

# Spirits, Stars and Ski Slopes

Head to the Hills of Aspen for Perfect Powder and Perhaps a Chance to Encounter a Spirit, Star or Both

[ WRITTEN BY LISSA POIROT ]

**For** YEARS I'VE HEARD TALES of Aspen that came straight out of the pages of celebrity rag mags. Goldie Hawn and Kurt Russell have a home there, which means Kate Hudson is a frequent visitor. Kevin Costner, Jack Nicholson, Michael Douglas, Don Johnson ... the place is teeming with celebrities during the winter months, where Aspen Mountain is covered in both densely populated forests of white-barked trees of the same name and a thick coating of white powder.

Aspen wasn't always a collection of the rich and famous, but rather those seeking riches from its mountains. Silver miners created this historic town, where original buildings from the 1800s still stand, giving visitors a feeling they've stepped back in time, although instead of fur coats worn by trappers, they are worn by those aforementioned celebs.

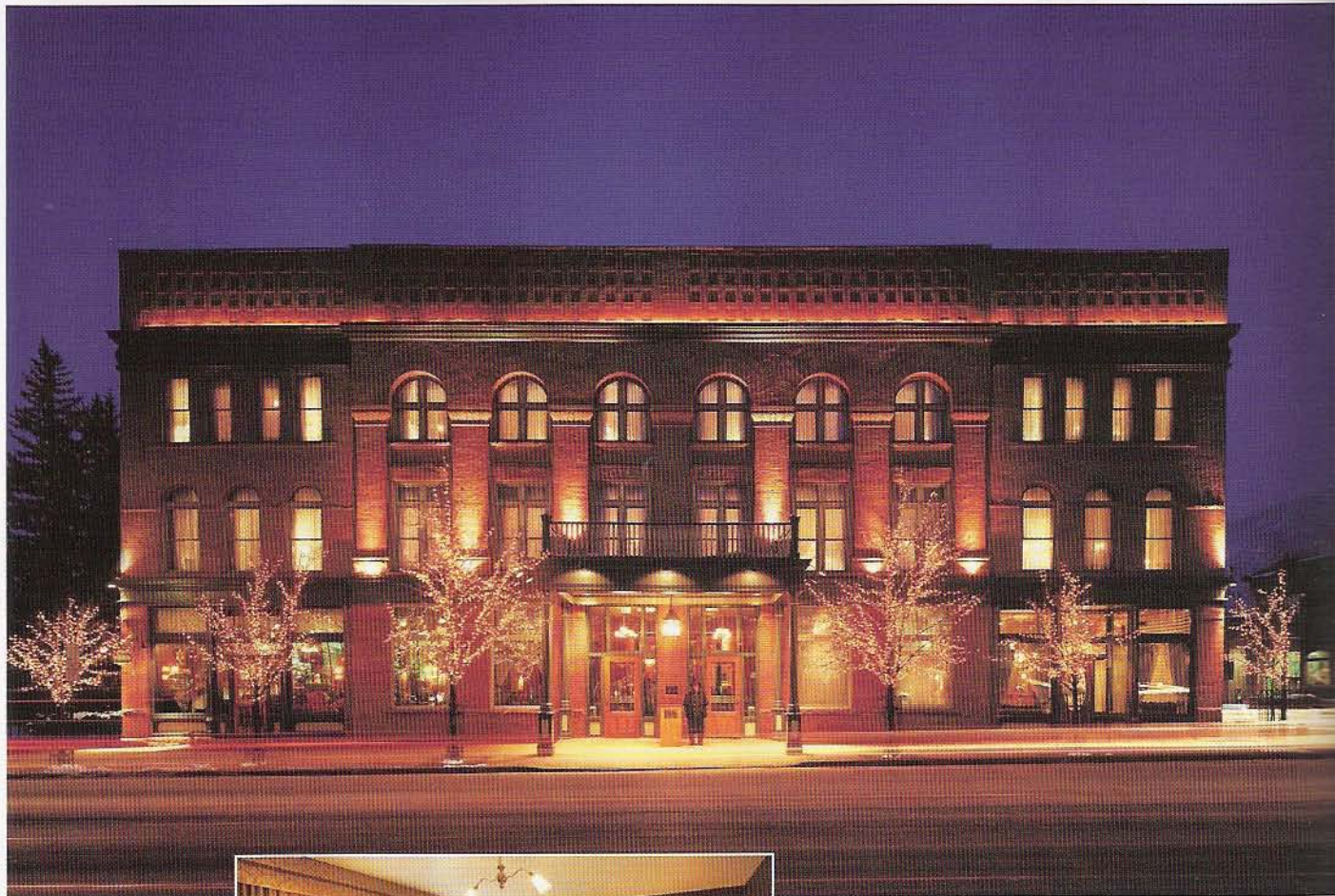
Yet, despite its collection of the rich and famous, this town is a welcoming destination for all who love being outdoors, especially in the winter, when



Aspen and its three neighboring mountains welcome hordes of snow lovers seeking its perfect powder and multitude of black diamond trails.

