

WHAT'S DOING IN; Aspen

By Rochelle Lash; Rochelle Lash writes frequently about skiing
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Correction Appended

Aspen has had a tough time staying a small town. During the early 1880's it was home to 50 grizzled, tobacco-chewing silver miners in tents. Within 10 years it became a sophisticated boom town with 12,000 people, a street car system and an opera house. By 1900 the gleam of silver had faded, and Aspen was a farming and lumbering community. By the time the ski developers arrived in the late 1930's, there were only about 350 people living in the valley of a cluster of magnificent peaks. Aspen grew steadily and became a lively, but out of the way, skiers' village nearly 8,000 feet up in Colorado's thickly forested Rocky Mountains.

Today's winter visitors, 90 percent of whom come to ski, swell the town's population to 20,000 from 6,000. Some part-time celebrities and residents have reached new heights of conspicuous consumption and have given the town a glamorous side. There are more than 30 art galleries and 90 restaurants, including takeout lobster. The airport logs 13,000 private plane landings a year, and a Saudi Arabian prince is building a mansion with 27 bathrooms.

In spite of all this, an intimate atmosphere prevails. The skier with whom you shared the chairlift on a morning run will say hello later that day at an apres-ski hangout. Most restaurants and shops are a few blocks' walk from Aspen Mountain, which rises dramatically from the town's center. It isn't necessary to have a car because shuttle buses run frequently, at no charge, between Aspen's three ski areas and Snowmass, a mountain and self-contained village 10 miles away.

For the most part, Aspen's style is casual and life centers around outdoor activities in Colorado's clean, crisp Rocky Mountain air and intense sunshine. It's true that rhinestone-studded ski ensembles and ankle-length fox coats are seen, but clean jeans, a sweater and a ski jacket are acceptable garb at even the most fashionable places. Environmental issues rate high, and the city has prohibited smoking at restaurant tables and neon signs on the streets.

At Aspen's core is its history as part of the territory of the Ute Indians until 1879 and after that as a silver-mining center. That Old West legacy lives on in the town's fine Victorian houses and touches of Western life. It's just that today's prospectors are real-estate agents, and the cowboys who stroll the boarded sidewalks are likelier to be ski instructors than bronco busters.

Aspen is 200 miles southwest of Denver - a 30-minute flight or a four-hour drive. United Express (800-241-6522) has nonstop service from Los Angeles, Chicago and Dallas starting on Dec. 15. An alternative is Aspen Limousine (800-222-2112; 303-925-2400), which operates a van from Stapleton Airport in Denver to Aspen, with a stop in Vail, six times a day. The city's area code is 303.

The Skiing

Aspen has access to four major mountains with a total skiable terrain of 3,700 acres, an average annual snowfall of 300 inches and elevations as high as 11,800 feet. Aspen Mountain (also known as Ajax) is the expert's favorite for its steep pitches and punishing walls of moguls, huge Snowmass has runs for skiers of all levels and gentle Buttermilk is where beginners head. All three are owned by the Aspen Skiing Company and accept interchangeable lift tickets. Aspen Highlands, known for its advanced skiing and the longest vertical drop - 3,800 feet - in Colorado, is owned independently.

The Aspen Ski School has more than 500 instructors and many varied programs. For children there are the snow cubs (18 months to 4 years), big burn bears (4 years and over), teen weeks and more. For adults there are private and group lessons as well as the Cooper-Tache race program, powder adventure, women's seminars and programs for blind or handicapped skiers.

A one-day ticket good at Aspen Mountain, Buttermilk and Snowmass costs \$40, and multiple-day discounts of up to 10 percent are available with reservations. For children 12 and under and those skiers 65 and over, the cost is \$20. Those over 70 ski free at Buttermilk. At Aspen Highlands, where the cost of a one-day ticket had not been set yet, children under 12 ski free if accompanied by their parents. Downhill ski areas are to open on Nov. 22.

Whether skiing or not, in Aspen it is important to look good, and many high-fashion shops carry the latest gear from the United States and Europe. The Mogul Shop (617 East Durant Avenue) sells the popular Hot Chillies ski tights (about \$50) and a dizzying array of glitzy fashions and accessories. Most ski ensembles range from \$500 to \$1,000, but at the Mogul Shop you can pick up a women's rubberized, sequined ski suit for \$3,000 or a men's waterproof suede outfit with a price tag of \$15,000. At Stefan Kaelin's shop (424 East Cooper Avenue) an elegant ski suit by Lily Farouche, High Society, Kaelin or EuroHead costs \$1,000 to \$1,500.

Lodging

There are accommodations for more than 8,000 visitors in lodges, condominiums and motels near each ski area and near stops for shuttle buses. Rates given are per person, per night, double occupancy, during the regular winter season.

The newest place to stay is the Little Nell (675 East Durant Avenue, 920-4600), a deluxe contemporary lodge at the base of Aspen Mountain

with a private mini-bus, a ski concierge and videocassette recorders and fireplaces in every room. Rates are from \$300 for rooms to \$1,800 for a suite. The dining room, perhaps the best place to eat in town though not the most expensive, serves what it calls "American alpine" cooking. Try gingerbread waffles with maple whipped cream for breakfast (\$5), asparagus bisque at lunchtime (\$5) or barbecued leg of lamb at dinner (\$35 to \$45 a person for a complete meal without drinks).

