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BASE CAMP: COLORADO SKI TOWNS

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A SOJOURN *into*

SNOW

written by **HEATHER KW BROWN**



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BEST-DRESSED, POWDER-PERFECT HOT SPOTS

THE SOUND OF SNOW, AS IT RELENTLESSLY TAPPED THE WINDSHIELD, rivaled a possessed typewriter while a discernible “grrr” rumbled steadily beneath us. Unaffected by either, our driver navigated the route to dinner with ease. Next to him in the front seat, I maintained my own ground, wishing I could convince him to let me drive. When visions of a Southern girl behind the wheel of a Sno-Cat in Vail, Colo. met with a long line of possible delays, I tabled the idea until after dinner.



TOP: Dinner reservations at Vail's Game Creek Restaurant, a European chalet accessible only by snowplows in the winter, is a must.

BELOW: A warm welcome always awaits inside the lobby at Vail Cascade, part of the Destination Hotels collection.

AS

we plowed into the scenic Game Creek Bowl to the European chalet known as Game Creek Restaurant, all preconceived notions of "fine dining at new heights" were cast aside like snowdrifts, clearing the path for an experience unlike any

other. My friend and I walked down the slick steps of the Sno-Cat into the coziness of the restaurant, where a gourmet prix fixe meal and bottle of Château de Sancerre complemented the chariot in which we had arrived.

I had arrived, alright — armed with minimal bravery but ample enthusiasm to immerse myself in Vail, Snowmass and Aspen, each of which are powder-perfect hot spots in Colorado, packed with as much personality as snow.

AN ELEVATED EXPERIENCE

The vibe in Vail is immediate and infectious. No sooner had I checked into my mountain hamlet than my heart rate started to climb. It could have been the view from my room, where snow-covered rocks ushered water through a brook almost as effortlessly as hearty trees bolstered newly dusted branches. Most likely though, my excitement stemmed from the stream of chairlifts that flowed up and down the mountain, serving as motivation to trade my current perspective for a look at life from the top, or somewhat close to it.

Tucked along the banks of Gore Creek at the base of Vail Mountain, Vail Cascade Resort & Spa is touted to be the town's only

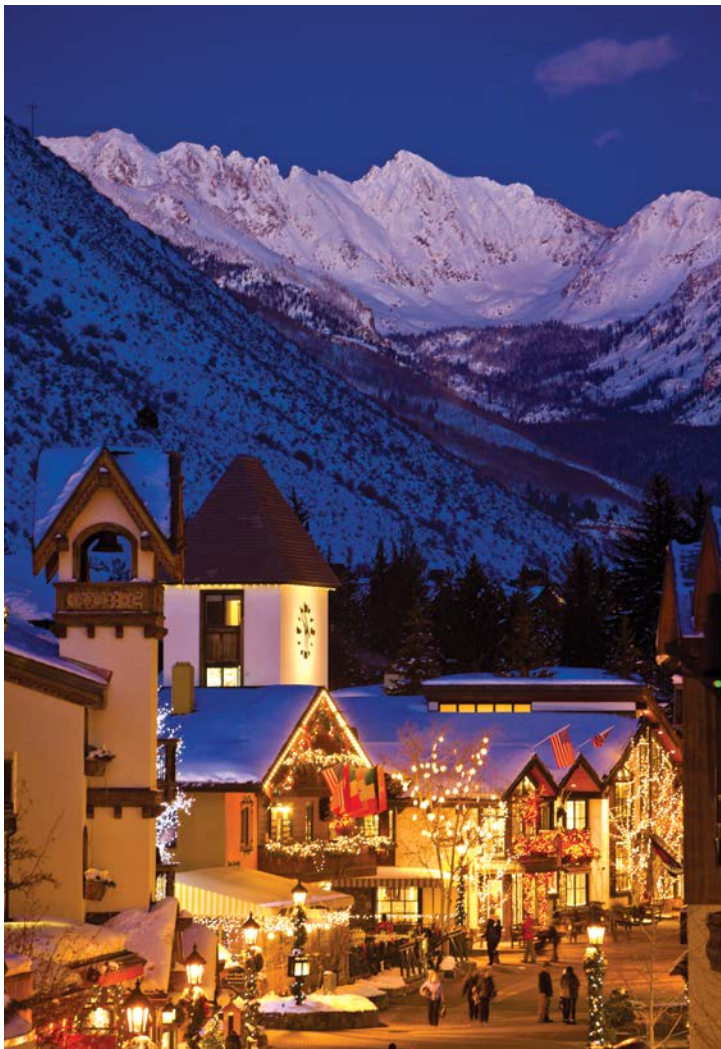
PREVIOUS PAGE: PHOTO COURTESY OF JACK AFFLECK, VAIL RESORTS; THIS PAGE: PHOTOS COURTESY OF JACK AFFLECK, VAILS RESORTS; DESTINATION RESORTS





