

Snowmass gets a \$1.3-billion makeover

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Snowmass's cheery weather is nearly unmatched. The sky can smile an innocent blue by 10 a.m. after a vicious night. (Tyler Stableford)

Drop down on Runway 15 on a sunny day at the Aspen/Pitkin County Airport and four Colorado ski mountains will be gleaming before you like the jewels on a wealthy Aspenite's fingers. Aspen Mountain (Ajax) is there to the east, with its sleek, double-black-diamond peaks and one of the world's chicest towns at its feet. Aspen Highlands is to the southeast, with its retro runs, pounding bumps, and posse of hard-driving locals. Buttermilk is nearly due south with its green circle strollers and rock 'n' roll terrain parks. And there, to the southwest, lounging lazily in the sun is Snowmass, the most chilled-out of them all.

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Broad, rolling, dotted with groves of glittering aspen trees, Snowmass has always offered a vibe different to its three more frenzied Aspen siblings. Absent have been the flashbulbs of Aspen Mountain's paparazzi, the

tumult of Buttermilk's parks 'n pipes - home to the Winter XGames - and the incessant fear inspired by the Highlands' steep slopes. Instead, Snowmass opens its cushioned arms wide to welcome you and rocks you into relaxation with its seamless lifts - including an \$8.8-million super chair new this season - its ski-in/ski-out accommodation, and its moderate pistes. It has always taken visiting skiers, regardless of their ability or the heft of their wallets, about two seconds to feel right at home on this unpretentious, pillow-comfortable mountain.

Not much has rocked Snowmass's relaxed world for nearly 40 years, until this season. When the chairlift bullwheels started turning in December, a \$1.3-billion addition to the Snowmass base made its debut - 100 new ski-in/ski-out residences, a handful of upscale restaurants and nightclubs at the base of Fanny Hill which, frankly, threaten to shake up Snowmass' notoriously sleepy disposition.

The village expansion has been rocky and years in the making. Those who valued Snowmass' quiet and lack of pretence fought the changes. Canada's currently troubled Intrawest Corp. took the lead on the project with partner Aspen Skiing Co. (ASC) early in this decade, only to sell out abruptly in 2006 to Related WestPac, one of the largest private real estate companies in the U.S. By the time of the sale, Intrawest had alienated those Aspen locals who strenuously opposed the size, height and density of Intrawest's development plans and what they called the company's "penny-pinching." After paying a reported \$208-million, Related WestPac forged ahead with Intrawest's intentions, anyway. Its first condominiums at Hayden Lodge and Capitol Peak Lodge are now open. While WestPac has plans to drop another \$2.5-billion on two more Snowmass neighbourhoods by 2011, some projects were suspended last fall due to the credit crunch.

Through it all the company has held fast its commitment to creating what it calls "environmentally-conscious and pedestrian-oriented, smart-growth designs." ASC's Aspen/Snowmass resort is certified as a green company - the first of only two ski resorts in the U.S. to achieve this recognition (the other is Jackson Hole, Wyoming). And it is the only snow-sport resort in the country to have a green building policy. As a result, WestPac endeavoured to have these additional buildings certified by the U.S. Green Building Council. Planners have incorporated bike paths, walkways and a gondola into the design to cut down on vehicular traffic and building products will consist of 20 per cent recycled material.

The designs are decidedly sleek - a style WestPac calls "mountain-modern." Most buildings will be green certified, including The Little Nell five-star residence opening in 2010, and the Viceroy Hotel.

All this money and the hullabaloo of development has not changed the feel of skiing Snowmass. Mercifully, the mountain's bones are still intact.

Despite its size - 1,268 skiable hectares, 1,343-metre vertical drop all served by more than 20 lifts - it doesn't take long to figure out how best to ski the mountain. Elk Camp. Sam's Knob. Campground. The Big Burn. Like a handful of cards, they're fanned out easily before you at the start of each day. Up one lift, down an easy piste, up another lift and into some trees. Pop out, slide over a snowbridge and into some well-padded bumps. Before you know it, it's time for lunch.

Most skiers' introduction to Snowmass is Fanny Hill, a beginner slope kids and newbies to Aspen learn to ski on. Fanny Hill's multi-coloured sky cabs - kids call them The Skittles - move people up and down this easy slope, accessing the condos that scale steadily up its borders. From Fanny Hill, skiers can ascend higher on a series of high-speed chairlifts to the peak at 3,813 metres - one of the highest lift-served points in Colorado's Rockies.

Up there, the Big Burn is the ski area's most easily-accessible, big mountain run. The Burn is vast swaths of wide-open skiing, with the odd pod of low-rise evergreens scattered about which, like slalom gates, give you something to ski around. Its sparseness was caused by a massive fire in the 1880s which, depending who you

talk to, was sparked either by Ute Indians trying to drive out white settlers, or the other way around. Either way, at this altitude, the trees have been extremely slow to grow back, leaving an impressive stretch of piste so broad that in a week you likely won't ski the same path twice.

Snowmass's grandness continues, with its streams of mogul runs on the ski area's west side at Campground and Sam's Knob, to the east at the intermediate Elk Camp, and above The Burn along what's called The Cirque. The latter is a ring of above-treeline, powder-filled, double-black diamond steeps with curious names like Hang On and AMF (Adios My Friend). In a good snow year - Snowmass' annual average snowfall is 762 centimetres - the skiing along these headwalls ranks up there with Whistler/Blackcomb's expert fare. Endless runs into the tightly-knit Hanging Valley Glades - with maverick names like The Edge and Free Fall - can fill in overnight with dry, chest-deep snow and give you the ride of your life after avalanche blasting in the morning.

What's nearly unmatched, though, is Snowmass's cheery weather. It's typical for storms to sweep into Aspen's valleys at night, dump snow, then blow out by morning. The sky can smile an innocent blue by 10 a.m. after a vicious night, leaving skiers to ride the powder in the sunshine.

Back at its newly expanded base, the jury's still out on the effect of the addition of several swank new hotels. On the one hand, more choice of lodging may mean more affordable accommodation; Snowmass' unique ski-in/ski-out accommodation has always been highly in-demand and rarely deal-friendly. On the other hand, more lodging means more people, which would translate into more skiers on the mountain's typically and blissfully calm terrain.

What's for certain, however, is the continuation of the ease and variety of Snowmass runs. Slap your boards on at the bottom of Fanny Hill, ride the gondola over to Elk Camp or a chair to the top of Sam's Knob and you'll be treated to the same effortless, pillow-soft skiing riders have experienced here for decades. Forget the blinding glint off those well-polished jewels and the designer duds you spotted in the ritzy town of Aspen. The pistes of Snowmass will continue to ski more like your grandpa's big leather chair, with its warm supple feel, rolling expanse and faint hint of pipe smoke.

Lori Knowles is editor of Ski Press Magazine.

Pack your bags

GETTING THERE

Air Canada and United Airlines offer direct flights from Toronto and Calgary to Denver, then on to the Aspen/Pitkin County Airport in Aspen.

GETTING AROUND

Most Snowmass lodgings offer free shuttle services to and from the Aspen airport. Call ahead to arrange pick-up.

WHERE TO STAY

HAYDEN LODGE Brush Creek Road, Snowmass Base Village; 970-922-5550; www.haydenlodgesnowmass.com. Rates from \$200.

CAPITOL PEAK LODGE Brush Creek Road, Snowmass Base Village; 970-922-5550; www.capitolpeaklodge.com. Condo units from \$200 to \$1,272.