

Skis lined up at the Women's Edge program in Aspen, Colorado.



## Queens of the Mountain

Do women learn to ski differently than men? A raft of new single-sex programs aims to prove they do. **Jayne Moyer** takes to the slopes with an all-female class to find for herself. PHOTOGRAPHS BY JESSICA SAMPLE

STANDING AT THE TOP of a black-diamond mogul ski run at 11,775 feet in Aspen Snowmass, I waited for the buzzkiller inside my head to decree, “You can’t do this.” Or at least, “You shouldn’t do this.” I’m only an intermediate-level skier, after all, and this was advanced terrain in the Rocky Mountains. The last time I had attempted a run like this—a couple of seasons earlier, with a male friend—I had ended up taking off my skis and walking. There are only so many hard falls a woman pushing 40 can, or should, sustain on what’s supposed to be a vacation.

This time, though, my inner naysayer was silent. The only sounds were the soft *whoosh* of wind in the boughs of snow-covered pines and the >>

snippets of conversation carried on the crisp mountain air from a nearby chairlift. And then the voice of my instructor, Susan Lee, saying, “You’ve got this.”

*Hell, maybe I do*, I thought. The way Susan put it, my classmates—Gigi, 56, from New York, and Nicole, 37, from Ohio—and I just needed to link three turns, then stop and regroup. Three turns, three moguls, 30 seconds of my life. Suddenly it didn’t seem so bad.

So it goes with the Women’s Edge program, a four-day intensive ski course for women, taught by women, offered by Aspen Snowmass from January to mid-March. The instruction style is based on the premise that women often prefer to learn in a fun, noncompetitive environment. Skiers who’ve experienced

single-sex training say they had previously underestimated their skills on the slopes, mostly because they compared themselves with men (who, due to body chemistry and physiology, are generally stronger, faster, and more apt to take risks). Removing men from the equation gives women a different baseline to measure their skills against—a “truing up” that can instantly boost their confidence.

Not only does the all-female experience elevate your skiing, it also helps foster friendship with a group of similarly single-minded women. What it doesn’t offer: spa treatments, shopping, or other stereotypically female pursuits. Nor is it a “learn to ski” program. Participants in Women’s Edge are mostly intermediate to advanced skiers, fit enough to spend multiple full-day sessions on the slopes.

Back on the black run, Susan led and we followed. I did my best to retrace the graceful line she wove between mounds of snow the size of Volkswagen Beetles. “Dive down the mogul,” she called over her shoulder, referring to a body alignment technique we’d practiced earlier, on less threatening terrain. I grimaced and dived, struggling to control my speed by making smooth, round turns before skidding to a stop beside Susan. Three turns down, about 30 more to go.

Before I’d had the chance to look up, we’d reached the end of the run. Susan held up her pole so Gigi, Nicole, and I could clank it in a skier’s high five. As we stood, beaming, triumphant, and gasping for air, it was hard to believe I had met these women only yesterday.

“Women’s Edge is not about coddling women; it’s about empowering them to be the best skiers they can be,” said Barb Hurwitz, the coordinator of Aspen’s Women’s Ski Programs, over an après-ski drink at the Limelight Hotel >>

The writer, second from left, with her Women’s Edge classmates and their instructor, Susan Lee, second from right.



**AMERICA'S TOP FIVE WOMEN-ONLY SKI PROGRAMS**

**Women's Edge**  
Aspen Snowmass, Colorado  
Course fees include small-group lessons (Aspen insists on classes of no more than five students) and an après-ski event on the last day. \$664 for four days; [aspensnowmass.com](http://aspensnowmass.com).

**Women's Only Weekend (WOW)**  
Sun Valley, Idaho  
Open to both skiers and snowboarders; includes lessons, lift tickets, après-ski events, and video analysis with Sun Valley’s top female instructors. \$850 for three days; [sunvalley.com](http://sunvalley.com).

