



# ROCKY MOUNTAIN HIGH

COLORADO'S CLASSIC SKI TOWNS

BY MARK SISSONS

**background:** A skier takes flight in Aspen, Colorado. Aspen Snowmass

**opposite, top:** Snowmass in Aspen leads the way with a world-class ski school. Hal Williams Photography Inc./Aspen Snowmass

**opposite, bottom:** Grab a bite and refreshments at one of a number of taverns in Aspen. David Kirsch/Aspen Snowmass



WHEN AMERICA'S FAVOURITE TROUBADOUR, JOHN DENVER, SANG ABOUT THAT COLORADO ROCKY MOUNTAIN HIGH, HE WAS REFERRING TO FAR MORE THAN HIS ADOPTED STATE'S NATURAL GRANDEUR.



Colorado is also home to some of America's most iconic ski towns, steeped as deeply in frontier history as they are blessed with champagne powder and year-round sunshine.

Among the most famous are Aspen, Breckenridge and Steamboat Springs. Each town offers authentic ski heritage, small-town appeal and vibrant mountain culture, as I discovered on a Colorado ski getaway last March.

## WHERE THE WEALTHY PLAY

The place to ski and be seen on the slopes since 1947, glamorous Aspen has come a long way since its days as a hard-scrabble silver mining town in the 1800s. Today, its private airport is lined with Lear jets, their owners' stupendous mansions dot the nearby hills, and the bling is on full display in the town's many trendy eateries. But enter the historic centre of town, with its Old West façades, grid-pattern streets, Victorian residences and cultural landmarks, and the jet-set glitz falls away to reveal one of America's most intellectually and culturally vibrant zip codes.

"Between the Aspen Institute, the Aspen Music Festival and the Food and Wine Classic, there's this whole other alternative, authentic lifestyle that exists here alongside the ski community," explains local broadcaster and wine writer Kelly Hayes, my guide for a day of play on Aspen's storied slopes. "And even though the billionaires have crowded out the millionaires, people of all backgrounds still mix here," he adds as we ride Aspen Mountain's Silver Queen Gondola, the longest single-stage gondola in the world.

Mixing is the name of the game that evening at the Hotel Jerome, where I'm staying, as Aspen's elite—including artists, wealthy patrons and even ranchers—flock into the hotel's ballroom for a charity fundraiser. Built in the 1880s by Jerome B. Wheeler, at the time co-owner of Macy's and a major investor in Aspen during its early boom years, this elegant local landmark also harbours a number of fine restaurants and infamous watering holes. Most notorious is the "J-Bar" where patrons can order the infamous "Aspen Crud," a milkshake infused with numerous liquors that was the preferred (and off-limits) drink of Tenth Mountain Division soldiers training here during WW II.

Just down the street is Aspen's famous opera house, also named after Wheeler. The cultural centre of Aspen, it hosts more than 300 events a year in its historic 500-seat theatre. Everything from comedy shows, film festivals, operas and music concerts play here on just about any given night. Clearly, in a town that's home to more conquerors

of Mount Everest than only Kathmandu, the arts and preservation of its unique heritage take pride of place beside some of America's best snowsports venues.

***The place to ski and be seen on the slopes since 1947, glamorous Aspen.***







**Breckenridge's highest run reaches a dizzying 3,961 metres, making it the highest on the continent.**

## THE PEAK OF NORTH AMERICA

A three-hour drive along a high mountain highway from Aspen, the historic town of Breckenridge offers an equally rich frontier history full of gold finds and mining, exploration and adventure, brothels and saloons, booms and busts. Founded in 1859 by a small group of prospectors, the town's gold rush attracted droves of settlers seeking their fortunes.

Those first arrivals did more than erect a bustling town; they put their stamp on Breckenridge history, vividly retold at the Breckenridge Welcome Center and Museum. When it was built, designers uncovered a historic log cabin that has since been transformed into a free museum featuring displays on Breckenridge life in the 1880s. Stepping outside, into the Blue River Plaza, I'm rewarded with spectacular views of Breckenridge Ski Resort's four (soon to be five) impressive peaks.

Breckenridge also has one of the largest historic districts in Colorado, with more than 200 structures on the National Register of Historic Places. I happen to arrive on St. Patrick's Day, when Breckenridge's Victorian-era Main

Street, with its more than 200 eclectically painted shops selling everything from handmade soaps and authentic Navajo weavings to high-end ski gear, is in full festive mode. Before long I've joined locals celebrating in true Irish style, downing pints of Irish green beer at rowdy local watering holes with names like Burke & Riley's, Fatty's and Ollie's.

