

Hard knocks and soft landings: A college search cushioned by Utah powder

By David Goodman Globe correspondent, March 12, 2019, 6:39 p.m.



Eriks Ziedins catching air at the powder skiing mecca of Alta, Utah. JASPER GOODMAN

Jasper peered down at the field of untracked powder below. Alta had received a foot of snow overnight, and the sight before us was breathtaking. A downy blanket cloaked the mountainside. Low gray clouds spit snow and obscured the slope. We would ski into a white room.

“Wow,” uttered my impressed 18-year-old son. “Dad, you first. I want to see where to go,” he said. I was glad to oblige this rare teenage deference.

I pointed my skis into the fall line and had barely made two turns when I heard Jasper hooting in excitement. The next thing I saw was — actually, I couldn’t see. I was enveloped in a white cloud as my son blew past me, cold smoke lingering in his wake. As the flakes settled, I saw him accelerating toward the bottom. When I finally caught up to him, he was plastered in snow, smiling and momentarily dumbstruck.

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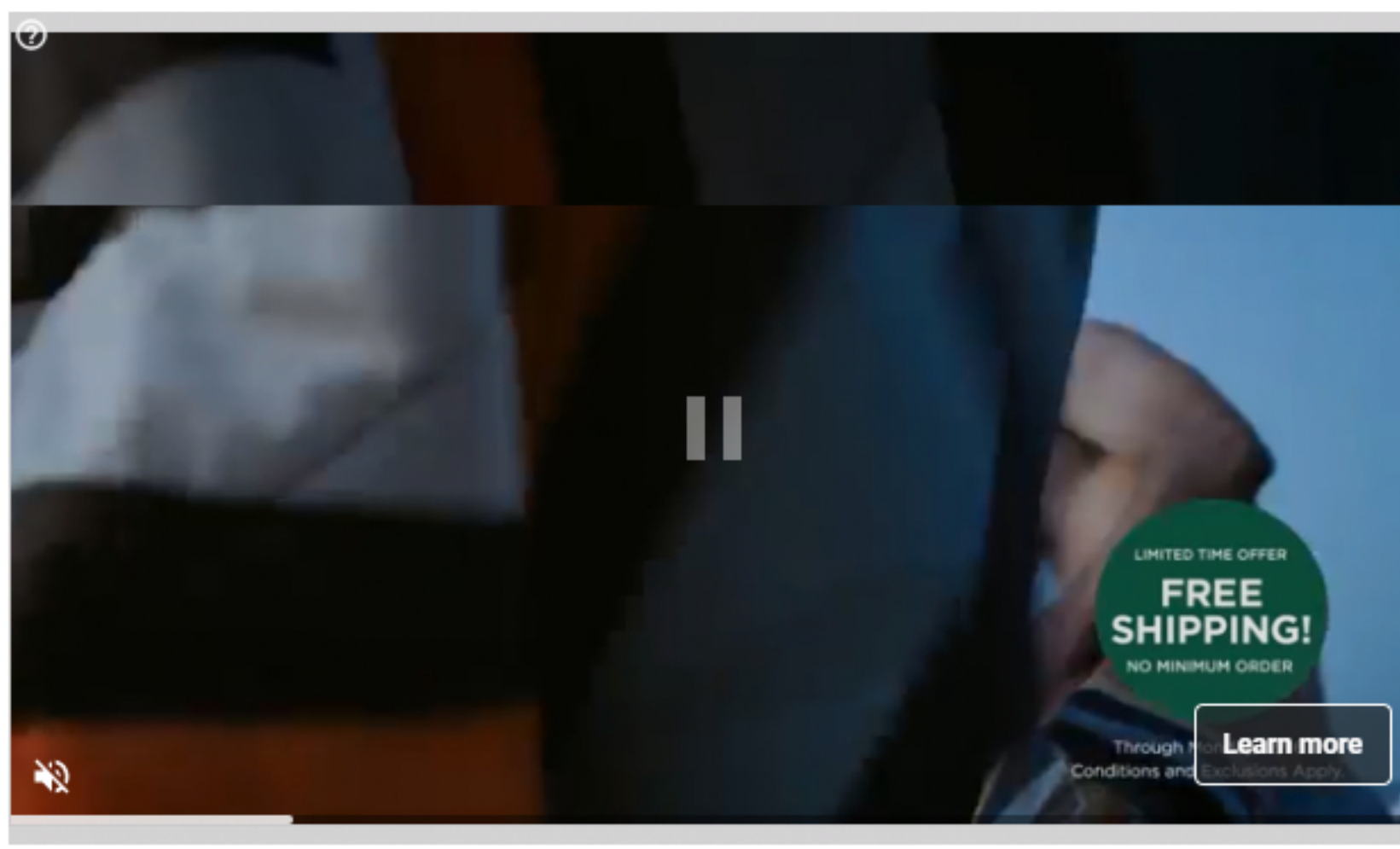
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“Oh my God,” bellowed my normally reserved son. “That was the best run I’ve ever skied.”

