

36 Hours in Vail, Colo.



The back bowls of Vail, which always draw lines of skiers.

Kevin Kolorey for The New York Times

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VAIL does not have the charm of [Telluride](#). Nor does it exude the glitz of [Aspen](#). Even Breckenridge, arguably, has better night life. But the one thing that Vail does have is great snow: some 5,300 skiable acres with a seven-mile-long mountain face, 193 trails and not one but seven bowls. That hasn't stopped Vail, the nation's largest [ski](#) resort by area, from polishing its base village. As part of an upgrade, many of Vail's boxy, 1970s-style facades and outdated streetscapes have been refreshed with a modern Bavarian look. This winter, skiers are checking into new boutique hotels with ski valets, getting pine-scented massages at Zen-channeling [spas](#) and warming themselves by outdoor fire pits.

Multimedia



Slide Show

A Weekend in Vail



Map

Vail, Colo.

Friday

3:30 p.m.

1) NORDIC AT DUSK

You don't need to be on the slopes to appreciate the Southern Rockies, 10,000-plus-foot-tall peaks that edge narrow Vail Valley, cut by clear mountain streams that flow despite the deep freeze. While it's still daylight, explore this winter wonderland on cross-country skis. The [Vail Nordic Center](#) (1778 Vail Valley Drive; 970-476-8366; [www.vailnordiccenter.com](#)) has rentals starting at \$17; trail passes are \$8. The trails loop across snow-covered wooden bridges, gentle pine stands and groomed [golf](#) greens.

5:30 p.m.

2) WESTERN CHIC

Like the mountainside chalets that share a modern rustic look — beamed ceilings, cathedral windows, stone decks — so, too, does the local fashion, which could be described as upscale cowboy. Get into the spirit at [Gorsuch](#) (263 East Gore Creek Drive; 970-476-2294; [www.gorsuch.com](#)), a luxe store with von Trapp-gone-Vail looks for her (crystal-studded cashmere hats for \$268), him (Johann Gottfried suede jackets for \$2,300) and home (Megeve crystal-etched wineglass for \$248). Nearby is Axel's (201 Gore Creek Drive; 970-476-7625; [www.axelsltd.com](#)), which carries British tweed sportcoats, shearling coats and oversized, etched belt buckles. For that rugged cowboy swagger, step into Kemo Sabe (230 Bridge Street; 970-479-7474; [www.kemosabe.com](#)), a retail saloon known for its handmade Lucchese cowboy boots that go from \$495 to about \$4,000.

7 p.m.

3) COLORADO CUISINE

With entree prices hovering around \$40, eating in Vail is not cheap. But that doesn't stop foodies from packing into [Restaurant Kelly Liken](#) (12 Vail Road; 970-479-0175; [www.kellyliken.com](#)), this season's hotspot. Ms. Liken cooks innovative regional fare, which recently included a rich elk carpaccio with mustard aioli, roast Colorado rack of lamb with mushroom bread pudding and locally farmed bass with candied kumquats. Since opening in 2004, the window-wrapped and art-filled restaurant has ascended to the top of the dining scene. Dinner for two is about \$100, assuming you don't order the \$10,000 Burgundy (a 2005 Domaine de la Romanée-Conti Grand Cru).

9 p.m.

4) NIGHT CRAWL

The party starts early in Vail — après-ski cocktails are at 4 p.m., which may explain why the town seems to shut down after dinner. A rollicking exception is the [Red Lion](#) (304 Bridge Street; 970-476-7676; [www.theredlion.com](#)), a dive bar packed with high-top tables. For the past 22 years, the guitarist Phil Long has stoked the crowd with [Bob Dylan](#) covers, corny jokes and [Elton John](#) sing-a-longs. If you're still wired, walk down the street to the candlelit Samana Lounge (228 Bridge Street, 970-476-3433; [www.samanalounge.com](#)), where 20-something snowboarders and South American lift operators pulse to the grooves of visiting D.J.'s.

Saturday

7:30 a.m.

5) HEALTHY STARTER

Skiing at Vail takes lots of calories, so don't skip breakfast. For a civilized start, waddle your way to [Terra Bistro](#) (352 East Meadow Drive; 970-476-6836; [www.vailmountainlodge.com](#)), a sophisticated, loft-style restaurant in the Vail Mountain Spa and Lodge that serves a delightful organic breakfast. Try the seven-grain hot cereal (\$7.25) or cage-free scrambled eggs with potatoes, kale, garlic and goat cheese over Indian-style naan (\$10.25). If your objective is to get an early start, don't sit by the bistro's windows, where the snowy street scene induces lingering over cups of locally roasted coffee.

8:30 a.m.

6) PICK A BOWL

Skiing Vail's legendary back bowls requires a game plan, not only because of the travel time, which can run upwards of 30 minutes without traffic, but to avoid the morning crush. Aim to catch one of the first lifts, which begin running at 8:30 a.m., to get atop the mountain ridge before everyone else. Expert skiers can claim first tracks on the extreme terrain at Sun Down Bowl, one of several south-facing slopes that make up the so-called backside of [Vail Mountain](#). Try its aptly named neighbor Sun Up Bowl for the softest snow this time of day. Though most of the backside bowls are expert only, intermediate skiers are welcome at China Bowl, a gentler basin with wide-open expanses and panoramic views. Staying ahead of the crowds, push on to Blue Sky Basin, one ridge to the south. Hit the effervescent Champagne Glade before everybody else does.