Like Aspen, Breckenridge has also long been home to a thriving arts and intellectual community that fosters everything from theatre and music to visual arts. But it's the resort's legendary high-altitude ski runs that provide an irresistible lure for adventurous skiers. With nearly a thousand hectares and 152 trails covered annually with more than 700 centimetres of snow, the resort offers downhill skiing and snowboarding across four mountain peaks, along with miles of snowshoeing and cross-country skiing trails.

Breckenridge's highest run reaches a dizzying 3,961 metres, making it the highest on the continent. By the time I reach the top in near whiteout conditions I'm feeling the extreme altitude, but nonetheless am thrilled to have reached the very peak of skiable resort terrain in North America.



**top: Enjoy après-ski moments in Breckenridge.** Liam Doran

**left: More than 200 shops in Breckenridge sell everything from handmade soaps to high-end ski gear.** Liam Doran

**opposite, top: Steamboat is actually a complete mountain range, where 1,200 hectares of permitted terrain offer a diversity of trails for all levels of ability.** Mark Sissons

**opposite, bottom: Just outside of Steamboat Springs lies Strawberry Park Hot Springs, where you can relax in 40 C mineral water and enjoy a massage or Watsu therapy in a private pool.** Mark Sissons



**Everyone here is  
genuinely friendly  
and loves living here.**



## SKI TOWN, USA

The final stop on my whirlwind tour of Colorado's classic ski towns is Steamboat Springs, the oldest ski area in continuous use in the state. Nestled 2,134 metres above the Yampa Valley just west of the Continental Divide, it remains a small ranching community, which serves as a constant reminder that the Old West is still alive and thriving.

Proud of its cowboy roots, Steamboat, as the locals call it, is still firmly linked to Colorado's frontier tradition. Many of the same families have been ranching this valley for more than 100 years. Certainly there are bigger mountains where the slopes are steeper or the runs longer. But nowhere do the various parts add up to create such a distinctive mix rooted in a genuine friendliness and authentic western heritage.

Steamboat's skiing history dates back to the early 1900s, when Norwegian Carl Howelsen started ski jumping here with the Barnum & Bailey Circus. Since then, it has produced more winter Olympians than any other community in North America, a record 84 and counting. In fact, Steamboat sent more athletes to the 2002, 2006 and 2010 Games than many small countries, affording it the well-deserved nickname, Ski Town, USA.

"The best thing about Steamboat is it's absolutely real. Everyone here is genuinely friendly and loves living here. They're not just putting on a mask for the resort," says ski instructor Brenda Smith, who moved here several years ago from Squirrel, Idaho, to live the downhill dream. Smith and fellow guide Ryan Watts, a hulking Aussie and expert ski racer, say they absolutely love living here. For Watts, the amazing snow conditions and huge variety of

terrain—from bumps to trees to groomers and terrain parks—lure him back from Down Under every season. "Skiing through Steamboat's aspens is my magical Zen moment," he says as we weave through the glades, carving fluffy white powder arcs.

After playing in Steamboat's legendary champagne powder, there's nothing better than a soothing soak in a natural hot springs. Luckily, nearby Strawberry Park Hot Springs is one of the most spectacular mineral springs in the world. As I relax in 40 C mineral water in rustic stone pools, surrounded by trees, flowers and mountains, I imagine how the Ute Indians, who first discovered these hot springs hundreds of years ago, soaked in these same waters while snow fell gently in the surrounding forest.

Back in town, refreshed and revitalized, I set out to sample Steamboat's renowned fine dining. With more than 100 bars and restaurants, Steamboat is a great place to try everything from elk and buffalo to Rocky Mountain oysters.

Afterward, after ambling through the dazzling, turquoise-coloured tunnels of the Steamboat Ice Castle—the only ice castle in Colorado and one of only two in the U.S.—I slip into the Tugboat Bar for a nightcap. Saddling up to the bar frequented by ski patrollers, former Olympians and long-time locals, I silently toast these classic Colorado ski towns that are still going strong over a century after they were born of gold dust and pioneer dreams. Now I understand how John Denver felt when he wrote "Rocky Mountain High." ■

### travel planner

More information on Colorado's classic ski towns and resorts can be found at [gobreck.com](http://gobreck.com), [steamboat.com](http://steamboat.com) and [aspensnowmass.com](http://aspensnowmass.com). For general Colorado tourism info, visit [colorado.com](http://colorado.com).

