



SMART TRAVELER

Your Own Winter Olympics

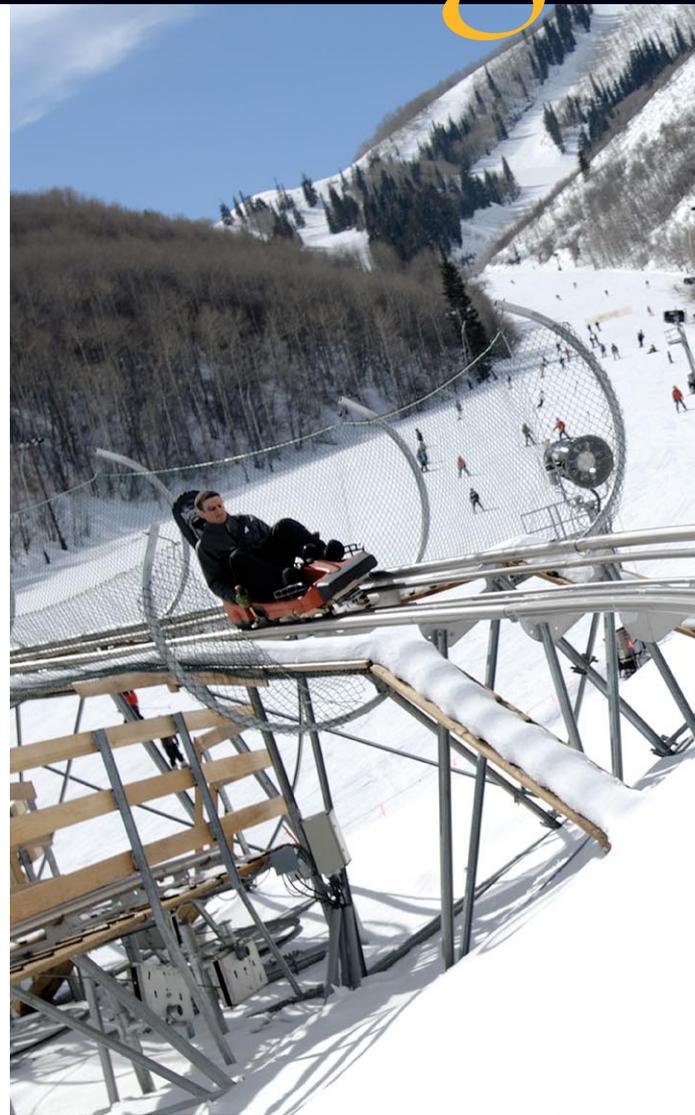
Forget Vancouver. With curling broom and bobsled helmet in hand, we play Olympian at former host cities dusting off their old venues.

By Kristen Bellstrom

Every four years, the Winter Olympics roll around and remind us about the glory of sport, the importance of international cooperation and just how nuts you have to be to set foot in a bobsled. And yet here we are, crammed into one with four other suicidal adrenaline junkies, about to crack 50 mph and 3 Gs on an Olympic bobsled run. “Don’t hold the straps like that,” says brakeman Joshua Hunt. Why? “If we were to crash, you’d break your arms.” Oh.

And with that, we’re off.

This February, millions of Americans will spend the three weeks of the XXI Winter Olympiad glued to their TVs, transformed into rabid fans of ski jumping and curling. But with all the focus on the festivities in Vancouver, B.C., it may be surprising to learn that it’s not the only place stoking the Olympic flame this winter. In former host cities across the continent, travelers—even those picked last in gym class—can get their own taste of Olympic glory, from headlong bobsled rides in Calgary to Friday-night curling lessons outside Salt Lake City to rickety elevator trips to the top of Lake Placid’s vertigo-inducing ski jump. The popular sport of spectating isn’t out of the question, either, with many towns hosting World Cup qualifying events. And one forgotten venue, Squaw Valley,



Calif., is now celebrating its 50th Olympic anniversary with nostalgic ski tours on its 1960 courses, led by former competitors.