The Aspen Club Lodge (709 East Durant Avenue, 925-6760) is a modern slope-sided hotel with an outdoor pool. Continental breakfast is included in the cost of a room, which ranges from \$212 to \$272. Mini-buses also ferry guests to condominiums a mile away (\$175 to \$1,050 per unit) and to the Aspen Club's tennis courts and fitness center, which has a full gymnasium, workout classes and a sports medical center.

The Hotel Jerome (330 East Main Street, 920-1000) and Sardy House (128 East Main Street, 920-2525) are two fine restored Victorian hotels. The Jerome's two bars and two dining rooms have been at the social center of Aspen for 100 years (\$319 to \$549). The smaller and more intimate Sardy House has 15 rooms and five suites (\$220 to \$500) in what was once a house.

Budget choice: The Christmas Inn (232 West Main Street, 925-3822), a motel near a stop for the shuttle bus, is one of the few good inns priced modestly. Rooms (\$85 to \$95), which are set back from the street and were renovated two years ago, have extra space for ski gear.

Dining

Aspen's restaurants can be jammed at night so reservations - even as much as a week or two in advance - are recommended.

The Caribou Club (405 East Hopkins Street, 925-2929), new this year, is a fancy semi-private club with a lounge, a small discotheque and a dining room that offers simple foods with a fancy twist. Among the house specialties are the caribou-burger, a 12-ounce sirloin steak with roasted peppers (\$12) and brownies with hot fudge sauce (\$5.50). Club membership costs \$11,000 a year, or upon availability, \$200 for a week.

Pinons (105 South Mill Street, 920-2021) is a tony dinner spot with a Southwestern decor - cowhide bar stools and sofa pillows made of Indian blankets. Dinner runs about \$50 to \$60 a person, without drinks, and is advertised as "Colorado cuisine," including carpaccio, grilled veal chop, pan-seared pheasant and Jack Daniels apple pie.

Celebrities like Don Johnson and Robert Wagner linger over fettucine (\$10) and rich tiramisu at Mezzaluna, a fashionable bistro (600 East Cooper Avenue, 925-5882).

Western Life

Aspen's Western heritage is reflected throughout the town. The antique shop Curious George Collectables (410 East Hyman Avenue) is virtually a museum of Cowboy Americana. More than 2,000 items are for sale or on display.

At Shooter's Saloon and Dance Hall (220 South Galena Street) couples sporting cowboy hats, boots and jeans glide and twirl, dancing to country-music hits.

Western and native Indian art are featured in some of Aspen's many galleries. The Squash Blossom (450 South Galena Street) exhibits Willy Matthews's watercolors of cowboys (\$1,000 to \$5,600) and a wide range of traditional Indian crafts from a \$200 pottery vase to antique weavings that sell for \$25,000.

Two Shoes Inc. (665 East Cooper Avenue) carries affordable trinkets like string ties (from \$20) and hatbands (\$15 to \$50).

Most shops are open daily, usually from 9 or 10 A.M. to 9 P.M.

Besides Skiing

If you've ever been tempted to board a hot-air balloon, two companies offer rides at sunrise with a view of the wildlife of the White River National Forest, the Continental Divide and the mountains. Adventures Aloft II (925-9497) and Unicorn Balloon Company (925-5752) both charge \$160 for rides whose length is determined by wind conditions, and they pick up customers at their hotels. They are airborne December to April and June to October.

For another unusual tour, try Krabloonik Kennels (1201 Divide Road, Snowmass, 923-4342), one of the few dogsled operations in the country. The frenetic barking of teams of huskies can be heard for miles and the two-passenger sleds streak along at between 8 and 20 miles per hour. A lunch of game stew back at Krabloonik's log cabin restaurant is included. Rides depart at 9 A.M. and 1:30 P.M., and the cost is \$150, \$100 for children 3 to 8. The Aspen Historical Society tells the town's story with photographs of life from the silver-mining days of the 1880's through its development as a ski resort starting in the 1930's. A tour of Aspen's fine Victorian houses can be arranged by appointment. Admission \$3, open daily, 1 P.M. to 4 P.M. as of Dec. 16 (620 West Bleeker Street, 925-3721).

Among special events are a torchlight parade of skiers - open to everyone - down the gentle Fanny Hill run of Snowmass Mountain on Christmas Eve (923-2000), and the 40th annual Aspen/Snowmass Winterskol Carnival, Jan. 16 to 20, with fireworks, ice skating shows and a parade.

Information

For brochures on lodging: Aspen Central Reservations, 700 South Aspen Street, Aspen, Colo. 81611, 800-262-7736 for Aspen, 800-332-3245 for Snowmass. For general information: Aspen Chamber Resort Association, 303 East Main Street, Aspen, Colo. 81611, 303-925-1940. For

skiing: Aspen Skiing Company, P.O. Box 1248, Aspen, Colo. 81612, 800-525-6200 or 303-925-4444, or Aspen Highlands, P.O. Box T, Aspen, Colo. 81612, 800-356-8811 or 303-925-5300. For 10th Mountain Hut-to-Hut Skiing maps and guide information: 1280 Ute Avenue, Aspen, Colo. 81611, 303-925-5775.

Correction: November 4, 1990, Sunday, Late Edition - Final Because of a typographical error, an article on Oct. 21 about Aspen, Colo., misstated the annual membership fee of the Caribou Club. It is \$1,000, not \$11,000. The article also characterized the club's admission policy incorrectly. Only members and their guests are admitted, according to Harley Baldwin, the owner. The club is not semiprivate.

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