Noon

7) UNBUCKLE AND REFUEL

Relive your morning conquests at [Two Elk Restaurant](#) (970-479-4560), Vail's flagship restaurant atop China Bowl. During lunch, skiers from the mountain's front and back sides meet here to unbuckle their boots and loosen their belts. Although the restaurant has 1,200 seats — all bordered by massive timber-framed windows that overlook the Colorado Rockies — plan on getting there before 12:15 p.m. (alternatively, after 1:30 p.m.), or you'll be left standing. Service may be cafeteria style, but the fare is upscale. Recent dishes include chicken posole soup (\$8.50), buffalo chili (\$9.70) and portobello mushroom sandwiches (\$10.25).

1:30 p.m.

8) LONG-DISTANCE CRUISING

Continue conquering the mountain in contrarian fashion, and skiing where the masses aren't. Now that the back bowls are brimming, point your skis toward Vail's front side, carved with many stamina-testing runs. By midafternoon, hit the four-mile-long Riva Ridge cruiser, the resort's longest trail.

4:30 p.m.

9) MUSCLE RELAXER

As the sun begins to dip and your muscles begin to tire, make your way to the Lionshead base, one of Vail's three base villages, and check into the [RockResorts Spa](#) at the Arrabelle at Vail Square (675 Lionshead Place; 970-754-7754; [www.arrabelle.rockresorts.com](#)). The new 10,000-square-foot spa features separate men's and women's lounges, each with a steam room, a sauna and a whirlpool. Treatments are mountain-themed, including massages with pine-infused oils and body wraps incorporating wildflower essences. Fifty-minute massages are \$145; 50-minute facials \$140. Therapists will even treat seriously sore muscles with an ice pack filled with mountain snow — for \$35.

7:30 p.m.

10) HIGH AND LOW

Still aching for more pampering? Stick around the Arrabelle for dinner at [Centre V](#) (970-754-7700), a white-tablecloth restaurant that resembles a cozy Lyonnaise brasserie, with vaulted ceilings, a zinc bar and an oyster station. Indulge in French classics like steak frites (\$28 to \$38) and duck confit (\$24). Reservations recommended. But if you're hankering for more action — and to see Vail's scragglier, less effete side — drive eight miles to the [Minturn Saloon](#) (146 Main Street; 970-827-5954; [www.minturnsaloon.com](#)). The knotty-pine and antler-adorned saloon draws hardcore skiers like Chris Anthony (a star of Warren Miller's ski movies), and serves Tex-Mex dishes like chicken burritos (\$14.95), as well as hunter's favorites like grilled quail (\$22.95).

Sunday

9:30 a.m.

11) A WALK IN THE WOODS

In a ski town that lives and breathes sports, Olympic-caliber athletes are the real celebrities. So if you're planning to go snowshoeing, there's no better guide than Ellen Miller, the first North American woman to reach the summit of Mount Everest from both the north and south sides. Now 49, Ms. Miller teaches a 90-minute [Mountain Divas](#) class at the Vail Athletic Club (352 East Meadow Drive; 970-476-7960; [www.vailmountainlodge.com](#)), which takes a crunchy cult of triathletes and trail racers on a valley trek through towering aspen forests, past trout-filled streams and under snowy pine boughs. Use of the club and a class are \$35, and private bookings are always available for \$100. Unlike skiing, snowshoeing requires no special skills. Beginners, finally, welcome.

THE BASICS

During the [ski](#) season, American and Continental Airlines fly nonstop to Vail/Eagle County Airport from [New York City](#). A recent Web search found an American flight from Kennedy starting at \$219 for travel in February. Downtown [Vail](#) is a 35-mile drive along I-70. A rental car is recommended, though Colorado Mountain Express (970-926-9800; [www.cmex.com](#)) runs shuttles between Vail and the airport for \$49.

The Arrabelle at Vail Square (675 Lionshead Place; 970-754-7777; [www.arrabelle.rockresorts.com](#)), which opened in 2008 at the base of the Eagle Bahn Gondola, has 36 rooms with fireplaces and spacious bathrooms. Rooms from \$295.

The **Westin Riverfront Resort & Spa** (126 Riverfront Lane; 866-949-1616; [www.westin.com/riverfrontavon](#)), in the nearby town of Avon, opened in September 2008 and has 210 rooms with a new gondola that zips guests to [Beaver Creek](#). It also has a heated outdoor pool, a 23,000-square-foot spa and a restaurant. Rooms from \$249.

The Lodge at Vail (174 East Gore Creek Drive; 970-476-5011; [www.lodgeatvail.rockresorts.com](#)) is centrally located and recently opened an 11-treatment-room spa. The best of the 165 rooms, and a new heated outdoor pool, face the ski runs. Rooms from \$229.