

SKI-AND-BE-SEEN **ASPEN**

It's the height of cool, but the welcome's warm out west – even for non-celebrities



In Colorado's tiny mountain town – and winter outpost of Hollywood – \$500 shoes and \$5 million views are the norm. But while it has its share of bejewelled women and tanned men scuttling from private jets to limousines, Aspen welcomes lower budgets, too. The mountains flatter skiers of every level, while its downtown Victorian charm will make anyone feel like a star.

By Minty Clinch



WHAT TO SEE & DO

● Get a ski pass, and your bearings. Poseurs **ascend Ajax Mountain with the Hollywood crowd** aboard the Silver Queen gondola; beginners favour Buttermilk; and intermediates love Snowmass, 20 minutes' drive down the valley – its heavenly cruising slopes roll on for ever. The tough get going in Aspen Highlands, on the bumpy mogul runs under the Deep Temerity lift. Knees burning?

● With **200 dogs barking to pull a sled**, you'll be deafened when you meet 'musher' Dan MacEachen. But silence reigns as, hitched up, they scamper the snowfields of Snowmass to Dan's restaurant, Krabloonik ('big eyebrows' in Inuit; reservations 00 1 970 923 3953, www.krabloonik.com; ① on map). There's elk loin, an excellent wine list, and no danger of driving home under the influence. Half-day with three-course lunch £172; ages 3-8 £118.



● Are you a snowboarder? Keen to perfect your skills? Hit the Lowdown Park at Snowmass, with its new 3.6m beginners' halfpipe. Cracked that? You're ready for the Snowmass Park and Superpipe, with its scary range of jibs, rails and jumps. **Tackle Buttermilk, the home of the Winter X Games, for podium bragging rites.** The halfpipe, nearly 137m long and 6.7m high, is also awesome. Do you dare?

● Pop on snowshoes for a forest expedition (00 1 970 925 5756 ext 103, www.aspennature.org; £34, child £21) amid the trees and glades of Ajax Mountain. Bears sleep until spring, but **beavers, foxes and deer are out foraging.** Led by a naturalist from the Aspen Center for Environmental Studies, you'll learn ecology the fun way – via nice scary stuff such as avalanches.

● It's always Christmas at the Woody Creek Tavern (00 1 970 923 4585, www.woodycreek

tavern.com; ②), where fairy lights burn all year. The trailer-trash ambience attracts wealthy Aspenites in search of 'low life' (**stuffed boar over the door, a row of shapely blondes watching TV at the bar**). When the late Hunter S Thompson, a regular, was asked what his favourite drink here was, he replied, 'Everything'.

● **All aboard the History Coach outside the Wheeler Opera House** ③ (built 1889), with its splendid red-sandstone facade: tours with the Aspen Historical Society (00 1 970 925 3721, www.aspenhistory.org; two hours Tue-Sat, £15; under-13s free; 90-minute walks £9) take in the Wheeler/Stallard Museum and Aspen's rich mining past – as well as mega-buck homes in the Victorian West End.

● Come for Wintersköl (details at www.aspenchamber.org), a three-day festival in mid-January that celebrated its diamond jubilee in

White nights: from left, it's a Narnian winter wonderland on Aspen's slopes; fireworks at January's Wintersköl festival; watch out for wolves; one of the resort's gondola ski lifts

2011. The highlight is **Soupsköl, a search for Aspen's best broth-maker – it's free and you won't need dinner!** Around 1,500 tasters sample 40 soups in 20 tents before casting their vote. From 2007 to 2010, the Garnish Cafe's chowder reigned, but 2011 saw regime change as Merry Go Round cafeteria romped home with its sweet potato and dill special.

● Ever fancied a mini Pink Floyd gig in the back of a cab? Join Jon Barnes in his Ultimate Taxi – **a car that trebles as a concert venue**, or even a recording studio. Jon has been a driver, musician and entertainer for 20 years so he knows the road even if he has to take his eye off it (00 1 970 927 9239, www.ultimatetaxi.com; 45 mins £106 – negotiable on slow nights). ➤

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WHERE TO STAY

Limelight Lodge (355 South Monarch St; 00 1 979 925 3025, www.limelightlodge.com; ④). Rub your hands in anticipation of log fires, pizza, live music nightly and a warm welcome at this central family-owned hotel, revamped for the 21st century. Doubles from £75, B&B.



Hotel Aspen (110 West Main St; 00 1 970 925 3441, www.hotelaspen.com; ⑤). An unassuming 45-room hotel gains added value from offerings of beer and wine with appetisers in the evening, free airport transfers and a 'Four Mountains' shuttle stop across the street. Doubles from £150, B&B.

