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# Getting away...

Aspen is best known as an upmarket ski destination. But visit during the summer to make the most of a colourful arts scene and great outdoor activities, says **Stephanie Maskery**

**THERE'S** a beautiful light fading across the mountains tonight as applause erupts and the cowboys take centre stage.

Intricately decorated horses kick up dirt which shimmers like gold dust in the air, and John Denver's Rocky Mountain High rings out from large speakers.

I'm in Snowmass, just outside Aspen in Colorado, the birth state of the rodeo - America's original extreme sport.

This particular rodeo has been running weekly in the summer for 40 years, with locals enjoying barbecue ribs while men battle to stay on wild bulls and bucking broncos, cowgirls show off speed and agility by racing around a course marked out by barrels, and little ones try their luck at muton bustin' - that's riding sheep to the uninitiated.

It's a wonderful insight into the character of the region, and the locals are quick to make you feel at ease. In fact, most of the residents aren't local at all, many having moved from all over America to live among the beauty of the Rocky Mountains.

Snowmass and Aspen may not sound like the most logical places to take a summer holiday, being better known as ski destinations, yet they boast 300 days of sunshine a year, and average June to August temperatures reach above 25C.

Once the snow melts, world class ski slopes become the perfect place for stunning mountain hikes, downhill bike trails and paragliding.

Chat to anyone here and they'll all say the same thing: "I came for the winter but stayed for the summer". And it's easy to see why. The summer calendar is bursting with events for both outdoor enthusiasts and culture vultures.

There's the Aspen Food and Wine festival (June 20-22), one of America's most renowned, and the Aspen Ideas Festival (June 24-July 3), with past speakers including Bill Clinton and Condoleezza Rice. Musical entertainment comes in the form



The pool at the Viceroy Hotel.



Stephanie Maskery in The Above It All Balloon.



## Hot air highs in Aspen

Views of Snowmass and surrounding area from the The Above It All Balloon in Aspen.

of free weekly bluegrass concerts in the mountains.

With no time to lose on our week off, my partner and I leave the cheers and jeers of the rodeo for the peace and starglight of our balcony at the Viceroy Hotel in Snowmass Village.

Opened in 2009, this luxury hotel has a fantastic 7,000sq ft spa offering a range of treatments (I'd recommend the 60 minute Path To Tranquillity) as well as one of the best restaurants in town. But with a 4.30am start the next morning, we head straight to our gigantic American bed.

Sometimes in life, you have to rise above it all. And with that firmly in mind, we watch bleary eyed, as fans roar with life and our hot air balloon glides into the clouds.

Floating up to 2,500 feet, the balloon slowly sails over the now peaceful rodeo grounds, before picking up speed down the valley. As we drift upwards, the staggering panorama of the Elk Mountains (part of the Rocky Mountain range) comes into view.

With 53 peaks measuring over 14,000ft, getting up high is a must if you want to truly see them.

It's also a great way to get a sneak peak of the amazing ranches of the rich and famous.

Stars such as Jack Nicholson, Melanie Griffith and Mariah Carey all own fantasy pads in the Snowmass/Aspen area, where the average house price is a whopping 4.5 million US dollars.

But it isn't celebrities we are gawping at as we stare into the wilderness below - it's

a rarer sight... a bear, making its way to the local dump. That's the best place to spot one, says our pilot Captain Bubba, but the Above It All Balloon Company. Elk are also visible, migrating in large herds along ancient routes.

The hour-long flight is sadly soon over, and after a Champagne breakfast in the sunshine, we embark on the next part of our adventure.

Leaving Snowmass behind us, we head to our new home, The Hotel Jerome - Aspen's oldest and most iconic hotel.

Built in the 1880s, this red brick Victorian property in the centre of town has recently undergone an extensive renovation, with beautiful furnishings inspired by its early years and the addition of a state-of-the-art spa.

It's the perfect starting place to experience what locals call The Aspen idea, stimulating the mind, body and spirit. It's an ideology conceived by the town's modern father, Walter Paepcke.

Industrialist Walter and his wife Elizabeth breathed new life into the once booming silver-mining town by founding the Aspen Skiing Company in the 1940s.

With an interest in the arts, they set up the Aspen Institute and Music Festival, creating not just a ski town but a cultural hub.

Their vision thrives today, with a list of art and music offerings that would rival Manhattan or London. Quite surprising for a city with a population of just under 7,000.

With Walter Paepcke's philosophy in our hearts, we take a bike ride to The Woody Creek Tavern, a favoured spot of Gonzo

journalist Hunter S Thompson, who moved to this area in the 1960s and wrote some of his most famous works - including Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas - at his ranch, Owl Farm.

The Rio Grande Trail is a leisurely paved route out of Aspen that follows the Roaring Fork River's descent, 42 miles into Glenwood Springs. After just a few minutes, the track takes us into the calmness of the river valley, among red jagged rocks and white rapids alive with the squeals of excited rafters.

Further along the trail we reach a wide plateau, perfect for viewing the surrounding mountains before winding down into Woody Creek, eight miles from Aspen.

The tavern is busy with cyclists, locals and tourists, all here to try its famous margarita cocktails and see where Hunter S Thompson hung out. The eclectic bar's walls are a scrapbook of photos and newspaper clippings depicting decades of laid-back fun in a town now synonymous with elitism and luxury.

But the image of Aspen dripping with gold and furs is quite misleading. Although the presence of stores such as Prada and Louis Vuitton is a reminder that this town has money, the abundance of free cultural offerings, such as the Art Museum and the Snowmass Thursday night concert series, demonstrate that people here can enjoy life whatever they earn.

There may be no Taco Bells or Denny's Diners in this little valley, but with real cowboys and good old fashioned bluegrass bands, this authentic American adventure leaves me on a rocky mountain high.



Quirky shops in Aspen.



A cowboy taking on a bucking bronco at the Snowmass Rodeo.

**TRAVEL FACTS:** Black Tomato ([www.blacktomato.com](http://www.blacktomato.com); 020 7426 9888) can arrange a bespoke seven night luxury summer holiday to Colorado from £2,422 per person, based on two travelling. Includes flights from London to Denver with British Airways, accommodation at The Hotel Jerome in Aspen and The Viceroy in Snowmass, and car hire. For more information on Aspen and Snowmass, visit [www.aspenchamber.org](http://www.aspenchamber.org) and [www.gosnowmass.com](http://www.gosnowmass.com).