of this northern city, with snow, ice, water and super-high winds.

Did it work?

Ogden is, claims one national publication, "fast gaining on places like Boulder, Colo., as a destination for extreme sports."

On the extreme menu are activities such as skiing, indoor surfing, kayaking, rock and ice climbing, flying without wings, and water skiing.

"When we came into office nearly eight years ago, we knew we had to stop being an old railroad town. We used to have a railroad; then we had nothing," recalled Ogden Mayor Matthew Godfrey.

"We asked ourselves: 'What can we do to be the best in the world?' We knew we had unparalleled access to recreation. No one along the Wasatch Front has better access to recreation. No one has greater access to recreation so close to a downtown area. That's what will make this work. "

It started with skiing — Snowbasin, Powder Mountain and Wolf Mountain, formerly Nordic Valley. It was available and had been for years.

Snowbasin had long been considered Utah's best kept secret when it came to skiing. No resort was said to have more potential. It came to light in 2002 when the resort hosted key alpine events in the 2002 Olympics — downhill, combined and super G. Among roughly 700 resorts in North America, voter in SKI Magazine's annual poll ranked Snowbasin No. 29.

Powder Mountain is another of the "undiscovered" resorts. When its unmanaged powder fields are combined with its managed slopes, it is Utah's largest resort — 5,500 acres. In the magazine's annual reader's poll, under the category "snow," skiers rated Powder Mountain second only to Alta.

Wolf Mountain, under new ownership, is Utah's smallest resort but lists itself as its most "family friendly" and most affordable.

Then Godfrey targeted two more areas — attracting new businesses and exercising new opportunities.

"We spent years cleaning up downtown to create momentum. We weren't presentable the way we were," he explained. Roughly 60 acres of the downtown area has been renovated, and 120 acres is currently under redevelopment.

The new development includes the new Salomon Adventure Center, named after the ski company Salomon.

There, people can surf or boogie-board indoors on the FloRider, climb any one of the hundred routes on the IRock climbing walls, fly solo in the IFly wind tunnel, work out at Gold's Gym, bowl a few games or engage in a range of other family activities.

The FloRider is a double-wide, indoor standing wave, which simply means rushing water flows uphill over a trampoline-like surface at about 20 miles per hour to create a perfect wave. This wave can be surfed upright on a FloBoard or horizontally on a BodyBoard.

The wave can be sectioned off into two lanes, one for surfers and one for body surfers.

It's easy, said Casey Nielsen, vice president of operations, "But, there's a real learning curve. People do crash. Some really good athletes have come in, thinking they'll master this first time out, and they struggle. It takes getting used to.

"It's different and it's popular. We get individuals, families, birthday parties and even businesses that will bring in their employees either before or after a business meeting."

The IRock is a 55-foot-high indoor climbing wall offering rope climbing, bouldering and route selection ranging from very easy to extremely difficult.

To promote family involvement, "We encourage parents to become belay certified so they can belay their children. While the children climb, the parents are holding the rope. Interestingly enough, it creates a real bond between parents and children," Nielsen noted.

The IFly wind tunnel is another new concept in adventure sports. It is only the 10th built in the United States, with the next closest being in Denver.

"And," said Nielsen, "it is the only wind tunnel in the U.S. sharing indoor space with a surfing wave."

Fliers, in jumpsuits, helmets, soft-sole shoes, goggles and gloves, step into a circular chamber with a prevailing up-draft ranging from 60 mph to as much as 170 mph.

The tunnel is the next best thing to weightlessness while free-falling during a sky dive adventure or getting sent into space. On first flight, an instructor helps fliers become suspended, then helps them maintain a position as they float.

More experienced fliers go with a higher wind speed and can ascend a couple of stories instantly and descend just as quickly. They can also sit, stand, spin and roll, all of which take time to master.

Also in the center area there is a state-of-the-art bowling center, video arcade and snack centers.

Outside the center, within a few minutes drive, there is a man-made lake that, in the summer, is suitable for a world-class water-skiing competition. The lake covers 70 acres and will someday include a half-mile-long slalom course that Godfrey said could be the site of the 2011 Water Ski Championships, "if all goes well."

Not far away are the two kayak courses, one on the Weber River and the second on Ogden River that attract everyone from beginners to world-class experts. Kayakers can negotiate both slow and fast water, skirt boulders and pools, and perform stunts ranging from simple spins to doing cartwheels, bow stalls, flat-water loops and stern stalls, with an occasional roll tossed in.

Along the foothills of Ogden there is a range of large boulders and steep cliffs that have become popular with climbers. What is especially attractive, like everything else, is that the rocks and walls are close to the city center and are easily accessible.

There are also plans to build a tower of ice suspended from steel cables this winter that will allow people to try ice climbing. The building of the tower is being headed by Jeff Lowe, a

world-class climber. The tower, to be located across from the municipal park, will be 65-feet high and have three climbing surfaces — a sheer wall, a 70-degree wall for beginners and a combine ice and rock wall. The ice tower will be open year-round.

"Imagine, people will be able to go skiing and then come to Ogden and try something they've probably never tried before or will ever have another chance to try, like indoor surfing or flying in the wind tunnel or ice climbing," said Godfrey.

On the outskirts of town is another adventure few people will ever get to experience elsewhere — Fort Buenaventura. Once a state park, the fort is now owned and operated by the City of Ogden. It was the first permanent Anglo settlement in the Great Basin. It was built in the 1840s. On site is a lake for canoeing and fishing, a camping area and a stockade on the old fort site. Inside the fort year-round is a trader's store selling hand-made items of that period.

In the summer there are rendezvous with people in authentic dress participating in crafts and competition such as blackpowder shoots and hatchet throwing.

Other activities in the Ogden area include cross country skiing, mountain biking and hiking.

"We see ourselves catering more to the middle-income vacationer," said Godfrey. "They can come and stay in Ogden, get a very reasonable rate and be only 20 minutes from skiing and the mountains, and only minutes from all of these other activities."

All of this adventure and recreational opportunity has not gone unnoticed by the adventure and recreational community. There have been at least a dozen international companies move headquarters into or near Ogden, including Descente, Scott, Salomon and Goode Ski Technologies.

All of which will, of course, as has happened in Boulder, Colo., lead to more companies and more activities of an extreme nature coming to Ogden.

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