



Rocky Mountain High

Colorado has some of the freshest air you will ever taste — however thin

BY DOUG WALLACE

Bison or buffalo? Same diff, right? With a 10-ounce slab of whatever-it-was prime rib staring me in the face, I had been served my first challenge my first night in Colorado. No problem, as it turned out. Bison burgers, bison sausage, pulled pork, elk tenderloin — I am a master at meat and potatoes. But Colorado has so much more on the menu, especially when you bring your skis.

Though Aspen has the cachet and Vail has the celebrities, you can do better — in the remote little village of Steamboat Springs. This is a town where they took a poll to help name a new bridge and ended up with the James Brown Soul Center of the

Universe Bridge. That's wacky stuff.

At 7,000 feet above sea level, population 12,000, this town is so named because the bubbling of the nearby natural hot springs resembled the sound of a steamboat coming down the river back when settlers first arrived. And while half a million people visit the incredible ski resort that sits just at the edge of town every year, tourism hasn't overwhelmed the flavour of this tiny canyon community.

And what a mountain! With 165 runs spread over almost 3,000 acres, what's not to like? My challenges on the hills were overcome with the help of a great ski instructor. Take a lesson; it will

do you a world of good. And while I'm doling out tips, get out the humidifier that is more than likely in your hotel room closet. This air is as dry as it is fresh.

To soothe moaning muscles after a day of skiing, we packed towels from the hotel and took a winding 15-minute drive into the woods to rustic Strawberry Park Hot Springs, where bathers doff their clothes in a teepee and "take the waters." Clothing is optional after dark, as there is no electricity, but luckily, I had a wee light strapped to my forehead (always pointed to the ground). Surrounded by Texans, Australians and Japanese, mine was a truly international experience, and the trick is to try not to be shy even if you are.

Steamboat has actually produced more Olympians per capita than anywhere else in the U.S., almost 70 and counting. One of them is community legend Ray Heid, who participated in the 1960 Olympics. He's also been renting out horses since he was a boy. He spirited us away to snowy Triangle 3 Ranch, just 20 minutes or so outside of town, where we saddled up a few of the 40 easygoing horses and headed out on the snowy canyon trails. The good thing about riding horses in the snow is that they can't go very fast. The bad thing is that you will be up to your waist in snow if you drop a mitt and have to alight from your horse to fetch it.

A few days later, a jaunt south back to the interstate left me at the foot of Copper Mountain, home to a fabulous 140-plus runs and 23 lifts, and the only full-length, early-season training venue in the world, the U.S. Olympic Ski Team Speed Center. Sundry hangers-on from various other countries hit the slopes here, too, as well as the Woodward Copper Barn facility, an indoor year-round training ground with Olympic-grade trampolines, foam pits, skate bowl, ramps, jumps — the works.

The 2,500 acres of pristine slopes steepen naturally from west to east, with the elevation topping out at 12,000 feet (with a 2,600-foot vertical drop). Despite the calibre of skiing that goes on there, you still find green runs at the top of the mountain, allowing for groups of varying skill to actually spend the day together; the experienced don't have to say goodbye to the beginners at the bottom of the hill. Expect breathtaking views and perfectly groomed runs.

With one million guests a year, this resort



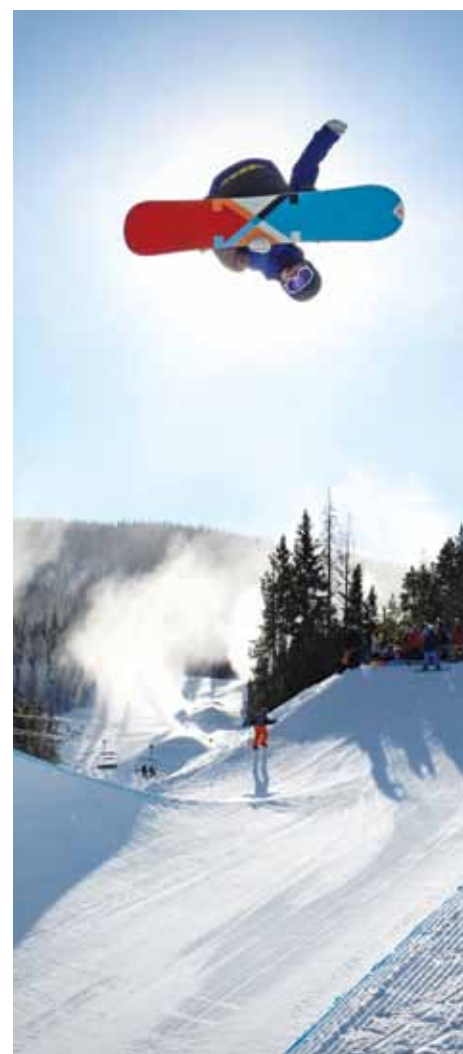
Post-ski, soothe your muscles at Strawberry Park Hot Springs, where clothing is optional after dark.