#### Stepping Back in Time

Aspen's history as a late-1800s mining town is evident in the style of its brick-building lined streets. And perhaps one way to truly get a sample of the



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Hotel Jerome



town's storied past is to spend the present at the Hotel Jerome. Although a newer wing is available, the original 1889 hotel has been a prominent local feature, and remains such after a recent renovation and expansion. Creating larger, more modern guest rooms and suites, Hotel Jerome now operates with fewer rooms than before it added its new wing. While the fabric-lined walls and incredibly comfy beds in the hotel's 94 guest rooms are something to write home about, the hotel itself is famed for its "spirits."

Locals rub elbows with hotel guests at the J-Bar, where the signature drink is its milkshake, the Aspen Crud. Created during Prohibition, the bar was converted into a "soda shop" and was popular for its

shakes, featuring a healthy shot of illegal bourbon. The hotel library is a hodge-podge of oversized couches and chairs in nooks where couples can sneak away for a quiet night amongst the crowds that find the late-night hot spot's magic shows (yes, magic shows) worth the walk in sub-zero temperatures. And if you'd like an extra dose of spirits with your stay, perhaps you'll encounter one of the hotel's ghosts, including a young boy who was rumored to have died in the hotel's swimming pool decades ago and who appears soaking wet, leaving his wet footprints as a sign he's been there. Some are so fascinated by the hotel's haunted history the staff will happily provide a ghost tour at your request.

Besides its Ghost Town history, Aspen has long been an artistic community. Shake off the snow and belly up to any one of Aspen's basement taverns and you're bound to encounter someone with a personal story about a famous resident, such as when they skied with John Denver, who called these Rocky Mountains home, or witnessed Hunter S. Thompson practicing his unique gonzo-style storytelling in the flesh. Aspen is also a music-loving town, and the area hosts a number

of music festivals and events, including the Jazz Aspen Snowmass music festival, and Snowmass's annual Mardi Gras parade and party. (Again, yes, Mardi Gras.) The tradition began decades ago when residents of New Orleans looking to escape the crowds descending upon them took the show to the snow-capped mountains, and now, revelers come from far and wide.

#### Outdoor Pursuits

Aspen is serious ski country and is cleverly promoted as the "Power of Four," which includes Aspen, Snowmass, Buttermilk and Aspen Highlands. A free shuttle connects each, with about 20 minutes between its Aspen and Snowmass stops. Beginners would best turn to Snowmass for green and blue trails and leave the true Aspen slopes to the experienced skiers and boarders — the mountain doesn't offer a single green trail for beginners, although it does feature a fantastic ski school to make you fall in love with its slopes. Beginners may also prefer Buttermilk for its green and blue trails, while the locals seeking to get away from the crowds prefer Aspen Highlands. Head there for quieter runs and to befriend resident skiers. Snowmass is filled with kids, and a favorite stomping ground for families is a visit to The Sweet Life for S'mores around the outdoor fire pit, as well as oversized ice cream cones. (Yes, ice cream. The lack of humidity in the Rockies paired with the sun's reflection on the snow makes 30-degree temps feel more like 60 degrees.)

During my visit last winter, the Winter X Games had just left Buttermilk, leaving behind its collection of boarding runs. The games will return this winter for the last time, providing more spectator fun during the event, and special leftover trail additions to enjoy after the event.

Although Aspen once reigned supreme in its luxury accommodations, including its four-star resort located at its base, the St. Regis, and the Ritz-Carlton found at

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*Combined, Aspen and Snowmass provide trails for all levels as well as ski schools, and a children's program at Snowmass keeps tots entertained while mom and dad hit the slopes.*

the base of Aspen Highlands, the ultra-family-friendly Snowmass has spent the last few years building up its village and adding slope-side accommodations in the luxury category, most noteworthy, Viceroy, which sits on the mountain with a ski lift running over its outdoor heated pool. Combined, Aspen and Snowmass provide trails for all levels as well as ski schools, and a children's program at Snowmass keeps tots entertained while mom and dad hit the slopes.

Aspen's slopes are visible from the intimate town streets, beckoning its residents and visitors to hop on a lift and reach its summit; however, the area also offers other outdoor endeavors for those who want to play in the snow. Snowmobiling through the mountain passes, snowshoeing, dog sled rides, ice-skating and sledding are offered to all ages. Aspen itself is a town and not just a slope-side village, so it is here where hunters of the shopping sort may not find bargains along its snow-lined streets, but will enjoy scouting its boutiques and antique stores for costly baubles, fashions and trinkets.

At night, Aspen's farm-to-table restaurants and Snowmass' après ski bars provide just the right atmosphere before crashing into bed beside a crackling fire. **FN**

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Aspen is about four hours from Denver, which features Colorado's largest airport. However, American Airlines and a few others will fly you direct to Aspen, or connect from Denver in less than an hour. Flying in will be quicker, and the small airport takes seconds to maneuver. Most hotels provide shuttle and SUV service to and from the airport.

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