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# Ski Colorado

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What makes Colorado's Rocky Mountains the biggest attraction in North America for British and US skiers alike? Beautiful mountains, plentiful snow, great ski terrain and blue-chip resorts such as Aspen, Vail and Beaver Creek. **Stephen Wood** visits the showpiece hotel in each of those resorts and skis their adjacent slopes; and for a more characteristic experience of Colorado hospitality, he also stays at a guest ranch nearby.

**The Four Seasons Resort**  
If location was everything, Vail's Four Seasons would be nothing. So late was its arrival in the resort that all the good, slopeside sites had long been taken, and it had to make do with a location about as far from the skiing as it could practically be. But the famously smart Four Seasons management minimised the problem by having the hotel turn its back on its own front door (and the adjoining highway) and instead



### ASPEN

#### VICEROY SNOWMASS

The Viceroy lies about seven miles from the town of Aspen, in the purpose-built ski village of Snowmass. Opened in 2009, it feels a lot more youthful than most five-star hotels. Its Eight K restaurant (so-called because of its altitude, 8,000ft above sea level) does have something of the cool 'Chicago-Modern', business-lounge style that characterises recent top-end ski hotels, but that is tempered by outside-in elements such as the pine-sapling screens and pillars clad in black granite or wrapped in leather. In the adjacent bar and lounge there are more playful intrusions such as the 87-foot-long, glowing blue-glass bar-top overhung with twinkling Christmas-tree lights and the 'fireplace', a glass box in which a single line of flickering flames rises from a 10-foot-long burner.

The staff, many of them from Commonwealth countries, are as engaging as the hotel; the latest style of five-star service – in which staff are the guests' new best friends rather than excessively helpful servants – flourishes at the Viceroy. The restaurant, which specialises in modern reworkings of classic American dishes, is attention-seeking, too: it offers pan-roasted black cod served with black rice-cake, black kale, black truffle butter and black trumpet mushrooms. The imposingly high-ceilinged, almost church-like spa, however, takes itself more seriously. A wide repertoire of exotic rituals, reprieves and retreats is available, including one that might suit a beginner after a bruising encounter with the slopes: the 90-minute Herbal Compress Healing Ritual is based on a 14th-century Thai muscle therapy for soldiers returning from







battle.

The bedrooms are unobtrusively stylish, with a restrained South-East Asian look of slatted, mid-brown wooden surfaces and black tiles. Particularly good are the bathrooms, which are generous to a fault: mine had a walk-in-and-around glass shower stall measuring 8ft by 4ft and, unusually, enough shelf-space for two people.

The most recent Snowmass construction plan having been compromised by the economic recession, the Viceroy's isolation is more glorious than it should be. But standing alone on a snowy knoll, it seems to take ownership of the nearby slopes.

**SKI ACCESS**

**HOTEL TO SNOW** 20 paces, including four steps (down). Short ski descent to the bottom of a chairlift

**VALET SERVICE** In the morning the valet will place skis on a rack outside the hotel – or, while you are putting on boots, place the skis on the snow

**SKI SERVICES IN THE HOTEL** Equipment rental, lift tickets, ski-school bookings (except private lessons)

**THE SLOPES**

Snowmass has 3,132 acres of skiing, 1,000 acres more than the three other Aspen ski areas put together. And although its reputation is for family skiing, there's much more to it than that. The terrain is varied, and includes plenty of glade skiing. Along the major lift line (the Village Express) and on the Campgrounds the slopes are very open, and you'll see a fair number of other skiers; elsewhere, particularly in more

**BEAVER CREEK**

**RITZ-CARLTON BACHELOR GULCH**

Despite being 11 years old, and almost a Grande Dame of Colorado ski hotels, the Ritz-Carlton – when seen from the slopes – still looks surprising, even forbidding. No other ski hotel gives quite the same impression, of having been designed to withstand attack.

Its dark, rear façade is stone-clad, and apparently supported on stone columns. It has (by my calculation) 50 balconies and 45 different sections of pitched roof, not counting those on the poolside bar. A whole platoon of snipers could find cover on it.

