

DOWNHILL BUDDIES

Space City Ski Club combines fun on the slopes and camaraderie.

By Philip Billnitzer

With more than 1,100 members, you might think Houston's Space City Ski Club (SCSC) wouldn't be looking for even more people who love to hit the slopes. However, that's not the case. Club President John Rice says the group is already the largest of its kind in Texas and

one of the largest in the nation, but still has room for more members.

"We want to bring together people with similar interests who enjoy doing a lot of things, not just skiing," Rice says. "We set our membership cap at 1,400 several years ago. We've fallen back a bit the last five or six years, but would still like to hit 1,400

members. It's not like we have a goal to be the largest club in the nation, though. We just want people to enjoy the group atmosphere."

Rice, 46, says membership levels have inched up since he became president in May. "It's nothing dramatic,"

he says of the increase. "We'd like to see our membership get younger."

Not that Rice has anything against members a little more advanced in years like Roger Holzman, 65, who says, due in part to the benefits of skiing, he feels more like 40.

A past ski trip director for the group, Holzman has been a member of one of the largest flatland ski clubs in the United States since 1976. A Minnesota native who took up skiing in 1967, he joined after being a member of a similar ski club in Nebraska. "I was in a bar (in Nebraska) with a friend and the next day I wound up in Colorado," Holzman said. "I haven't missed a year since."

Tom Cronin and Rolfe Beaudry founded the SCSC in 1964 with just a handful of members. By the end of the first year, the club had about 200 members.

Club member Kayleen Kill says the club's 11 scheduled yearly trips—the club's "season" basically runs from September to May—are designed to fit every budget.

Married to John Rice and a member since 1991, Kill says she's had so many memorable trips that it's hard to single out one as her favorite. She's looking forward to a trip slated for Alaska this season. "Normal skiing (as opposed to racing) is a lot like dancing," Kill says. "It requires



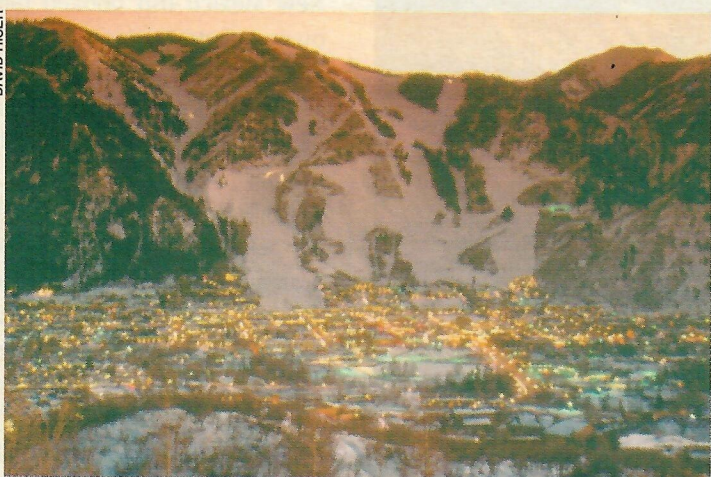
COURTESY: SCSC



BEN BLANKENBURG



Fun Bunch: The SCSC schedules 11 trips per year to resorts across the country.



Ski Country

In addition to the Space City Ski Club, two other clubs in the Houston area boast burgeoning membership rolls. Both clubs are members of the Texas Ski Council.

Clear Lake Ski Club. The group has about 300 members, including some who are also in the SCSC. They schedule around six trips per year. Other activities include shrimp boils and wine tasting parties. 713-797-8385. www.clasc.org.

Ski Jammers of Houston. Founded in 1982, this was the first predominantly black ski club in Texas and is a member of the National Brotherhood of Skiers. Its web page says there are about 8 million skiers in the U.S., but only around 10,000 black skiers. They schedule about half a dozen ski trips each season and have an annual pajama party. 832-824-4102. www.nbs.org/clubs/sj.

complete body control. You get a tremendous rush going downhill."

