

Leg 2 – Taos Ski Resort in New Mexico

Day 4 – Thursday (23 December 1999)

LAX to *Albuquerque*, New Mexico and on to Taos Ski Village Resort.

Another early wakeup call at 5am and out to the shuttle for LAX to catch the Southwest flight to *Albuquerque*, New Mexico. On arrival at Southwest Airlines terminal the queue moved slowly but efficiently through check in and on up to get our boarding passes. We had a first taste of no-frills flying with passengers choosing their own seat based on a number system, the earlier you get there the lower the number so first on board to run and select your seat.

Southwest serves juice, coffee and small snacks. The flight to *Albuquerque* took around 2 hours and flew over moonscape terrain, completely arid, no green, no water, no towns that we could see from the air – just desert. A large crater was pointed out by our captain who said the astronauts walked the bottom of the 500 foot crater surface to experience what it will be like on the moon.

Albuquerque is a large city with a centre about the size of downtown Brisbane but the thing one notices the most is the lack of vegetation or green grass, however the mountains are spectacular. It was a shock coming from 70 Fahrenheit to 20 Fahrenheit but being prepared was the key. Our shuttle service drove us through the same sort of countryside we saw from the air all the way to Taos. All along the way there are little communities of Mexican style houses or trailers crammed together in what I would classify as unbearable, slum type conditions.

The snow started around San Fernando but this year the falls have been light and the topic of conversation by everyone we meet. With nothing to do in this area casinos are everywhere and packed with cars. And they say Australians have a gambling problem. There was even a casino shuttle bus at Taos as we were having dinner.

The shuttle bus took us through many places I had looked at on the Internet and so glad we didn't chose because of the style of accommodation and distance from the ski valley itself. The town of Taos will be worth a visit, especially the centre with its Mexican Pablo buildings and shops. It's about the same distance from the ski valley as Jindabyne is to Blue Cow, but the resemblance stops there.

Since we had never experienced a white Christmas we searched the Internet looking for a ski resort that would be along the flight path from LA to New Orleans and found the ski village of Taos in New Mexico. On the website for Taos we found Sierra del Sol Condominiums right at the foot of the chairlifts and the village itself. Our condominium was number 27 which faced the mountain and the creek, very peaceful.

We arrived at Sierra del Sol Condominiums around 4:45pm and immediately noticed the temperature difference to Taos itself as it was 9 degrees Fahrenheit and the snow is so white and crunchy under foot, not like our heavy, wet snow.

Our unit is a bed sitter, well appointed with a kitchen, bathroom and a lounge/dining room/fold out bed and a fireplace and is located right on the field meaning ski in and ski out comfort. As it was getting late we thought we had better find some food, so a gentle walk through the village at OF was quite refreshing to say the least. Robyn bought a good pair of water resistant boots to keep her feet warm while I settled for my good old faithful ugg boots.

Something I cannot get use to so far is the food and lack of nutrition. Tonight we thought we would be safe ordering the chicken salad but we soon learned the meaning of hot lips as the peppers took hold, we have to find a shop to buy some food was can cook and digest.

Day 5 – Friday (24 December 1999)

Taos ski valley resort is 9,250 feet and the air is thin and one needs to drink plenty of water otherwise you can get altitude sickness causing pain above the eyes, feel dizzy and have a headache. I should know, because I started to feel dizzy and got a roaring headache last night and this morning I really felt crook, what a way to start a ski holiday. The shop owner told us we needed to drink around 4 litres of water a day to stop the dehydration and gave me a bottle of energy drink and told me to sit down and drink it and immediately the headache lifted. Since Robyn had been sipping on a bottle of water all the way from *Albuquerque* so she was fine. Thank goodness as I didn't want to lose any ski time feeling crook.

By the time we sorted out our ski hire, lift tickets and ski lesson confirmations we finally found food we could eat without heart burn. My lesson was at 2:00pm with Sandy who took me all over the ski areas that were open and taught me the finer points to improve my skiing powder snow.

