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Midwest resorts add new features indoors and out

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Momentum is the watchword for Midwest skiing this season. Last winter got off to a slow start for most of the Midwest, but once the ski resorts got rolling the result was some of the best skiing in the region in recent memory.

This season Midwest resorts hope to keep that momentum going by fine tuning what they have to offer for skiers and snowboarders.

Visitors will find many resorts sporting nifty outside tweaks that will translate into more fun on the slopes, new experiences to more fully round out resort venues and upgrades inside to raise the apres ski relaxation quotient.

Here's a selective look at some resorts:

Illinois

Close to Chicago in Galena, Chestnut Mountain (800-397-1320; chestnutmnt.com) is a great example of an area tuned up and ready for 2007-2008. Several runs have been widened to give skiers and snowboarders more maneuverability and to increase visibility on the slopes. That's augmented by the just-completed final phase of its three-year snowmaking expansion, which now gives Chestnut the ability to open 100 percent of its runs in less than 48 hours of snowmaking. All that snow will ensure smooth landings in the resort's awesome Rail Garden, a 45-foot-high and 150-foot-wide mountain of snow that has wide-eyed thrills for skiers and riders alike.

Wisconsin

Devil's Head in Merrimac (800-472-6670; devilsheadresort.com) started on a roll last winter and continues this year. The biggest improvement at the resort is the addition of Glacier Ridge Condominium Development. Six of an eventual 30 luxury units are in place at the east end of the ski slopes. From there skiers can head to the new terrain park called "The Zone," which is lighted and has a steep drop-in with massive banked walls and natural rolls.

Also this winter NASTAR racing returns to Devil's Head with a dual race course on the Serpent's Mogul trail.

Sunburst in Kewaskum (262-626-8404; skisunburst.com) has always been known as a place for family fun, and this year will just add to their reputation. A new run has been added and is the home of the resort's new Black Forest Terrain Park and will have various terrain features, rails and boxes for the park enthusiasts. For non-skiers the snow tubing area has expanded to 20 chutes.

In East Troy near Milwaukee, Alpine Valley (800-227-9395; alpinevalleyresort.com) has also been pointing toward this winter. Outside they've doubled the size of their terrain park, added a third Wonder Carpet to the learning area and revamped the lodge landscaping.

Also tuning up their terrain park action is Christie Mountain in Bruce (715-868-800; chris.tiemountain.com). The terrain parks this year will be designed to fully integrate the natural features of the land itself, making the jumps and rails a hoot for all abilities from novice to expert.

For sheer size, not much beats Granite Peak in Wausau (715-845-2846; skigranitepeak.com) with 74 trails, 700 feet of vertical drop and a high-speed six-place lift. This winter they'll try to match the ski fun by tuning up an apres ski music lineup in their new 10,000-square-foot Sundance Chalet & Grill with its two gigantic fireplaces and floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the slopes. On the docket are acts familiar to Chicago and Milwaukee, including: Ingram Hill, The Brewins, Maggi Speaks and the Love Monkeys. This will all culminate with the two-week-long Avalanche Days spring festival March 17-30.

Michigan

Nub's Nob in Harbor Springs (231-526-2131; www.nubsnob.com) celebrates its 50th birthday this season and is gearing up for the next 50 by adding eight additional snow guns, bringing their count to 250, which is more than one per acre. Some of that fluff produced by the guns will no doubt drift into a new expert-only gladed tree skiing area, located in Arena Glades and featuring a wind-protected pitch. This comes on the heels of last winter's SKI Magazine rating that ranked the Nub's terrain park as No. 1 in all of North America.

Cadillac's Caberfae Peaks (231-862-3000; caberfaepeaks.com), the oldest operating ski area in the Midwest, also made some terrain expansions over the summer including widening the Canyon run, a Michigan staple originally cut during the 1930s. The Upper Easy Street beginner trail was widened by 50 percent, providing easier access from the Shelter and Clubhouse chairlifts. Inside the Mackenzie Lodge the addition of full service dining will make stays at the Peaks more enjoyable.

The most famous of all Michigan resort operations is, of course, Boyne USA (800-GO-BOYNE; boyne.com). Boyne Mountain in Boyne Falls, known for its Hemlock run, massive uphill lift capacity and base area Avalanche Bay indoor water park, adds an expanded 1,000-foot tubing park between FIS and Thunder trails this winter. Boyne Highlands in Harbor Springs has added \$400,000 of new snowmaking for skiers and adds to its ambience with new hour-long dog sled rides and also the Aonach Mor Moonlight Dinner featuring a sleigh ride, mouthwatering menu, entertainment, bonfire and views of the Mackinac Bridge!

Elsewhere in Lower Michigan, Shanty Creek in Bellaire (800-678-4111; shantycreek.com) is embarking on a \$10 million upgrade of its Summit Village, Crystal Mountain in Thompsonville (800-YOUR-MTN; crys talmountain.com) has increased snowmaking by 30 percent, and Treetops in Gaylord (888-TREETOPS; treetops.com) has expanded its terrain park with designated beginner and expert sections.

Michigan's Upper Peninsula is quite a trek for Chicago skiers, but this year the trip might be worth the effort.

Big Powderhorn in Bessemer (800-501-7669; bigpowderhorn.net) has tuned up something for everyone. Racers can feed their need for speed with new weekly racing on the Dynamite Trail. The Oxbow Terrain Park has expanded its snowboarding features with more rails, boxes, jumps and bumps. Big Powderhorn's newest addition, Katie's Katwalk, is the resort's first double black diamond trail -- elevator shaft steep and narrow. Finally, for kids, Crazy Trail is an ungroomed run through the woods complete with hanging trees, stumps and rocks that only the wee ones can negotiate.

In the same neighborhood, at Indianhead in Wakefield (800-346-3426; indianheadmtn.com), the Big Chief terrain park, which was doubled in size last year, has even more features this season, plus the new Timber Wolf beginner park will again be ready for those not ready to challenge the Big Chief. Inside, the Trailside and Village Chalets' ski-in, ski-out units have been completely renovated, and wireless Internet access is now operational in the Summit Center and Chippewa Trailside condos.

Way up north in Houghton, Mont Ripley (906-487-2340; www.aux.mtu.edu/ski) has added one of the few new chairlifts in the region, a double called the Copper Hoist. Right next to the new lift is a new glade area, Copper Chute.

Also in the U.P., Michigan's wildest ski area, the ungroomed Mt. Bohemia (906-360-7240; mtbohemia.com), near Lac La Belle, has cut several more drops through its glades, added four ski-in, ski-out yurts, and will debut the region's first 16-guest hostel. Over in Ontonagan, Porcupine Mountains (231-420-5420; skitheporkies .com) will try to crank up the region's only snowcat operation again this winter. And in Iron River, Ski Brule (906-265-6754; skibrule.com) is inviting guests to come and be a snow groomer co-pilot on Wednesday, Friday or Saturday evenings.

This is just a sampling of what skiers and riders will find at their favorite winter resorts in 2007-2008. For the latest resort news, travel directions, and contact information go to www.snowplaces.com, the official Web site of the Midwest Ski Areas Association.

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Credit: By Jim Neff, Special to the Tribune

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