The St Regis Aspen Resort (315 East Dean St; 00 1 970 920 3300, www.stregis.com/aspen; ⑥). Central and contemporary, this handsome red-brick behemoth draws voyeurs to its restaurant, where the chef rustles up American dishes with French-Med inspiration in the 'exhibition' kitchen. Doubles from £166, room only.

Hearthstone House (134 East Hyman Ave; 00 1 970 925 7632, www.hearthstonehouse.com; ⑦). Here's a standout 16-room lodge, built in 1961 in the Frank Lloyd Wright mode. It is trad yet 'now', with live music most evenings, and free wine and cheese. Doubles from £175, B&B.

Hotel Jerome (330 East Main St; 00 1 970 920 1000, www.hoteljerome.rockresorts.com; ⑧). Aspen's most atmospheric hotel was built in 1889 by mining tycoon Jerome Wheeler, and

restored a decade or so ago. Over the years it's seen it all, including Jack Nicholson living it up in the J-Bar. Historic tours on Tuesday (1.30pm; £9, under-12s free). Doubles from £199, room only.

Viceroy (130 Wood Rd, Snowmass Village; 00 1 970 923 8000, www.viceroysnowmass.com; ⑨). Above the new base station, this 'design darling' is ski-in, ski-out, with a top spa, gourmet grub, and cocktails-as-cures in Nest Lounge – if the ingredients are anything to go by. 'Immunity', for example, includes echinacea and St-Germain liqueur. Doubles from £385, room only.



WHERE TO EAT

Ute City (308 East Hopkins Ave; 00 1 970 925 2900, www.utecityrestaurant.com; ⑩). The newest addition to 'Restaurant Row' has 1970s retro looks: full-length panes, ribbed grey walls and oversized orange lampshades. Step in and savour Walt Harris's bistro bar, with its Colorado take on French Alpine cooking. Meat seared on the plancha grill is especially popular. Mains around £13.

Takah Sushi (320 South Mill St; 00 1 970 925 8588, www.takahsushi.com; ⑪). There are smarter Japanese restaurants, notably Kenichi and Matsuhisa, yet Aspenites love this 30-year-old classic, with live music on selected nights. Takah's cuisine takes in sushi, steaks, seafood and Pacific Rim fusion. Mains around £15.

Gwyn's High Alpine (Snowmass Village; 00 1 970 923 5188, www.gwynshighalpine.com; ⑫).

George and Gwyn have been serving lunch as Europeans love it – with waiters and slippers – for around 30 years, racking up awards in the process. After elk medallions will you have room for the signature warm chocolate gâteau? Only if you've skied hard. Mains around £15.

Elevation (304 East Hopkins Ave; 00 1 970 544 5166, www.elevationaspen.com; ⑬). Blow-ups of Marilyn Monroe sharpen appetites in this basement stalwart. Gothenburg-born Tommy Tolleson came here as a ski bum in 1987 and stayed to create a contemporary American menu, with lobster bolognaise and Colorado lamb en crouete. Mains around £20.



Cloud Nine (Aspen Highlands; 00 1 970 923 8715; ⑭). At this mid-mountain Austrian hideaway, Andreas Fischbacher favours wine with meals and schnapps to follow, so get your skiing done before lunch. Raclette or fondue, which must be booked 24 hours ahead, costs £21.

Jimmy's (205 South Mill St; 00 1 970 925 6020, www.jimmysaspen.com; ⑮). The emphasis is on steaks and more steaks, plus meatloaf like Jimmy's mother made it. Fans dress up for his Saturday salsa sessions from 11pm, when he joins them on the floor. Mains around £22.



NIGHTLIFE

Belly Up (450 South Galena St; 00 1 970 544 9800; ⑯). It's an intimate club with world-class music most nights, but shows sell out fast.



Belly full: from left, one of Jimmy's steaks (this one's tuna) will set you up for a day's skiing; shows sell out fast at the music venue Belly Up; The St Regis marries modernity and old-fashioned wintry charm

Junk (305 South Mill St; 17). Such is the decibel level, this place is impossible to ignore. The firepit is the focus; that and the big drinks list.

Aspen Brewing Company (304 East Hopkins Ave; 18). Two university roommates spotted a vacancy for classy local ales a decade ago and filled it so effectively that they've recently moved to bigger premises. Open until 2am.

Hunter Bar (434 East Cooper Ave; 19). The long tapas menu is served until 2am, for refuelling after sessions on the large dance floor.

WHERE TO SHOP
Ute Mountaineer (210 South Galena St; 20). Shop for top-of-the-range activities togs.

Pitkin County Dry Goods (520 East Cooper St; 21). Bag jeans for all seasons, leather jackets and handmade jewellery at this unisex store.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT
Explore Booksellers (221 East Main St; 22). This Victorian treasure trove has deep armchairs for reading – don't miss the travel and mountaineering section – and a bistro.