The first thing you notice about the snow is how dry and firm it is, no ice spots even late in the afternoon. The snow slows you down so as long as you remember to:

1. Lean downhill when making turns;
2. Lean forward as the centre of gravity is over your boots;
3. Keep your hands out in front of you to make sure your body angles are correct;
4. Roll the skis into the mountain as it forms an edge in the snow;
5. Shift your centre of gravity into the centre of the uphill ski; and
6. Straighten up by moving the body back over the two skis.

Simply hey

The two hour private lesson with Sandy went really quick and I noticed that I used less energy by moving the body weight and allowing the skis to follow making it very enjoyable. Tonight they had a special Christmas Eve ski torch down the mountain but we were too late to see it, never mind we won't miss the next one.

The village in Taos Ski Valley was incorporated in 1996 and at an elevation of 9200 feet; however the Village limits reach elevations of 12,581 feet with the highest residential dwelling being at 10,350 feet, making Taos Ski valley the highest municipality in the US.

Tony had a ski lesson at 2pm so that he could get tips on skiing deep powder snow, something we are not use to in Australia. Sandy his (Tony) instructor took him up to the top explaining some of the finer points in turning, body angles, stopping and how the powder slows you down. Now that's comforting having skied ice for most on my years in Australia. The six tips proved extremely helpful and before long I was carving up the long, steep slopes making my way along groomed paths and off into the pine trees, I am in heaven!. Before long the 2 hour lesson was over but since she didn't have another class, we met up again later for some chat and skiing.

Right next door to our unit is a sauna and hot tub so to finish the first day on the slopes I headed off for a sauna and hot tub to loosen up for tomorrow. Our first 'white Christmas', by ourselves without family, but a perfect way to celebrate our 25th wedding anniversary.

Day 6 – Christmas Day (Saturday - 25 December 1999)

Merry Christmas - our first white Christmas, something I have always dreamed of experiencing and what could be more perfect with clear skies and 15 degrees Fahrenheit or -9.5 Celsius and a full day of skiing. The day started with Robyn having the first of her 4 'yellow bird' ski lessons today and once she was underway I took off for the top of the mountain to explore and put into practice all that Sandy taught me yesterday.

As the morning progressed the clouds started to roll in and the wind chill factor started to take effect. But best of all not many skiers were out on the slope to brave the conditions; they don't breed them as tough as we Aussies. See we are here for 10 days there is plenty of time for skiing so no rush.

Robyn and I met up at No 27 for lunch and relaxation before her 1:45pm lesson. By now the clouds have started to drop snow, perfect dry powder and the wind through the fir trees were like music to my ears.

They opened up the far lift which took us to three quarters up the mountain where long sweeping blue runs (Australian Black) and fresh powder was waiting. The crunching squeaky sound rings in my ears and as I carve up the slopes I am leaving neat parallel tracks down the mountain Yahoo.

By 4:30pm it was getting dark, the snow is falling and time to head home for a hot tub and sauna while Robyn went shopping for some real food, and we certainly miss our plain cooked food.

Christmas dinner was at the 'Inn at Sundance' the most impressive hotel and restaurant in Taos Ski Village. Our table looked out over the chairlift meeting area and we watched the dancing lights from the chalets and accommodation places up the other side of the canyon.

Our dinner was perfect. Robyn with the beef and I had the hen with real vegetables, what a difference and quite reasonable being Christmas day. There was a string quartet playing in one of the rooms which really set the atmosphere for a perfect Christmas dinner.

The wind chill factor really hit us as we walked out of the restaurant and headed back to our condo to sit in front the fire to warm ourselves. This has been a dream fulfilled.

Day 7 – Boxing Day (Sunday - 26 December 1999)

With clear skies, sunshine and sinking moon started off the day and with 3" of fresh powder snow time to hit the slopes and move from one chairlift to the next until I am right over at chairlift 8. Porcupine, a blue run, fresh powder making the skis squeak, a sharp right turn into Powder horn, push off and we are away for the first run of the day. Down through the fir trees, cross over 'White Feather', dips, bumps, long stretches, quick turns left then right, a near 360 degree turn and the last leg into the basin Can it get any better than that? Heart racing, legs pumping and body screaming for more, don't stop, let's head back to lift 8 and do it all again.