Of course, there’s more than just the Olympic spirit at work here. It’s no secret that hosting is an expensive undertaking: Vancouver anticipates spending about \$3 billion this year, though that pales next to the reported \$42 billion spent by China on the Beijing Games. What’s more, a recent survey by the European Tour Operators Association found that

Photograph courtesy of Park City Mountain Resort



visitation to Olympic cities often stalls after the games, leaving all those new hotel rooms and venues sitting empty. And let's not forget the economy. By nature, Winter Olympics destinations lean heavily on ski tourism, which took a big hit in the recession; skier visits at U.S. resorts dropped by nearly 6 percent last season. Turning all the fancy new facilities into a kind of Olympic theme park is one way to sustain tourism—a big reason cities agree to host in the first place—and ideally brings in

enough additional revenue to keep venues staffed and running.

But visitors who arrive in former host cities with dreams of reliving all the Olympic highlights they remember may find things a little different these days. At Squaw Valley, in the Lake Tahoe region, the arena that hosted the opening ceremonies and skating events collapsed in 1983, and Lake Placid's Olympic Athletes Village is now a federal prison. Plus, some attractions aimed at travelers seem to still be operating at Olympic

prices: The bobsled ride at Utah Olympic Park is \$200 a person—or about \$4 a second. And that's if it's actually open. Indeed, travelers often find themselves bumped from activities by elite athletes or even local events. The day Deborah Newman, a dental-office manager from Inland Empire, Calif., visited the Olympic Park, she was disappointed to find the bobsled ride shuttered because of a World Cup competition. “Too bad, I really wanted to try it,” she says.

For our own stab at Olympic glory, we visited the two most recent American hosts, Lake Placid and Salt Lake City. Along the way, we tackled our fair share of Olympic sports, watched international-level competitions, schmoozed with past and potential Olympians, and picked up enough history to fill a book.

Ever dreamed of pushing off the hack, delivering the hammer across the hog line and into the center of the house? Okay, probably not. But for those who've ever puzzled over the curious sport of curling, the \$7.50 lessons at the Utah Olympic Oval offer a rare chance to take the broom into their own hands. And after our hair-raising bobsled run, pushing a few rocks around an ice rink seems easy enough—that is, at least until instructor Dale Forsyth Sandusky starts running through the seemingly endless list of rules and techniques. But before we know it, we're embroiled in a



SOLDIER HOLLOW (above), in Utah, hosted the 2002 biathlon event. Below, downtown Park City.

heated match with a group of local Mormon youth, jostling for our turn at the stones—the very same ones, we learn, used in the 2002 games. And when our two hours are up, our group pleads with Sandusky for a few more minutes on the ice.

Located in Kearns, the Oval set the scene for eight U.S. speed-skating medals in 2002, including Apolo Anton Ohno’s

gold. These days, the scene on a typical Friday night resembles a very large roller rink, with teens skating to the sounds of Beyoncé and Jay-Z over here, curling lessons over there and lighted display screens overhead (formerly showing competition results) now hawking \$1 corn dogs at the snack bar. Olympic wannabes can rent special speed skates to test the Oval’s “fastest ice on Earth”—a boast based on being the site of the most world records. And when they fall on their backsides, they can gaze up to the rafters at flags from whichever countries competed in the most recent World Cup events at the venue.

The Oval is just the beginning of Utah’s Olympic legacy. There are also mountain resorts, like Deer Valley and Snowbasin, where visitors can ski in the tracks of champions. In Midway, the Soldier Hollow venue, host of the 2002 cross-country events, offers a \$129 “Biathlon Experience,” a mix of cross-country skiing and shooting (yes, that’s a real Olympic-grade .22). Then there’s the Olympic Park, a multisport complex where travelers can check the view from the top of the ski jumps, zip down the luge track and more.