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I had come to Alta last March on a mission. It was my son’s senior year of high school, an exciting but stressful time. Every week was another momentous deadline for a test, essay, or application.

“I’ve got this,” my son would stoically insist, shooing away his concerned parents. I worried about how he would handle disappointments. And I wondered, as did he, where life would take him.

I decided there was something that I could do to help. I would make plans to get away in late March, just when colleges notify applicants of admissions decisions. I would take Jasper, his best friend Eriks, and his dad, Ed, to a place that always helped me put life in perspective: the powder skiing mecca of Alta, Utah, which is graced by 500 inches of snow per year. Whether the boys got good news or bad, I could count on Alta to provide soft landings.

Our home base for this pilgrimage was Alta Lodge, a place steeped in ski history. I felt a rush of déjà vu as I entered: the 79-year old lodge looked much the same as it did the other times I’ve stayed there since the 1980s. It is a touchstone, a place that always feels like home in the mountains. Comfortable stuffed chairs in the lobby surround a fireplace. Floor-to-ceiling windows in the rooms make you feel as if you could reach out and grab a fistful of snow from bed. Friendly ski-bum servers offer sage advice on everything from dessert to ski runs.

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On our second morning we awoke to the dull thump of explosions. In the lobby of Alta Lodge, a rope hung across the front door with a sign announcing that we were “interlodged,” meaning we were temporarily confined inside while the ski patrol was conducting avalanche control on the slopes overhead. Alta skiers live for days like this.

As soon as the outdoor travel ban was lifted, we bolted outside into another foot of new snow. I led our father-son posse across a zany high-speed traverse to High Rustler, Alta’s signature run. The boys were right on my ski tails as we burst out of tight trees and slid out to the center of a steep swathe that plunged straight down to the base of the mountain. Jasper and Eriks grew up skiing in the tight confines of Vermont, where we live. They paused for a moment to inhale the majestic view across the valley of 11,132-foot Mount Superior, then instinctively took off, diving down the trail and popping jumps off the sides, powder erupting all around them.

Back in the lift line, Jasper discreetly pulled out his phone to check his e-mail. I didn’t ask but didn’t need to. He quietly slipped the phone back into his pocket and returned his attention to skiing. We continued the day dancing down the appropriately named Ballroom, a broad snowy headwall where we skied one at a time and admired each other’s best powder moves.

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As the four of us recounted adventures and mishaps over dinner at Alta Lodge that night, Jasper revealed that he received some bad news in the lift line: He was rejected by a college that he liked. Later, he learned that he was waitlisted by another college. We instinctively consoled him — “their loss,” “you’ll be happier somewhere else” — but he waved us off.

“I was bummed,” he conceded. “But I recovered by the bottom of High Rustler.”

Our fourth and final day at Alta was a bluebird day: 8 inches of new snow fell overnight and brilliant sunshine greeted us in the morning. Our waiter tipped us off that they might be dropping the rope on Devil’s Castle, a sprawling powder playground that had been closed for several weeks. When the Castle opened we joined the frenzied rush to hike for fresh powder. Jasper and Eriks reached the top of the run and launched down the alluring slope, diving in and out of the powder like playful porpoises. Cold face shots startled us all.

“This,” said Jasper, motioning to the sparkling snowfields around us, “is a magical place.”

I felt a warm satisfaction as the cold flakes fell off my ski jacket. The torch had been passed. My mission was accomplished. Even if these boys left the mountains to follow their dreams, the mountains would never leave them. The kids would be all right.

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