

## WINTER IN THE SNOW; The Ungroomed Vail

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THE backcountry gate at Vail's westernmost boundary is a bit like the entrance to Alice's rabbit hole. Passing through it on a blustery January afternoon, I was suddenly transported from the Colorado über-resort's manicured ski boulevards into a topsy-turvy wonderland: a backwoods bowl filled with snow so deep that the surrounding stands of aspen and lodgepole pine trees seemed dwarfed -- their trunks buried six feet under thick white curds. Piled high with powder, rocks and tree stumps morphed into puffy white mushrooms. Tangles of spiky underbrush lurked like serpents beneath the surface, nipping at skis and sending unsuspecting revelers flying into what amounts to frozen quicksand.

Which is precisely the predicament I soon found myself in. Blissed out and careless as I carved a swooshing track at the top of the bowl, I'd caught a ski tip on a buried sapling and landed with a muffled thud, chest-deep in the duff.

Save for the cold tingle of snow down my pants, the feeling wasn't unpleasant. For only then did I remember why I so adore Vail's resplendent backside. Other than the rays of sun glinting off the snow, the forest was perfectly still. Beyond my huffing and puffing, I could hear, well, nothing. No whirring ski lifts. No lift-line yapping. Just the sublime silence of the deep woods.

It was a yearning for just that sense of serenity that inspired my wife, Holly, and me to spend a week on the mountains along a stretch of Highway 24 that begins just west of Vail and winds up the resort's rear flanks to the 10,424-foot Tennessee Pass and beyond. The two-lane road traverses some of the most gloriously overlooked landscapes in Colorado, including 14,000-foot mountain ranges (the source of its nickname, Highway of the 14ers) in the White River National Forest, a 2.3-million-acre haven straddling the Continental Divide.

We planned to do plenty of downhill skiing along the way, both on Vail's ski slopes and on powdery off-piste trails that fan out from the ski resort and the roadside. But we would also hit above-timberline snowmobile and cross-country ski trails that retrace the haute routes pioneered by the United States Army's 10th Mountain Division training for World War II. Not to overdo it, we plotted stops at a natural hot springs and a high-altitude yurt-cum-restaurant where a woolly troop of locals from Leadville served up a sumptuous meal featuring elk tenderloin and homemade strawberry-blueberry pie.

Our tour could have been done as a road trip, but was just as easily enjoyed as a series of day trips dovetailed with a Vail ski vacation. After a three-month stint working in New York, we had just arrived in Minturn (population 1,068), a former railroad town sandwiched in a narrow hollow between Vail and its upscale sister resort, Beaver Creek, where we rented an apartment overlooking its cozy Main Street.

I headed straight for Vail and my favorite ski run: the Minturn Mile, a backwoods frolic that funnels down from the ski resort, twisting and turning like a luge track as it follows a frozen creek bed toward Minturn. Off-piste and out of bounds, the one-way ride isn't for the faint of heart. Yet it's one of a few backcountry descents that don't require an avalanche beacon. And its moderate pitch and easily navigated trail make it a great introduction for backcountry novices.

I left Holly, who is less inclined to ski off-piste, at the backcountry gate, swooshed down into the bowl and was soon contemplating my navel in the deep snow.

Shortly after righting myself, I was overtaken by two boisterous pairs of skiers racing toward the door of the Minturn Saloon, a 102-year-old roadhouse near the trail's end where Minturn Milers congregate each afternoon around a massive stone fireplace. Once a watering hole for railroad crews who readied trains for the trek up Tennessee Pass (one of the nation's highest railroad passes), the place was turned into a Mexican restaurant back in the 1970's by Bob Cherry, a charismatic former pro baseball player. Fancying himself an ambassador to the celebrities who visited Vail, he lined the Saloon's walls with autographed photos of everyone from New York Yankees catcher Yogi Berra to John Wayne, whose no-nonsense drinking habits are now honored on a placard that touts the barkeep's motto: "If John Wayne didn't drink it, we don't make it."