Needless to say, the weekend-warrior versions of these sports don’t hold a candle to the real thing—something we see for ourselves when we stumble onto a bobsled and skeleton (a sort of head-first version of luge) World Cup competition at Olympic Park. During the Olympics, spectator areas around the park’s sliding course were jammed with roughly 16,000 people, paying between \$40 and \$145 per ticket. Today we have our pick of free viewing spots and stand just a foot or so from the track, close enough to feel the breeze when the athletes tear by at 70-plus mph. We encounter Johnette and Shel Zimmerman from Overland Park, Kan., at the platform overlooking the finish line. The Zimmermans had planned to spend the day shopping in Salt Lake City, but when they found out about the competition, their decision was simple. “Salt Lake City will be there tomorrow,” says Johnette. “This is a onetime chance. When am I ever going to be at a World Cup event again?”

Not that tourists are always the priority at these venues. In Salt Lake City, our plan to

Ski Like an Olympian Below, a few North American host sites where alpine lovers can schuss down the same slopes as their medal-winning idols.



MOUNTAIN	OLYMPIC YEAR	COST OF A DAY PASS	SKIABLE ACRES	COMMENT
Whistler Blackcomb Whistler, B.C.	2010	\$86	8,171	Whistler's runs will remain 90 percent open to the public during this year's Games, with skiers able to watch races from on-slope viewing areas. But expect serious traffic and parking jam-ups.
Deer Valley Park City, Utah	2002	\$86	2,026	Nostalgic skiers can cruise three Olympic runs or visit a memorabilia-filled base lodge. The resort also hosts World Cup events every year.
Nakiska Kananaski, Alberta	1988	\$62	420	A good bet for beginners, but experienced powder hounds should look elsewhere; surprisingly, only 14 percent of the runs qualify as "expert."
Squaw Valley Olympic Valley, Calif.	1960	\$83	4,000	Until this year, Olympic signage at historic sites was spotty. But the area marks its 50th anniversary with a slate of Olympic-themed offerings, like ski days hosted by local gold medalist Jonny Moseley.

visit the Olympic museum and gawk at the cauldron that held the flame is squashed by Utah High School football playoffs taking place at the same stadium that hosted the games' opening ceremonies. We also have to postpone our guided tour of the Olympic Park, since the World

Cup event has unexpectedly shut down visitor tours for the day. A spokesperson from the park says that with the economy chipping away at their public-program revenue, the venue has opted to shift its focus to athletes and the local community.

Visitors expecting a heavy

dose of Olympic-level pomp and glitz may be a little disconcerted by the mom-and-pop feel of these destinations—particularly those that hosted years ago. At Lake Placid, home of the 1980 competition, it takes some looking before we finally discover the Olympic cauldron on the edge of a parking lot, sandwiched between the high school ball fields and a horse farm. Later we tour the Olympic Center with James Rogers, a chatty, professorial guide (and member of the original Lake Placid Olympic bid organizing committee) who noshes on an English muffin as he takes us into the rink where the underdog U.S. hockey team toppled the Soviet Union in the fabled "Miracle on Ice" game. As a worker hoses the storied ice to strains of a heavy-metal power ballad, Rogers leads us up to a lonely corner of the stands to watch the conclusion of the game—on three antiquated TVs wedged onto a makeshift table. "Don't sit in front of the one on the right," he says. "It doesn't work."

Still, informality has its upsides, including turning kids loose on that iconic ice. For Buddy Skelly, a fireman from Middletown, N.J., watching his 10-year-old son, Justin, smack a puck on the Olympic rink was awe-inspiring. "It's history," he says. Justin was pretty impressed too—though it didn't have much to do with Olympic memories. ("My little guy wasn't even born yet," says Skelly.) Instead, for Justin, the thrill was all about seeing what resembled the set of one of his all-time favorite movies, *Miracle*, based on the 1980 game. Oh, well, close enough. **S**

HANG TIME not included. Many former Olympic venues offer visitors sky-high views from atop their ski-jumping platforms.