Lift 8 takes you half way up the mountain with perfect views across the valley and a glimpse of the steepness of each run. Taos has Bonanza listed as a 'green run', more like a blue/black run back

home but enough of the decision making, point, push and we're off again heading to the basin trying to take a different track and line through the trees. As I reach the basin it's time to head over for lunch with Robyn, wonder how her skiing has been going.

After lunch we could see they were getting ready to open Mucho Gusto (blue run), Firlefan blue run) which lead into two other blue runs 'Don't Tell' and 'Willy Tell' the furthest runs to the east of the mountain and they end up at the bottom of chairlift 8.

I had a number of interesting conversations with people on the lift, in particular how they fire shot into the 'West Basin' during the height of snow falls because of the fear of an avalanche in this region and the hills being so steep. In all there are 13 (luck or unlucky) black runs dropping off the west basin ridge.

At this height it is good to be able to ski hard for two to three hours both morning and afternoon and have the time to relax in your own condo during a lunch break. It's now dark, getting cold and you can hear the snow making machines working up on the top slopes, so maybe tomorrow after the snow groomers have been working, the higher up slopes will be open.

Day 8 - Monday (27 December 1999)

Another day in paradise with freshly groomed runs, clear skies and sunshine and not the expected crowds normally associated with this time of the year. Unfortunately for many of the ski instructors they were now on stand-down and I guess the retailers will be feeling the pinch as well.

They opened Mucho Gusto today so that's where I am heading, so fast, steep, smooth, exhilarating ... fantastic. Had my first buster coming down 'Willy Tell' with my right ski sliding around 50 metres down the slope. A pretty young lady came to my rescue grabbing the ski as it went near her and waited until I slid down to her to retrieve the ski. Such a grand impression I made on her (NOT), oh well can't win them all. Late afternoon the slopes are getting a little icy but nothing like our ice back home. New snow right now, natural or manmade would help, however the cold temperatures hold the powdery surface well.

Day 9 - Tuesday (28 December 1999)

No new snow overnight but the snow groomers and the cold temperatures keep the runs in top shape. The snow keeps coming off the ski edges as powder even at 4:30pm although some surfaces are a little icy giving that scraping sound and allow you really pick up speed ... you aussies are crazy.

There were more skiers on the mountain today as they have come to Taos due to the lack of snow in some of the other resorts on both the east and west coasts. Saw a couple of deer which were white with dark brown markings and all of a sudden two F18 jets appeared above and they were being refuelled by a tanker aircraft from the air force base in Albuquerque.

This afternoon I had an interesting conversation with a Navaho Indian who lives in a Pablo reservation in Taos village and he suggested we come down into the village on New Year's Day for witness one of their dances and compare it with our aboriginal dances. He had a great sense of humour and told some great stories of the region. It is interesting to talk to other skiers on the chair lifts to learn more about the American way of life and what they do for a living.

Day 10 – Wednesday (29 December 1999)

An eventful day which started out like any other clear day except for when I skied to the bottom of lift 8# there was a notice on the board “Tony Stiller – 1213”. A simple message but one that changed our whole holiday from that point onwards. Rang 1213 from the chairlift hut and was told by the nurse Robyn was having x-rays and I should head back down the slope to the medical centre. She was fussed over by a team of doctors and nurses (just like a scene from ER) and after a couple of hours Robyn left on crutches and a knee brace to hold things in place until she got back home where her doctor would determine what needed to be done.

With the damage to her right knee it has unfortunately cut short her ski week and lessons but fortunately, the damage isn't that great and with the rest of the week resting with her leg up, she will be ready for the next stage of our holiday.

The snow on some of the slopes is getting a little patchy with tufts of grass starting to appear. Without new snow I guess they will start closing some of the runs as the water restrictions in Taos limits the amount of man-made snow they produce in a season.

