



WORDS ELISABETH KING

SKI AMERICA'S WEST AND LIVE THE APRES-SKI HIGH LIFE

AUSTRALIANS have long flocked to the American West for apres-Christmas ski breaks with good reason. American ski resorts are purpose-built, packed with activities and real fun. Just as importantly, they are crammed with first-class bars and restaurants.

Aspen is the most famous ski area in Colorado and one of the world's 10 best ski resorts. The area caters to all comers from beginner slopes to "back side of the mountain" terrain for near Olympic-standard performers. Although famed for attracting celebrities, the mega-rich and the merely wealthy, Aspen's well-known steeps and four mountains (famously

per half hectare. Vail's High Noon Lift has been re-christened Chair 5 and is now a four person detachable chair lift - a.k.a high-speed quad. Sweet Basil is the major dining destination in Vail. The long, curving bar is as schmick as the main dishes, including Wild Alaskan Salmon and Duck Breast a la Plancha. A ride on the Eagle Bahn gondola and a snowcat shuttle is part of the magic of dining at Game Creek, which prides itself on the chef's tasting menu and prime meats. The best place for breakfast in Vail is the Westside Cafe & Market for the legendary Bloody Mary and eggs Benedict.

Umbrella Bar allows you to ski right in on Champagne Powder days.

Telluride Eco Adventures, a major initiative targeted at families, delivers a platoon of activities for all ages, including snowmobiling, beginner ice climbing excursions, fly fishing and heli-skiing. The guided back country ski program at Telluride has also been a major hit. You have to be expert, though, to tackle the breathtaking terrain near Bear Creek and Alta Lakes. Alpino Vino claims to be the highest elevation, fine dining restaurant in the US. A cosy hutte, there are only 26 seats, a prix fixe five-course dinner and bookings are mandatory. If sensational

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not linked) are also accessible to most budgets. Lowdown Park in Snowmass, the largest local peak, is only one of a handful of ski resorts in the world to offer three half pipes that cater to all skill levels.

For a big hunk of meat from a nearby herd, book a table at Steakhouse No 316. For sheer drama, you can't beat Cloud Nine, located 3200m up Aspen Highlands, for elk ragout, pheasant sausages and Colorado lamb chops. A rowdy apres-ski scene and a flood of Guinness soaked up by pub fare such as bangers and mash is the magnet at Finbarr's Irish Pub - smack in the middle of town.

There's room for everyone in the three major mountain areas at Vail - the Front-Side, the Back Bowls and Blue Sky Basin. A big 12km wide, even on busy days there are only four skiers

About 35km from Vail, Copper Mountain offers Woodward Camp, a 1900 square metre indoor facility dedicated to perfecting snowboarding, ski jump and half-pipe skills without risking the mishaps of real life. For the skilled there are "double black diamond" slopes on Copper and Union peaks, including four expert bowls. Rib-sticking fare done well is the promise at Incline Bar & Grill, where rotisserie and barbeque dishes are the forte. For more upscale dining, it's hard to go past CB Grille for "modern Colorado cuisine". You can hear Zizzo's Ski Bar long before you see it, boasting the loudest sound system on Copper Mountain.


The longest run at Steamboat is the breezily named Why Not at 4.8km, but nearly 50 per cent of the 165 named trails are rated beginner and intermediate. The Mavericks Superpipe is rated as one of the premier pipes in North America. For apres-ski, the Burgess Creek Terrace and

house-made sausages appeal, 221 South Oak is the place. For sunset drinks, the happy hour at Allred's is a non-negotiable.

Crossing into Idaho, Sun Valley is billed as America's first and finest ski resort. An instant success from the day it opened in the mid-1930s, Sun Valley was the Aspen of its day and attracted regulars such as Clark Gable, Gary Cooper and Errol Flynn. TV legend Lucille Ball took her kids there almost every year and if you're taking the children overseas for a ski holiday for the first time, Sun Valley is still a top choice for a rollcall of activities that will leave them pleasantly exhausted at day's end. Wild West meets fancy cooking is the lure at the Cornerstone Bar & Grill. For a great US-only wine list, CK's Real Food also offers top-notch paddock-to-plate food. If you've always wondered how high altitudes affect fermentation,

drop by at Frenchman's Gulch Winery close by.

Over 600,000 visitors a year converge on Squaw Valley, one of the largest ski areas in the US. With 33 chairlifts and the only funitel (aerial lift) in the US, the resort is also the epi-centre of the current revival of snowshoeing. Many of the restaurants and bars have spectacular views of Lake Tahoe. And it's a real thrill to ride the cable car up the mountain to the High Camp, a textbook winter wonderland comprised of the Olympic Skating Rink, tennis court, resorts and a swimming pool and spa that - hyperbole aside - really does boast one of the most majestic views in the world - from the lake to the high Sierras. Graham's has been the go-to restaurant in Squaw Valley for over 20 years and you have to think well ahead (as in maybe before you go) at the height of the ski season. A big wallet winelist and Mediterranean cuisine pull in the punters. The Uncorked Wine Bar is the most famous apres-ski venue, as much for its little known boutique wine and beer selections as its friendly service.

The prestigious SKI magazine has ranked Park City Mountain Resort as one of America's top 10 ski areas for several years in a row. No wonder. Utah's skiing boast - the Greatest Snow On Earth - is a registered trademark. It's also home to the High West Distillery and Saloon, opened in the 1870s as the state's first distillery and the only ski-in-ski-out distillery and gastro-saloon in the world. Biochemist David Perkins took over 10 years ago and produces the best in Rocky Mountain Whiskey. Swiss-trained James Dumas helms the kitchen. A whisky-lover's heaven, orders flood in from all over the US for storied bottlings such as High West Whiskey Campfire and Son of Bourye, a smooth blend of straight Bourbon and rye whiskies. 



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