**Women's Intermediate-Advanced Ski Camp**  
Alta, Utah  
Includes lessons, lift tickets, a four-night stay at Alta Lodge, and the option to try out high-end demo skis. \$2,541 for three days; [altalodge.com](http://altalodge.com).

**Elevate**  
Jackson Hole, Wyoming  
Includes lessons, lift tickets, optional yoga and stretching sessions, and an après-ski program featuring talks by professional women skiers. \$1,705 for four days; [jacksonhole.com](http://jacksonhole.com).

**Women's Ski Camp**  
Killington, Vermont  
Includes lessons led by Olympic gold medalist Donna Weinbrecht, lift tickets, lunches, and a welcome party on the first night. \$349 for two days; [killington.com](http://killington.com).

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later that day. The term *edge* refers to finding your limit on the mountain, then pushing past it. The staff, picked from applicants from around the world, are among the strongest skiers in the industry, each a level-three certified ski instructor or higher.

Aspen isn't the only destination offering serious women-only ski programs. Though the concept has been around for two decades or more, in the past five years, almost all the major resorts in the U.S., and several in British Columbia, have embraced the trend. Offerings during last year's season ranged from specialized camps focused on skiing extreme terrain in Washington to weekend retreats honing skills with an Olympic-gold-medalist skier in Vermont.

Demand is high—which Aspen attributes to the fact that female skiers direct their competitive instincts toward self-improvement, rather than pitting themselves against their peers. “Women aspire to do more on the mountain, in the same way men do,” Barb said. “We just go about it in a different way.”

I absolutely wanted to do more on the mountain. A Colorado resident for 16 years, I had taken up skiing five years earlier and felt stuck at the intermediate level, lacking both the skills and the confidence to handle steep and bumps. But I wasn't sold on the idea that women execute skiing skills differently than men. In my experience, when you lose control and face-plant into an icy mogul, the mountain doesn't care whether you're a man or a woman.

I was put with Gigi and Nicole because we all aspired to become more confident skiers—though they displayed far less skepticism about the women-only approach than I did. In total, there were 10 of us participating in Women's Edge, broken out into four groups, each with a dedicated ski pro. Small group size is one of the hallmarks of women-only skiing, no matter which resort you're at, as it allows for individualized attention (something the teachers say women often fail to insist on in the

context of a larger, mixed group). As a group of four, we were a natural fit for both the two-person and four-person chairlifts, and it felt like being on the slopes with a group of girlfriends—something I realized I'd never done.

I found out a lot about my teammates while sitting on those chairlifts. Both Gigi and Nicole were Women's Edge repeats, although they hadn't met before. They return each year for an intense dose of skiing with other athletic, goal-focused women. Both were married, but Nicole's husband didn't ski, and Gigi disliked skiing with her family because she always felt like she was slowing them down.

We discussed the merits of women-only instruction during one such ride. Susan admitted that the mechanics of skiing don't vary much between a man and a woman, but in her experience, learning style does. “Women are more inclined to pay attention to details, to slow down, do things on easier terrain to gain confidence before going straight to harder terrain,” she says.

A light snow began to fall, dusting us and the slope below with a fresh coat of powder. I considered Susan's point. Up until then I had mostly skied with my boyfriend, and had always felt timid in comparison. I took longer to warm up, and navigated tough terrain much more slowly. But with my Women's Edge group, I was the hard-charger of the group, preferring to be first in line after Susan down the mountain, and skiing faster than the others. In a group of women, I felt much more like myself.

The power of engaging with the mountain on my own terms crystallized on the last day. My classmates and I rolled into a warm-up run with a gradual start, and I was raring to go. I turned around to see if the others were close behind me, but instead of craning my neck, I let my entire body spin 180 degrees—something I've seen my boyfriend do when looking back for me. I'd never had the guts to try it myself. Or maybe it's more that I'd never had the opportunity, because he was always in front. ☘