On Wednesday, Friday and Saturday nights the attraction is ‘tubing’ under flood lights where people slide down the beginners slope in rubber tractor tubes and the built up snow lining each side of the run prevents people heading off into the bush or the creek at the bottom of the run.

Day 11 – Thursday (30 December 1999)

The animal life in the fir tree just outside our condo is frantic with the squirrels, deer and other critters busy doing something. Turns out that due to the lack of snow they are staying on this side of the mountain instead of being higher up.

Seeing the disappointment on the face of Robyn who has an ice pack on her knee is disheartening to say the least. You can see she would like to be up on the slopes, but can't. Hopefully it won't hold her back on the next leg when we see the sights of New Orleans.

The snow is holding due to the temperature whereas back home it would have melted by now. On the lifts people are fascinated about Australia even though you hardly hear anything about Australia on the television. The people are forthcoming about places we should go and visit and what foods we should try and how to order food so we can mix it to our taste and liking.

Tomorrow is the last day of 1999 and what a day they have planned for New Year's day in the ski village with the festivities starting around 6:00pm.

Day 12 – Friday New Years Eve (31 December 1999)

One of our goals was to see in the New Year in the snow and the new millennium at the same time. Robyn was laid up in bed having damaged her knee. For one reason or another we woke up at 5:45am and watched Sydney (Australia) celebrate New Year's Eve with a spectacular fireworks display from the harbour bridge. CNN and other networks had a worldwide coverage from all major cities, what a way to see in the new millennium if you are laid up in bed that is.

Here is Taos Ski Valley skiing went on as normal regardless of the effects of the Y2K bug that is supposed to wreak havoc around the world as the computer clocks turn over to the year 2000. Anyway, back to the skiing on the thinning snow and bigger crowds with people trying to find good

ski runs without bumping into each other, sounds like Perisher front valley. With most of the schools in the USA closing on the 17th December and opening again on the 3rd January, the number of families and kids is large as this resort is advertised as family friendly.

At 6:00pm and the temperature at -2 degrees Fahrenheit, the ski instructors held a flare run down the front valley slope into the village with the orange flare against the white snow and green fir trees making the scene very picturesque. To add to the spectacle some of the instructors did some stunts as they glided down the slope with the crowd applauding as predicted.

After the flare parade there was a 15 minute fireworks display, equal to, if not better than those last year at Maroochydore and Mooloolaba. The loud bangs of the big bangers like the ones used to set off a controlled avalanche echoed through the valley, very impressive.

Robyn had to hobble her way across to the viewing area on her crutches but was able to get a seat to rest her knee until it came time to watch the flare run and fireworks when she had to stand as everyone else blocked her view. Back in the condo we celebrated over dinner and a glass of 'Asti' and waited for New Years to arrive in Taos. Much to Robyn's disgust I stretched out on the floor and slept on an off while the television showed the celebrations from parts of the USA.

At midnight Taos Ski Valley has another fireworks display but instead of going over to the viewing area we watched it from the condo veranda. This time the display only went for about 5 minutes, so lucky for Robyn we didn't try to scurry over to the viewing area we were at for the 6:00pm display.

Tomorrow is our (mine) last day of skiing at Taos and with the warmer weather during the day and with no new snow, it will be time to move on to New Orleans for the next stage of our holiday. The flat out skiing on my body is starting to tell and I am getting a little slower each day. Time for bed as we have just viewed the last time zone in USA and Canada celebrating New Year's Eve.

Day 13 -New Years Day (Friday - 31 December 1999)

Did the Y2K cause the end of the computer world? Who cares, I just want to ski and that doesn't require a computer. The New Year brought in a snow storm which lasted all day with about 5" of fresh powder snow blown around by 40mph winds, talk about feeling the cold even though I was wearing my thermals.

Even though the new snow is welcome, the winds blew fresh powder off some surfaces turning it to ice and when there is a whiteout, you go skating until you hit the next snow drift, challenging for any skier. Met some interesting people on the chair lift again today. One young male from Port Douglas (Queensland) who came here for a holiday and has been working in the valley for 4 years.

