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The Volcano Goes Off
by [Gordon Wiltsie](#)

Back in the Thirties, when legendary Northwest skier Otto Lang first installed a rope-tow on the site of what now is Washington's Mt. Baker ski area, he had no idea that he had stumbled onto a place that can yield the highest snowfall anywhere on Earth. He just thought he'd found a nice slope at the end of a convenient road. Lang got the first hint of bigger potential, perhaps, when his first lift was quickly wiped out by an avalanche.



Baker: Why hike? Because the lifts are buried again. Sigh. credit: [Gordon Wiltsie](#)

Consider Mt. Baker's 1998-99 winter season. Every day in January, the heavens heaped forth more than a foot of powder. Relentless storms swooped in from the Pacific, funneled between Vancouver Island and the Olympic Mountains and headed straight for an ancient volcano named Mt. Baker. Their abundant moisture cooled as it soared skyward from sea level. Then, four or five miles downwind, at the ski area (which is actually not on Mt. Baker itself), the winds unloaded their snowy burden in an extreme example of an annual weather pattern. That year alone, the ski area racked up 1,140 inches of snow—almost 100 feet—a record certified by the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration as the greatest snowfall in a single year anywhere on Earth in recorded history. By comparison, the ski area's annual average snowfall of merely 50 feet or so (which still far exceeds anywhere else) seems piddling. It's one of America's few places where they need a D-9 Caterpillar to plow the parking lot.

As a consequence, Mt. Baker does have a very devoted following. Among Mt. Baker Hardcores, a homegrown cult, skiing and snowboarding take total precedence. And it's not a resort for lightweights. The closest lodging is 17 miles distant, and you can only phone out via satellite. You won't find fancy French wines, and the only fur coats are worn by wild animals in the adjacent National Forest wilderness or North Cascades National Park. If you're driving, bring chains: It's a long, scary, switchbacking climb.

Baker first rose to national prominence not for its snowfall, but because it was one of the world's first ski areas to allow and even promote snowboarding. Many of the sport's pioneering champions—Craig Kelly and Shaun Palmer among them—honed their skills here. Area manager Duncan Howat's encouragement—and then subsequent, well-considered behavior guidelines for delinquent riders—set a national standard.

For snowboarders, this was Ground Zero. Given the absence of usual ski-area amenities, Mt. Baker embodies the spirit of near-wilderness

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skiing. To the west looms Mt. Shuksan, arguably the most beautiful peak in the northern Cascades. Just southwest is Mt. Baker itself, a classically shaped volcanic cone surrounded on all sides by lesser mountains.

Still, deep snow doesn't mean much if it doesn't remain untracked long enough for serious powder hounds to enjoy several runs. In that respect, this is even more a Valhalla. Baker is far enough from any big city to deter huge crowds.



credit: [Scott Wicklund](#)

Despite its small size, Mt. Baker is geographically complex. There is no way to ski from either of its two base lodges to the other without riding at least two lifts. In between is an astonishing variety of terrain ranging from easy groomed stuff to bump runs to rocky gorges, horrifying faces and chutes, even huge cliffs, where the boldest skiers and boarders "pillow drop" from one snow-covered ledge to the next.

If you follow ski-area policy requiring transceivers, shovels and basic avalanche knowledge, you can legally head out of bounds. Smack in the middle of the area is Hemispheres, a beautiful powder dome you have to hike to ski, and which I have never seen tracked-out. To the east is Shuksan Arm, which will take you as far into official Forest Service wilderness as you choose to propel yourself. Or, head west to Table Mountain and Herman Saddle. Somewhere in between is so much powder that it would take a Vail crowd to ski it out. And not much of it is easy. After two decades as a ski photographer, I have seldom been as scared by a local guide as I was trying to keep up with Baker's 63-year-old Don Wilcox, who just wanted "to show me around."

My favorite part of Mt. Baker is that although it is corporately owned, it is run with homespun grace by Howat's family and a host of shirtsleeve "relatives" who never seem to migrate elsewhere. No wonder. Despite the (subsequently civilized) advent of nose-ringed, Mohawk-shaven snowboarders who used to spit in liftlines and insult young children with offensive language, gliding over snow here is a throwback to earlier, more innocent times. Since my very first turns down Pan Dome with Don 15 years ago, I've been totally hooked on the place.

Thank goodness it's so isolated. I'd hate to see too many others share the secret.

Mt. Baker, Wash.

Getting There From Bellingham, Wash.: Follow Highway 542 (Exit 255 off I-5) east until it ends (75 minutes). From Seattle: Take I-5 to Bellingham, then same as above (2.5 hours).

Average Annual Snowfall 645 inches.

Record Season 1,140 inches, 1998-99. (At one time in the Seventies, it snowed 12 feet in three days. Only by using a D-9 Caterpillar front-end loader were workers able to get grooming machines out of the garage.)

Biggest Dump In Recent Memory January 1999, when a foot fell every day, all month.

Length Of Season Mid-November to end of April.

Best Time For Powder February.

Price Of A Lift Ticket \$34.

Skiable Acres 1,000 (not including vast out-of-bounds).

Information 360-734-6771; www.mtbakerskiarea.com.

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