North Carolina ski resorts are ready for New Year's

By Karen Chavez
Asheville Citizen-Times

It's been a sluggishly slow start to the Western North Carolina ski season, but thanks to last weekend's start-of-winter storm and rapidly plummeting temperatures, the slopes are finally starting to come alive.

While some resorts have been open since the end of October, they have all had to close down at least for a time because of warmer-than-usual weather, and Wolf Ridge Ski Resort in Mars Hill had one of its latest opening dates ever.

"Last year we opened after Christmas, Dec. 29. That was the latest the resort opened in the last couple of decades," said Kathy Bogdanescu, Wolf Ridge group sales director.

"The projected forecast was that it was going to be colder and snowier than last year. So far the weather hasn't lived up to the hype."

But Wolf Ridge finally opened for skiing, snowboarding and tubing on Sunday, right on time for the Christmas crush. This was the best present for Bogdanescu and staff, who have a full house of visitors from across the Southeast in the resort's town homes and cabins, who came hoping to spend the Christmas and New Year's holidays on the snowy slopes. Up until this week, however, instead of skiing on the mountain's 22 slopes, she said, staff members have been sending guests on horseback rides, caving tours, ziplining and even whitewater rafting.

"It's pretty devastating to not have snow and not have the ability to make snow in the middle of December, especially two years in a row," Bogdanescu said. "Many pass holders will probably not purchase them next year. We haven't raised prices this year."

Beech Mountain Resort ski area near Boone in Avery and Watauga counties has been open for 45 years. It recently added snow-making capabilities. The resort also expanded and renovated its Alpine Village to include lodging, shops and restaurants, said marketing director Talia Freeman.

The ski season is now in full swing at Beech, though, with skiing, snowboarding and outdoor ice skating. The mountain resort will have a New Year's Eve party Monday for ages 21 and older at the Beech Tree Bar and Grille starting at 8 p.m. There will be live entertainment from The Jonathan Birchfield Band and ice skating hours extended until 11 p.m. with games and activities for families.

At Sugar Mountain Ski Area in Avery County, "We had a very exciting early season so far. We opened Oct. 31 and had a great couple weeks of skiing," Kim Jochl, Sugar Mountain marketing director, said of the resort, which had one of its earliest opening days this year.

"Last year was obviously very tough. We've been on a roller coaster ever since."

The ski area opened and closed at the whim of the warm weather, closing again Dec. 17 and opening last weekend thanks to natural snow and perfect snow-making conditions.

Sugar, which had Santa skiing for Christmas, will have a New Year's Eve party including a torchlight parade at 11:45 p.m. Monday, an "extravagant" fireworks display at 11:55 p.m., live entertainment by the Johnson Brothers 9 p.m.-1 a.m. and a champagne toast at midnight in the Last Run Lounge for ages 21 and older.

At Cataloochee Ski Area in Haywood County, the staff squeezes every drop out of the winter season, said spokeswoman Tammy Brown, so the focus right now is on improving and expanding snowmaking.

"We've been open every day except for two since the beginning of the season," Brown said.

"Our investment in snowmaking has kept us open. We've been fortunate to have good temperatures and make snow consistently," she said.



Skiers hit the slopes at Sugar Mountain Ski Resort in Avery County. The ski area will hold a special New Year's Eve torchlight parade and fireworks. PHOTOS SPECIAL TO THE CITIZEN-TIMES



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