By 3pm I had skied myself out, yes hard to believe but I didn't have anything left so until the next time I can go skiing, time to call it quits as my body told me that 9 days of flat out skiing is enough and it didn't want to risk a ski accident. So with a touch of sadness the best thing I thought was to return the ski equipment and clothing to the hire place, take the short walk to the condo and head for the sauna and hot tub to help in the recovery process.

I think the staff at Taos Ski Valley are tremendous:

1. Milli – the ski school booking person behind the desk has been an angel, her advice and assistance to Robyn and myself on the first day was unmeasurable, a true friend;
2. Ski Hire – the whole crew had smiles and friendly advice about skis, boot types and fittings;
3. Bumps – the small self-service store at the Inn at Sundance has most supplies and the owners Bill and Beth are a delightful couple, always willing to help in any way they can. I logged into the Internet in their store tonight and checked the 154 emails of which only 5 were worth answering, the rest deleted.

Robyn and I finished the first day of 2000 with dinner in front of the fire drinking a bottle of complimentary Cooks Brut Californian Champagne sparkling wine given to us by the management of Sierra Del Sol as part of the New Year celebrations.

I have learned many things about the US system of schools from students and parents alike while skiing or on the lifts such as;

1. The schools shut down on the 17th December for Christmas and New Year and return on the 3rd January for teachers and the students return on the 4th;
2. High school graduates like to move away from home to go to college rather than attend a college in their own home town regardless of the courses on offer;
3. They don't cover as many subjects or to the same depth as Australian schools for the same level of age of student;
4. Many students don't make up their mind on which program or major when entering college and wait until the foundation courses have been completed.

The ski season;

1. Due to the short 2 weeks holiday period, ski resorts are heavily booked from 25 December to 2 January, then again from mid-January to mid-February when a number of families take their holidays (minus the children who are at school);
2. Taos this year has lost money due to the poor snow falls and late opening of the resort and a number of staff have been stood down;
3. The 'Parks' system restrict opening and closing dates of ski resorts regardless of the depth and quality of the snow;
4. The recommendation is to go skiing in February/March – spring skiing when the sun shines, the snow is softer and usually the whole mountain is open.

Pay system for New Years Eve;

1. Unlike Australia, workers from all parts of the USA do not get leave loading, not like the 200% to 600% increase on booking prices and costs imposed in Australia;
2. On the slopes here at Taos, Christmas, New Year etc. is just another working day, same pay rate as all the other days and they were surprised to hear about our 'Workers Award' system;
3. Workers in all industries work longer hours per day than Australians do, most earn less per hour but hey, that's life they are in the 'land of the free'.

Day 14 –New Years Day (Friday - 31 December 1999)

Two weeks into our holiday and time to leave the most beautiful ski valley I have ever visited and after two nights and days of snow, the white fir trees and temperatures at this height above sea level is a place I could retire to and live out my days (if that was possible). All of this is going through my mind as we start to pack and prepare for our return shuttle bus to Albuquerque at 10 am.

First thought was a visit to the medical centre to have a flexible brace fitted to Robyn's right knee, then to Cold Smoke Photography to have two photographs developed and posted home.

We had an interesting drive back down the mountain as the snow has fallen right to the bottom of the mountain. In Taos village itself, we changed into a larger shuttle bus with 4 other people from Texas, California and Chicago. Their conversation on various places helped us understand more about the USA and places of interest we should see, as well as ones that are not worth seeing.

Again it took 3 hours to travel from Taos Ski Valley to Albuquerque and after dropping off the other passengers we finally settled into the Ramada Airport Hotel. Lunch and dinner (combined) at the Applebee's Homestyle Diner and Bar just up the road from the hotel and is one of the best eating places in the USA serving home-style meals we can digest without hot lips, heart burn, indigestion, and food you can taste without loading on all sorts of dressings etc. and the American Club Sandwich with chips and coffee filled a hole, magnificent.

The rest of the day we spent watching television, resting and reading brochures about New Mexico, well worth another visit but next time, we will spend 3 or 4 days visiting places of interest in New Mexico.