

# Breaking Into Snow Business

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Ogden's plan to become a premier center for outdoor tourism: an abandoned cannery with rotting wood floors and boarded-up windows. In a few months, it will become home to some of the biggest brands of the ski industry, including Salomon and two other units of Helsinki-based Amer Sports.

"There is no Silicon Valley for the ski industry," says Mr. Godfrey, a 36-year-old former technology executive. "Why not us?"

Ogden, a city of 82,000 perched on the edge of the Wasatch Mountains, wants the same thing as many other Western communities: a piece of the growing outdoor-tourism market. But Ogden is taking an unusual approach. Instead of just courting vacationers, it's also going after companies that make skis, snowboards and other outdoor gear. So far, it has gotten more than 10 brands to move to town, including Ni-decker and Descente.

Central to both sides of the town's strategy is a controversial proposal for an overhead gondola. The gondola -- which is estimated to cost \$35 million to \$50 million and would be funded by the developer -- would carry skiers from Ogden up to the secluded nearby Malan's Basin ski area. The project's supporters hope it could eventually be extended to Snowbasin, where the 2002 Winter Olympics held downhill events and saw Bode Miller win a silver medal.

Ogden officials, particularly Mr. Godfrey, say the plans are the town's best hopes for a renaissance. Their pitch to the ski-and- outdoor companies: an opportunity to get in on the ground floor with relatively cheap real estate in an up-and-coming resort area, which makes it attractive for executives, retailers and other customers to combine vacation and business. If the gondola project is approved, these companies can also take potential wholesale buyers up to the nearby slopes to try out gear. The mountainous location also ties into product credibility -- companies like Patago-

nia have seen the benefits of associating themselves with picturesque, rugged areas.

On the tourism side, the outdoor businesses will have a vested interest in seeing the town's profile as a destination rise, says Kurt Geiger, vice president of Descente North America, an outdoor-clothing maker. In this view, passionate outdoors types might visit Ogden, in part, to see where their snowboards and high-performance jackets are made. Some companies are planning to open showrooms in downtown offices for commercial and retail customers.

Mr. Geiger says during the 10 years Descente was based in Denver, clients hardly ever visited. In just over two years since relocating to Ogden "we've had nearly 200 retailers who just dropped in," he says. That, plus lower overheads in Ogden -- which has allowed them to spend more on marketing -- has helped boost sales, he says.

But perhaps even more critical to the future of the town is that these companies could become allies in the battle over the gondola plan, which is being spearheaded by developer Chris Peterson. It has divided the city on whether public funds and resources should be used to help fund a project, which critics say doesn't solve the community's mass-transit issues and benefits a private developer (the construction of the gondola would be funded by a housing development, built in part on hiking land that the city would sell to Mr. Peterson).

The idea of a gondola link from Malan's Basin to Snowbasin has also failed to gain support from Earl Holding, the head of Sinclair Oil and the owner of Snowbasin resort -- who is also Mr. Peterson's father-in-law. Clint Ensign, head of government relations for Sinclair Oil, says that the company studied the feasibility of a gondola link and thinks that it's too difficult and costly. (Mr. Peterson also says he has no plans to connect the two resorts.)

If the plans come to fruition, "Ogden can be one of the best, most convenient high-adventure communities in the country," says Mr. Peterson, who has the support of the town's new ski businesses. Descente's chief operating officer, Bob Geiger (the son of Kurt Geiger), is the head of the pro-gondola group, Lift Ogden.

For now, Ogden's tourism draw is mainly as a cheaper -- though less convenient -- alternative to Park City. Ogden hotels offer ski packages to Snowbasin and Powder Mountain, both within a half-hour drive. There is also cross-country skiing and snowshoeing along the Wasatch Mountains.

Downtown, historic 25th Street has been attracting new restaurants. Nearby, the swanky redesigned offices of snowboard maker, Nidecker, have opened with a showroom and retail store. Further down the street, crews are finishing construction on the new Salomon Center. Named for one of the latest big brands to move to town, the recreation center will have an indoor wave pool, a sky-diving wind tunnel and rock-climbing walls.

But the strategy still has skeptics. Though town officials have succeeded in attracting some companies, others are waiting to see if the city council approves the gondola project. "Other companies have intimated that they're inter-ested, but really would like to see the gondola come through," says Mr. Godfrey.

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#### Trip Planner

-- How to Get There: It's about a 30-40 minute drive from Salt Lake City International Airport.

-- What to Do: Ogden is about 20-30 minutes from ski mountains including Snowbasin (known for lodges with gi-ant fireplaces and chandeliers) and Powder Mountain (known for its backcountry terrain). You can also get to popular spots like Alta, Snowbird, Brighton and Solitude in less than an hour. Try ice climbing at nearby Waterfall Canyon. In the summer, there is kayaking along the Ogden River and hiking in the Wasatch Range. For a dose of history, try Union Station, once a major stop on the Transcontinental Railroad. The George S. Eccles Dinosaur Park has replicas of T. rex and Triceratops. The Treehouse Children's Museum is devoted to literacy and lan-guage.