plays host to all crowds, international and local — family, college and otherwise. A quaint and manageable centre village is full of après-ski fun in the form of skating, zip lining, big drinks and tiny doughnuts. And after the ski hill does you in, an hour (or two) on the four-lane tubing hill will bring out your inner child, and make beer time all the more rewarding.

There's only one hiccup of being up in the clouds so high: It's all fun and games until somebody gets altitude sickness. Common after 8,000 feet above sea level, this ailment leaves you feeling as if you have the flu or a hangover, or both. Apparently, it takes one day to acclimatize to 1,000 feet. Someone abandoned their ski pants in the lobby of our Copper lodge, with a note citing "age and altitude" as the reason for packing in the skiing. No chutzpah, I say. (Sadly, they didn't fit me.)

Two litres of water before noon is almost mandatory, and we threw in the odd Gatorade to help us feel sporty. Speaking of drinks, you will also notice that one vodka can actually feel more like two vodkas. Bonus! You're a cheaper date than you thought. And no, it's not because of the beloved American free-pour. Altitude again, messing with your head. Best to skip the now legal pot altogether.

But back to my stomach and the buffalo. Who would have thought? All North American buffalo are actually bison, buffalo being rather a misnomer on this continent. It's actually Africa and Asia where the buffalo roam. Somebody better give that song a rewrite.



Gravity-defying action at the Copper halfpipe.



Ray Heid from Triangle 3 Ranch is a former Olympian.



Put horseback riding in the Colorado Rockies on your bucket list.



Rabbit Ears is the name of one of the mountain passes — not the TV antennae.

STEAMBOAT ESSENTIALS

- The Steamboat Grand (steamboatgrand.com) is the biggest game mountain-side, the ski lifts within walking distance. There are plenty of smaller spots, near and far, as well as condos to rent if you're travelling with a group. Rabbit Ears Motel (rabbitearsmotel.com) is named after the mountain pass, not the TV antennae. The Old Town Hot Springs is right across the street.

- Ore House at the Pine Grove (orehouse.com) has been serving steaks in a 110-year-old barn since 1971. Small plates shine at Laundry Kitchen & Cocktails (thelaundryrestaurant.com), perfect for the after-ski crowd or dinner out. These people really get into their menu, and it pays off. Deeply delicious cocktails, including a spicy margarita. We saw not one but two wedding couples eloping on the same day at Truffle Pig (trufflepigrestaurant.com), which has a stick-to-your-ribs burger with truffle fries. Hit the intimate Café Diva (cafediva.com) for the best meal in town. Head straight for the tenderloin.

- Après-ski, the Right-O-Way run concludes with a long, almost flat ski-out to the village, known to the ski instructors as "Fifth Avenue." It passes by several small watering holes, but you should stop at slope-side gem TBar at Steamboat. Wherever you end up, keep an eye out for craft beers Mahogany Ridge, Breckenridge Avalanche and Fat Tire Amber.

- Gear up in town with western duds from F.M. Light & Sons (fmlight.com), "outfittin' the West for over 100 years." Across the street, stick your head in Cowboys and Indians (cowboysandindiansonline.com) for gifts, jewellery, antiques and crafts.

Check out steamboat.com for more.

COMPULSORY COPPER

- Copper Mountain Ski Resort has a sort of communal reception for accommodations, where they then mete you out to the various lodges surrounding the centre village, each with underground parking. Chalet-type furnishings (log lamps, Murphy beds) are comfortable and cool. Each lodge is equipped with a large outdoor hot tub, but sadly no time machine.

- The aforementioned bison sausage is neck and neck with the rack of lamb for top honours at C.B. Grille. And while you can't throw a stone and not hit a drink of something in this place, the college kids favour Mulligans Irish Pub, because it stays open late, as does the On the Rockies Whiskey Bar.

- It's worth a visit to the indoor Woodward Copper, located in an old barn, if only to watch the cool kids do their thing on mountain bikes and skateboards, or see aerialists practise their jumps. An intro session will see you on the trampoline for a couple of hours with a coach. As always, keep an eye out for Olympians, who come for the world-class facilities, but stay for the vibe.

Visit coppercolorado.com for more.