Carl's Pharmacy (306 East Main St; 23). The evergreen Aspen hangout sells everything from tents and climbing gear to food, booze and drugs. Not cheap but certainly cheerful. ■

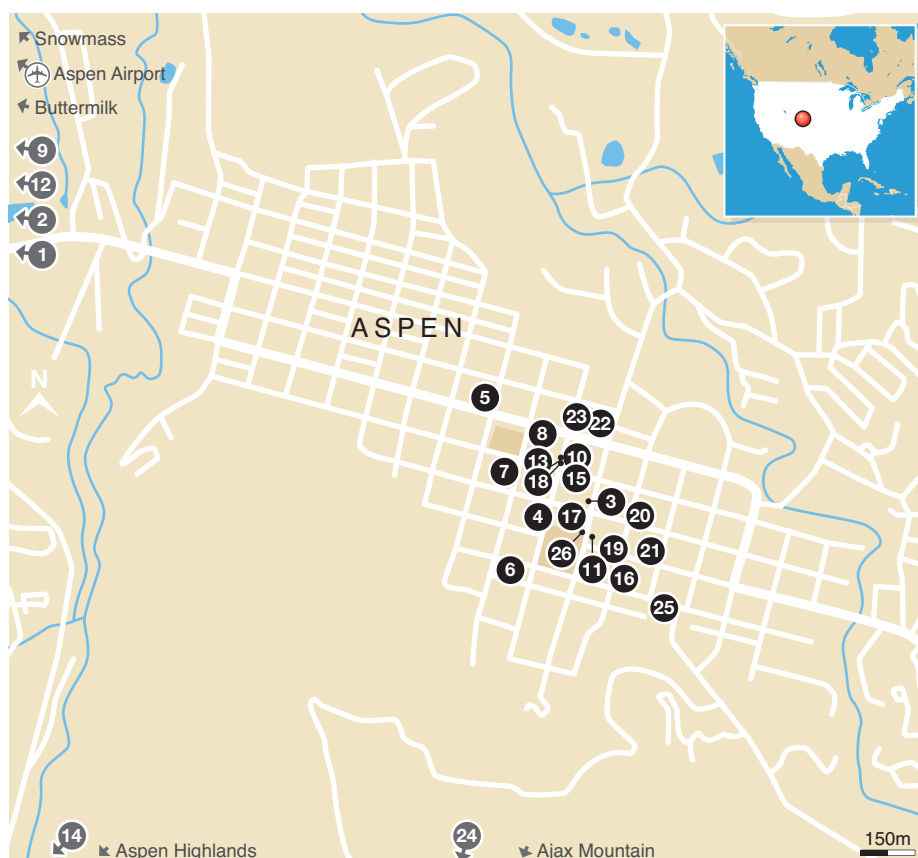
Ask the local



Snowboarder Chris Klug, 38, was the first organ-transplant recipient to win an Olympic medal: in 2002, two years after an op for a new liver, he won bronze in the Salt Lake City Games

'Forgot breakfast? **Try buckwheat pancakes at Bonnie's Restaurant** (00 1 970 544 6252; 24), mid-mountain on Ajax – they're special

indeed. Then, if you're new to skiing here, join the Aspen Snowmass Ambassadors on the slopes. They're **locals who adore the snow and offer guiding for free**. Look out for the red 'i' on the arm of their grey Helly Hansen outfits, and get a mountain tour (10.30am daily). It's not all about action here: idle in the sun at **Ajax Tavern** (at the Little Nell; 00 1 970 920 4600, www.thelittlenell.com; 25); there's nowhere like it for lunch when it's warm enough to sit outside. **Best dinner in town? The Dungeness crab at Pacifica Seafood & Raw Bar** (00 1 970 920 9775; 26). And make it the Maine lobster.'



Get me there

GO INDEPENDENT

BA (0844 493 0758, www.ba.com) flies from Heathrow to Denver non-stop daily, from £502 return. **American Airlines** (0844 499 7300, www.americanairlines.co.uk) operates routes from Heathrow to Denver, via Dallas, from £524 return. Connecting flights to Aspen with **United Express** (0845 844 4777, www.united.com) start at £95 return.

GO PACKAGED

The Oxford Ski Company (01865 398130, www.oxfordski.com) has a week at Limelight Lodge from £2,074pp, B&B, or Hotel Jerome from £2,809, B&B, including United Airlines flights and transfers. **Erna Low** (0845 863 0526, www.ernalow.co.uk) can fix seven nights at Hotel Lenado, boutique accommodation in the town centre, from

£1,166pp, with BA flights and shuttle transfers from Denver to Aspen.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Visit the official website, www.aspensnowmass.com. Or for independent news and views, try **Welove2ski** (www.welove2ski.com), which reviews 100 ski resorts worldwide. Consult also the **Ski Club of Great Britain** (www.skiclub.co.uk).