ABOVE:
Ultimate 4 makes a day on the slopes fun.

RIGHT:
Vail Village stays busy at night too, compliments of its many bars and restaurants.



true ski-in/ski-out property, providing direct access to the lifts — no shuttling required. In relation to the rest of Vail Village, Vail Cascade sits farthest west, but the property is essentially a village of its own, complete with condominiums for families and groups searching for a home away from home.

Among the abundant amenities at Vail Cascade is Charter Sports, the onsite ski hub, located beside Cascade Village Lift (No. 20). There, I met Laura Morvay, one of the instructors of Ultimate 4, a women's only ski school. Despite her credentials as a Level 5 certified instructor with the added talent of being a heli skier, Morvay enthusiastically escorted me up, down and around the easier runs, stopping more often than not to share tips and demonstrate how to properly turn in a pair of skis.

The need for Ultimate 4 originated from the idea that women want a fun day on the slopes without the stress and intimidation that often accompanies a pair of skis and large groups. Moms, in particular, sign up to participate while their children are in ski school, as well as girlfriends on winter getaways. During these lessons, typically held between 12:45 and 3:15 p.m., up to four women are led by a female instructor from the Vail Ski and Snowboard School.

Traveling sans little ones meant I had a successful morning on the slopes plus time for après-skiing at The 10th, a sit-down dining destination residing atop Gondola One at Mid Vail. In addition to overlooking the majestic Gore Range, patrons are treated to modern Alpine cuisine, the likes of which range from heirloom chicken and roasted pheasant pot pie to Colorado bison and pork bratwurst braised in local beer. Equally inspired by its heritage, the name is derived from the veterans of the 10th Mountain Division, many of whom, including several of Vail's founders, became involved with the ski industry upon their return from World War II.

Exercised, fed and ready to explore, I ventured into almost every shop in Vail Village. Hours later, I returned to Vail Cascade, where I promptly ditched my new snow boots in lieu of a plush robe at Aria Athletic Club & Spa. Incorporating elements of the Colorado Rockies, Aria offers a wide range

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JACK AFFLECK, VAIL RESORTS





TOP: Heavenly slope-side condos at Top of the Village in Snowmass.

ABOVE: Aria Spa inside Vail Cascade is a rejuvenating respite even on the best bluebird day.

of spa treatments that rejuvenate and prep tired muscles for more days on the mountain.

Unwinding and refueling are all part of the experience and when dinner approached, we wandered with purpose into Atwater on Gore Creek. The onsite signature restaurant sports authentic mountain energy and a creative menu listing locally inspired dishes like Boulder organic half chicken

served with butternut squash farro risotto, apple, kale, shitake mushroom and champagne velouté.

Dubbed “like nothing on earth,” Vail lived up to its superlative reputation. From ground to gondola, it was going to be tough to beat.

SOLITUDE AT SNOWMASS

SNOWMASS, like Vail, started as a mountain for skiers and the town developed around it. Graced with blissfully wide runs, as well as a 5-mile intermediate run called The Long Shot, Snowmass remains a favorite for skiers in search of fewer people, shorter lines and plenty of options.

From Vail, Snowmass is just under a two-hour drive, plus a few extra minutes to reach the Top of the Village, which is a haven of slope-side properties. Sleep in, grab a hot coffee, and a warm breakfast from the comfort of your own kitchen, then step out of your condo onto a ski run.

