BREAKING OUT

Skiers reveling in North Carolina's snow blast

By Sofia Mannos
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BLOWING ROCK, N.C. — Skiers in North Carolina have an unusual treat this year: The Blue Ridge Mountains are dressed in winter white from an early snowstorm coating native rhododendrons in iridescent crystal ice and creating a solid base on the slopes. The ski resorts and snow guns are going full bore.



TODD BUSH / The Associated Press

A group of skiers prepare for a run down Northridge atop Sugar Mountain's 5,300-foot peak.

The largest and best known ski areas are Sugar Mountain and Ski Beech, along with nearby Appalachian Ski Mountain that has a run playfully called "Candied Appal." These areas boast well-groomed trails, crisp clean air and views that won't quit. At the tops of these mountains, you'll see the eponymous blue-gray haze swirling around gently undulating peaks. Beginners have no trouble finding ample room and more than enough runs to keep them busy. A couple hours away are Wolf Ridge ski area and Cataloochee. The elevations range from about 4,000 to 6,000 feet.

"It's all about having fun here," Cataloochee's Tammy Brown said. "I think sometimes that's what folks forget. We want you, your family and your friends to come to Cataloochee and have such a blast that you go home talking about your next visit."

These ski spots offer much more than skiing. There's snow tubing, ice skating — Sugar has a 10,000-square-foot outdoor rink — and even zip-lining, where you're attached to a cable in a sort of aerial slide. Nearby Hawksnest describes itself as the biggest snow tubing center in the East with 20 lanes.

This season was jump started. Just ahead of the winter solstice, a big storm blew in, sending up to 2 feet of snow across N.C. ski country, delighting skiers and operators alike.

Hitting the slopes is not only an adventure for visitors and residents alike, it's also big business for the Tar Heel State. The latest figures available are from the 2002-2003 season and they show that skiing generated more than $120 million — all of that in about 100 days.