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Easy Riders: Snow Biking in Keystone

By: [Ted Alan Stedman](#)

Snow bikes offer a fun alternative when it comes to shredding the slopes



Courtesy Sean Boggs/Keystone Resort

Of all the places you could hook up with a biker gang, the slopes of [Keystone Resort](#) seem the most unlikely. Yet, here we are, a group of four beginning riders—students in the resort’s snow biking certification program—listening as instructor Sean Passes schools us on how to ride this twin-ski bike-like contraption that’s a magnet for stares and comments from curious onlookers.

“You’ve got to be kidding! My wife doesn’t ski but she’d try this,” says one passerby skier.

“Cool, looks like fun. How fast do these things go?” asks another.

Passes has heard it all in his five years as Keystone’s lead snow bike instructor. “Skiers and boarders who see snow bikers for the first time laugh,” he says, noting that snow bikes have been on Keystone’s slopes for 12 years. “Experienced skiers are blown away once they try it. You can rip through the trees, sail over powder. Beginners find them easier to learn than skiing, and they’re more maneuverable.”

As the name “snow biking” implies, our machines—part of Keystone’s rental fleet based at Adventure Point atop the River Run Gondola—use a light, bowed suspension frame with front and rear skis where tires would normally be, plus a handlebar and an old-school-style padded banana bike seat. Small foot skis clip onto the rider’s ski or snowboard boots and serve as stabilizing outriggers.

With the lookie loos gone, Passes begins with the most critical technique we’ll need. “First thing is learning how to stop,” he says, showing how us to use the heels of our tiny foot skis. “I call this the Flintstone stop—get it? You dig your heels down like old Fred used to do with his foot mobile,” Passes says to our group’s laughter. “As you get more experience, you can slide

and carve to a stop like skiers and boarders.”

Being first-time snow bikers, getting down a slope in a seated position seems awkward in the beginning. But as experienced skiers and snowboarders, we’re already familiar with using edges to control arc and speed. After some bunny slope practice, it only takes a couple runs until Passes cuts us loose and we’re carving crisp turns, hitting moguls and taking the fall line through tight tree runs reserved for expert skiers. If there’s anything difficult with snow biking, it’s boarding the chairlifts while holding the ski bike off to the side. But even that becomes a snap during the required two-hour intro lesson.

Depending on who you talk to, these snow machines might be called snow bikes, ski bikes, snow cycles, ski-bobs or slope cycles, and come in three essential designs. The traditional snow bike body has a bowed main frame that you ride seated while wearing small foot skis. A more recent design has foot pegs known as “peggers” that use front and rear mountain bike suspension systems and allow riders to either stand or be seated. A third, less-common design, is a snowboard-based bike typically ridden standing up like a scooter.

Although it’s still grassroots in the United States and Canada, the sport is common at most ski areas in Europe, where it originated more than a century ago. In 1949, Austrian sleigh- and ski-maker Engelbert Brenner introduced the first commercially made snow bike (a term the company patented, though it’s widely used generically), which became a hit with resort-goers who liked the sport’s quick learning curve, as did skiers with troublesome knees. Chances are, people of a certain age have seen them in the Beatles’ 1965 movie “Help!,” in which the four lads scooted down the Austrian Alps on “ski-bobs,” as Europeans sometimes call them.

Ski-bobbing first made its trans-Atlantic hop into the United States in the 1950s, but it didn’t stick and was reintroduced with more success in the mid-1960s, when a California resident, William Cartwright, became interested in the sport after ski-bobbing in Europe, according to the [American SkiBike Association](#). A handful of Western resorts supported ski-bobbing with rentals and lessons. But, once again, it fizzled and by the late 1970s the sport essentially became extinct in America. Enter Colorado in the mid-1990s, when snow biking re-emerged thanks to design enhancements and marketing by Brenner Snowbike, maker of the fleet used by Keystone Resort. With modern improvements that made snow bikes increasingly stable, maneuverable and easy to use, the sport’s time had seemingly arrived.

Chris Sorensen, Adventure Point operations manager at Keystone Resort, says the snow bike stigma is fading thanks in part to resort employees who enjoy the machines on their days off, along with avid mountain bikers running down the same trails they ride in the summer. “Lots of guests who don’t ski are discovering snow biking and they love it,” he says. “Older skiers with bad joints, families with kids—it’s a fun, exciting way to get down the mountain.”

Colorado resorts, such as Keystone, that rent snow bikes often require lessons first, and those that allow you to bring your own bike often require you to pass an inspection. Sometimes snow bikers are allowed only on certain lifts or on separate terrain designated for snow biking; others allow 100 percent access to all terrain. Winter Park, Durango Mountain, Copper Mountain, Arapahoe Basin, Vail, Telluride, Steamboat, Eldora, Snowmass and Buttermilk resorts all offer some version of snow biking.

With our lesson complete, Passes and his posse of snow bike students ride Keystone like wannabe pros. We swell with confidence and tackle technical runs that admittedly would be iffy for me on my modern fat skis. “It’s squirrely at first, having the back ski slide separately from the front, but it’s pretty easy to pick up,” says fellow student and skier Abby Artl.

“As a snowboarder, it’s a different sensation and harder to maneuver at first,” adds Sarah Schwartz, another of Passes’ biker gang. “But the learning curve is super quick. It’s fun to try something different—a definite do-again.”

NEED-TO-KNOW INFO

SADDLE UP: Snow biking is not skiing or downhill mountain biking, but a blend of both that doesn’t require prior experience. [Keystone](#) is a pioneer of snow biking in Colorado, establishing its program 12 years ago and now offering a modern fleet of Brenter C6 Heavy Duty snow bikes for instruction and rental. The resort requires a two-hour lesson to gain ski bike certification, learning the basics of making turns, stopping and hopping on lifts. After that, bikers have 100 percent access to all slopes. Reservations are required (minimum age 12 years old), and participants must wear ski or snowboard boots. Call 970.496.4386 for reservations.

SNOW BIKING RESOURCES

The goal of the [American SkiBike Association](#) is to raise awareness of the sport and list ski bike-friendly resorts, while serving as an online community for enthusiasts.

[SkiBikeFun](#) is a product-focused site dedicated to the ski biking community, with listed events, products and sales information.

◆ [Keystone Resort](#), [Sean Passes](#), [ski-bob](#), [Snow Biking](#)

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A photograph of a modern kitchen with a dark countertop and wooden cabinets. The countertop is set with a sink, a vase of pink flowers, and a plate of cheese and grapes. In the background, a dining table with orange chairs is visible. The overall atmosphere is bright and clean.

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