By the time I arrived at the Saloon, a cabal of workers from the local hospital -- among them the skiers who had sped by me -- were crowning the winner of their Organ Donors Challenge and belling up to the bar to order frothy pitchers of beer and margaritas. They mixed freely with vacationers who had driven over from the ski resort.

On the afternoon Holly and I drove into town, we spotted elk grazing on the south-facing slopes above the Eagle River, not 100 yards from the road. Across the river stretched Meadow Mountain, a broad sloping pasture that is a mouse-hunting area for red-tailed hawks (we counted two of them), and one of our favorite places to go snowshoeing.

So the next morning, we tromped up a snowshoe trail near the back door of our apartment. The switchback trail quickly yielded grand views of the rocky buttes along Cougar Ridge across the valley and Minturn below. Yet at 8,000 feet and climbing, it left us breathless.

Seeking less strenuous vistas, we drove up Highway 24 toward Tennessee Pass. From Minturn, the road quickly climbs about 1,000 feet above the Eagle River, passing Gilman, a deserted mining town perched precariously on a cliff below the 14,005-foot Mount of the Holy Cross, so called for a vertical couloir and intersecting cliff band that fill with snow in winter to form a cross.

HOLLY is prone to carsickness. So her prayers were answered after the switchbacking road crossed a picturesque arch bridge and approached the broad flats of Camp Hale, former home of the Army's 10th Mountain Division. A few cement foundations were all we could see of the military's mountain-warfare training center. At the height of World War II, it housed about 15,000 men, a remarkable number considering that only about 7,800 residents now live in the entire 384-square-mile Lake County, which is just past the camp.

The Army's Special Forces units still use the area for high-altitude training. But Camp Hale's only full-time occupant is a snowmobile concessionaire, who offers tours to the surrounding peaks and unguided snowmobile rentals. Holly and I chose the latter, which freed us to explore at our own pace and spared us from the exhaust fumes we would otherwise suck up riding behind another two-stroke machine.

At more than 9,000 feet, Camp Hale isn't far below the treeline and just a few throttle squeezes from some of the most spectacular panoramas in the Rockies. We were riding tandem, and Holly's grip on me tightened in direct proportion to our altitude as we ascended to Ptarmigan Pass and up along 12,400-foot Machine Gun Ridge. I almost had to pry her off the sled, the vertiginous ridge all but distracting her from jaw-dropping views of three distinct mountain ranges -- the 14,000-foot New York, Ten-Mile and Gore ranges -- turning orange and purple in the late-afternoon light.

Only after we returned did I fully understand Holly's worry. That's when the rental shop manager told us about a snowmobiler who tried to summit the same ridge the previous winter and drove off the edge in heavy cloud cover. I made sure our next outing was less risky: an easy car ride up the road to the top of Tennessee Pass, where a year earlier I'd hidden a diamond ring in the snow and proposed marriage during a snowshoe hike. This time Holly and I donned cross-country skis and climbed a mile through the woods up to the Tennessee Pass Cookhouse, a round yurt-style tent that overlooks a stunning wall of giant peaks.

Its wood floors and well-stoked potbelly stove kept us toasty. And at 11,000 feet, every glass of wine felt like two, ensuring a lightheaded ambience that was only enhanced by a prix-fixe meal that began with boar sausage appetizers and peaked with elk medallions dressed in a sauce of blueberry, sage and port wine.

The week's final outing took us up Highway 24 toward Buena Vista and the Cottonwood Hot Springs Inn and Spa. The route first passed through Leadville and its historic main drag of Gold Rush-era brick and flagstone buildings. We drove past the charmingly dilapidated Tabor Opera House and the National Mining Hall of Fame, then stopped in at Western Hardware Antiques, a turn-of-the-century hardware store that houses a wonderful collection of high-country artifacts and 10th Mountain memorabilia, such as a vintage issue of The Saturday Evening Post, its cover depicting a crouching soldier dressed entirely in white.