A veteran of countless trips, Holzman has enjoyed several sojourns to Europe. He's been to Italy most recently and has fond memories of the Alps, which he says are even more beautiful than the Rockies. This season's European trip was set for the principality of Andorre, which lies between Spain and France. Holzman likes short trips as well, like one he led to northern New Mexico early in the season that included stops at Taos and Red River.

One reason membership may be down slightly, Rice and Holzman say, is because the club is no longer able to negotiate more favorable air fare rates than shrewd shoppers can get on their own using the Internet. About half of the people who went on the



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New Mexico trip booked their own tickets, some at lower rates than the group received.

"I know the cost of our membership is not one of the reasons why membership is down," Holzman adds. At \$30 per person or \$45 per couple per year, membership has advantages that include activities that go way beyond skiing. Space City skiers get reduced lift tickets, discounted lodging, and, if necessary, reduced equipment rentals. Discounts aside, most join for the camaraderie.

"Our membership varies greatly in terms of the kind of people we attract, but it's fair to say most of them tend to be well educated," Holzman says. "I don't know the reason why membership has dropped off in recent years. The sport seems to be fading a little bit, but you would never know it judging by resort building and expansion."

Contrary to popular belief, Holzman says skiing is not a dangerous sport. In fact, he's never been injured on a ski trip, except for the time he suffered pulled stomach muscles while in the back of a van—he coyly declines to offer details of the incident. A bachelor and accountant by trade, he is quick to add there is no shortage of attractive, often single, club members of the opposite sex.

"We have a nice mix of singles and couples," says Kill, who met her husband, John, through the club. "We've had quite a few people get married as a result of meeting someone in our club," Rice adds.

Like Holzman, Kill has suffered only one ski-related injury since being in the club—a broken leg suffered during a 1994 trip. Now 50, Kill has skied for 26 years. She and Rice both enjoy meeting fellow golfers through the club. Even if you don't ski, you can go along on trips or participate in

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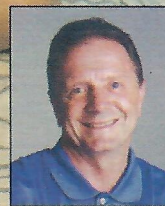
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Group Privileges: Members receive perks such as reduced costs for equipment rental.

a wide variety of other activities, including happy hours, monthly meetings during ski season and athletic events such as golf and tennis tournaments. They have an auction every year that benefits the Sunshine Kids, in addition to other charitable activities.

"We work very hard for our members and we try to be good civic citizens," Holzman said. "Officer positions are unpaid and they work unbelievably hard." Other events sanctioned by the club include white water rafting trips through the Grand Canyon, sailing, tennis tournaments, darts and bowling. Theater nights, an annual Spring Follies Show, beach parties and trips to Cancun complete the yearly schedule.

Rice says SCSC members range in age from about 30 to 70. "People say they are reluctant to join the club because they don't know anybody in it," Rice, a member since 1983, says. "I tell them, 'That's OK, come to one meeting and you'll have 40 new friends.' You can go on as many, or as few trips as you like."

One of his fondest ski trip memories was forged during a SCSC trip to Austria a few years ago, which was his first excursion to Europe. He did less skiing than he had planned, but had a wonderful time sight seeing. "People often plan trips around our trips," he says. "They might get there a few days early or stay a few days later. That's fine with us. We just want our members to have a good time. Since we can't guarantee the best rates anymore, we realize what we are really selling is group atmosphere and group fun."

Group members help each other off the slopes as well. One member, who met her husband in the club, was in need after her husband disappeared during a scuba diving trip. The body was never recovered, and with four young children to care for, she had fallen upon hard times. Members of the ski club came to her aid and now, when they are not enjoying club activities, they derive satisfaction from helping her complete the building of her new home, which was under construction at the time her husband vanished.

If you'd like to learn more about the Space City Ski Club, visit www.spacecity.org, or call 713-688-7272. They guarantee you won't get lost in the crowd.

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