With only one day to spend in Snowmass, we opted to play in the snow, but to venture off the beaten path. This time, my friend and I cinched up our moccasins for an outing in snowshoes. Fun and incredibly easy, snowshoeing is ideal for travelers

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ABOVE: Aspen
RIGHT: The Gant's lower pool

looking to enjoy a winter sport off the slopes. In my case, it allowed me to see the wilderness with intention, rather than as a result of ungracefully veering off course.

Contrary to a blur of passing trees, we joined a tour guided by a naturalist from the Aspen Center of Environmental Studies (ACES). The easy trek took us in and out of spruce and fir forests and through an alpine wilderness decorated with animal prints in freshly fallen snow. Along the way, we learned of local winter habitats, avalanches and wildlife. Maybe it was the solitude, the welcomed treat of hot chocolate and cookies or the amazing bluebird day, but I felt like a kid again and couldn't resist the temptation of plunging backward into the powder.

We eventually traded the day's giddiness for a sophisticated dinner at The Artisan Restaurant and Bar inside The Stonebridge Inn. At the helm here is chef

Randall Baldwin whose creativity regularly attracts a crowd, and rightfully so. In tune with palates beyond the plate, Baldwin also stocks a wine list that appeases aficionados and casual sippers alike.

THE AWE OF ASPEN

T simply wasn't blessed with the ability to descend a mountain on a pair of skis — at least, not very quickly. That said, I can do it. It just isn't pretty. Or skilled.

Sure enough, midway down the mountain, my friend who had moved to Colorado and no longer skied like a Southerner asked if I wanted to take the chairlift back up the mountain. Feeling confident thus far, I would not be deterred. Until I was. Unbeknownst to me, the worst was yet to come and my sunny disposition disappeared as the slope grew steeper. Several choice words might have surfaced, as did



two good Samaritans who tried their best to encourage and assist in my unconventional route down the mountain.

Welcome to Aspen Mountain, better known by the locals as Ajax. To be fair, mythology is also not one of my fortes, but even I know the name of a Greek hero, proverbial for his size and strength. Too

PHOTOS COURTESY OF NATHANIEL WILDER, JASON DEWEY





LEFT: The Gant; **ABOVE:** Pepperjack's Café

bad I hadn't heard the reference prior to my undertaking. Indeed, Aspen is less of a family-friendly ski stop — for that, head back to Snowmass or Vail; however, for those with serious skills, Aspen is the place to be and be seen.

At this point, I wanted nothing more than to "be seen" (in street clothes). Once a mining town, the area is small, easy to walk and replete with reasons to wile away the day. Located a few short blocks from downtown, The Gant, Aspen's premier condominium resort, sits just as close to

more than 300 shops, restaurants and clubs as it does to world-class skiing. The Gant, like Vail Cascade and Top of the Village — all three of them part of the Destination Hotels collection — feels like home with the added bonus of every amenity you'd expect from a fine hotel. Not to mention, The Gant might have some of the best views in town, especially from its lower pool.

The onsite Pepperjack's Café offers small bites and just enough brew (both caffeineated and alcoholic), but when hunger

strikes, Aspen is well-suited to satisfy. Our favorite was Ajax Tavern at The Little Nell, easily one of Aspen's hippest spots, where people watching and glamour commingle as frequently as orders of cocktails and truffle fries. Needless to say, the incomparable accommodations and enjoyable night on the town more than made up for my lack of talent earlier in the day, allowing Aspen to reclaim its high rank among mountain towns in my book.

Sno-Cat ride in Vail, check. Snowshoeing in Snowmass, check. Mettle test in Aspen, check. Picking a favorite from our tour de force of Colorado's best-dressed mountain towns requires a return visit. Mine is already booked. 🍷

● **FOR MORE INFORMATION**
aspensnowmass.com
destinationhotels.com
vail.com

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Our guests travel great distances to dine here as the setting in the Persimmon Valley is as tempting as our menu, which is conceived based upon the fresh ingredients we source each week. We don't even own a freezer! Uncomplicated, yet finely prepared dishes are crafted by two chefs in a kitchen likely smaller than the one in your house. The Farmhouse at Persimmon Creek is reserved for the gastronome, the intrepid traveler, and those simply who enjoy dining far off the beaten path.

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