The road out of Leadville soon paralleled the Arkansas River and a broad, high-altitude valley with sweeping views of the Collegiate Peaks (another line of 14ers), named for the Ivy League alma maters of the surveyors who first climbed them. Sitting in the shadow of Mount Princeton, the Cottonwood Hot Springs pools were packed the last time we visited, in summer high season. But on this moonlit night, there were only three locals soaking in its seven rock-lined hot pools.

Holly winced at a sign reading "Clothing Optional After Sundown." Yet the attendant set her mind at ease. Pulling a baseball bat she called Miss Maple from behind the counter, the woman assured us she would not tolerate frisky behavior. So we slipped into an empty hot pool away from the other bare-cheeked bathers and proceeded, instead, to stare up at the naked moon.

#### Finding the backcountry

The Eagle County Airport is a half hour's drive from Vail. But flights into Denver's airport -- a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Vail -- can be less expensive, as are car-rental rates there. Both Interstate 70 and Highway 24 are generally well plowed, but a front-wheel-drive car is helpful.

#### Dining

Full of rowdy roadhouse ambience, the Minturn Saloon, 146 North Main Street, (970) 827-5954, serves Mexican fare. Dinner is about \$50 for two, with a pitcher of margaritas.

During ski season, the Tennessee Pass Cookhouse on Highway 24 near Leadville, (719) 486-8114, offers an unusual dining experience. For \$60 a person, diners are outfitted with cross-country skis or snowshoes and take a milelong path to a round canvas yurt. There, the proprietors serve a hearty meal in a single nightly seating for about three dozen guests. Reservations are required at least a day in advance.

#### Accommodations

The Minturn Inn, 442 Main Street, Minturn, (800) 646-8876, fax (970) 827-5590, www.minturninn.com, is a B&B-style hotel renovated from a former railroad worker's home. Its three wood-frame buildings sit along the Eagle River. Eight of its 18 rooms overlook the river; 12 rooms have Jacuzzis and fireplaces. The rates, from \$139 to \$299 in high season (December through March), include breakfast.

In Vail, the Austria Haus Club and Hotel, 242 East Meadow Drive, (800) 898-4363, fax (970) 479-5651, www.austriahausclub.com, is similarly cozy. The 25 rooms, including 6 suites, are small but nicely furnished and there is a heated swimming pool, and a whirlpool. Rates, \$250 to \$615, with breakfast.

The Trappers Cabin on Beaver Creek Mountain, 242 East Meadow Drive, (970) 845-5788, www.vbcrp.com, is a luxury retreat with an outdoor Jacuzzi and a private chef, who cooks breakfast and a five-course dinner. Nightly rates, \$850 to \$950 a person, include all meals and drinks and lift tickets. For other Vail and Beaver Creek reservations, (800) 404-3535 or www.snow.com.

#### Activities

To ski the Minturn Mile from Vail, you must buy a lift ticket from the resort (one-day passes, \$73). To reach the backcountry gate I used, ride the Wildwood lift and climb Ptarmigan Ridge. The gate is at the summit (two other gates are nearby).

At Western Hardware Antiques, 431 Harrison Avenue, Leadville, (719) 486-2213, consignments from about 30 local antiques dealers include skis and snowshoes used by 10th Mountain Division soldiers.

Nova Guides, (888) 949-6682, www.novaguides.com, operates snowmobile tours through Camp Hale. A half-day trip with lunch with one person on the snowmobile is \$150.

Cottonwood Hot Springs, an ancient respite for the Ute Indians, is at 18999 County Road 306 outside the town of Buena Vista. The inn and spa feature seven pools (temperatures range from 94 to 110 degrees) and a long list of treatments, such as Ute-style hot rock therapy; (719) 395-6434 or online at www.cottonwood-hot-springs.com. ALEX MARKELS

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