The front of the building is more typical of US five-star ski hotels; but the

small courtyard – with a very chunky porte-cochere – has entrance and exit arches that are unreasonably narrow for an SUV but probably just right for a porte-cullis.

Inside, it's a different story. The interior of the Ritz Carlton is the ultimate realisation of the welcoming, cosy 'lodge style' – all stone cladding and exposed beams – which was the staple of North American ski developments for at least two decades. In the lounge the stone fireplace is vast; giant black chandeliers hang over a conversation pit of leather sofas; up beyond the gallery huge timbers offer an explicit display of the principles of roof construction. This is a place where only a foreign-exchange dealer on



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amphetamines could fail to relax.

Elsewhere, the hotel is sleeker, veneered, and more club-like. The bedrooms are comfortable and classically well-appointed, with desks, armchairs and fireplaces in a setting of beige and brown with floral drapes; the luxurious bathrooms are in an equivalent style. Stylistically the spa is showing its age somewhat, though the rough-clad grotto with its waterfall and underwater jets is rather fine.

The hotel was freshened up with the advent of the global-cuisine Spago restaurant in 2007. In stark contrast with the rest of the property, Spago has seats backed with animal skins, maroon wall-hangings and terra cotta panels, and

photographic screens of black-and-white landscapes; and the adjoining bar, largely glass and steel, has an aluminium counter surface coated with nickel in which elements of an Arctic landscape are etched.

For skiers, the Ritz-Carlton's great virtue is that it has its own chairlift, whose base is on the snow apron at the back of the hotel. It carries skiers up into the Beaver Creek ski area.

#### SKI ACCESS

**HOTEL TO SNOW** 21 paces, with no steps; the base of the Bachelor Gulch chairlift and the children's 'magic carpet' lift are a further 50 paces away.

**VALET SERVICE** In the morning the valet will place skis on a rack outside the hotel or, at off-peak periods, place them on the snow

**SKI SERVICES IN THE HOTEL** Equipment rental, lift tickets, ski-school bookings (but lessons take place at the main Beaver Creek base, not at Bachelor Gulch)

#### THE SLOPES

The 1,815-acre Beaver Creek ski area is known for flattering intermediate skiers with its preponderance of wide, well-groomed slopes. But it does have steep terrain, notably off the top of the Cinch Express and Grouse Mountain lifts. The best-known descent is the Golden Eagle run, the setting for the annual Birds of Prey downhill World Cup race. Like the other runs on the same face, it is cut through dense woodland. The adjoining Grouse Mountain face is just as steep and has plenty of ungroomed, bumpy terrain for skiers who want a challenge; and for those who don't there's the easy, wide-open Larkspur bowl.

#### VAIL

##### THE FOUR SEASONS RESORT

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Nothing could be done about the trek

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AUTHENTIC COLORADO

WOULD YOU FEEL MORE AT HOME ON THE RANGE?

Ski resorts are busy places. Snowploughs hit the road in the small hours, ski-lifts do the day shift, and the grooming vehicles work nights; and in any brief period when the machinery falls silent, you can bank on a bunch of après-skiers falling out of some nearby bar. Peace and quiet are in short supply, particularly in purpose-built resorts where skier-convenience and strict planning controls both militate in favour of dense development.

And although the surrounding areas are usually places of great natural beauty, the resorts are not. They are purely commercial ventures. And though there are some great hotels in the Colorado resorts, you'll find very similar properties elsewhere in the world.

So why not forsake the resorts and instead enjoy the authentic Colorado experience of staying on a ranch?

Many of Colorado's dude and guest ranches (both terms mean the same thing, namely a ranch which hosts paying guests) have extended their traditional summer season into the spring and autumn, and now – increasingly – the winter. When there's snow on the ground and ice on the lakes, the activities available reflect that; but riding remains on the agenda, and skiing becomes an option. Most ranches have nursery slopes on site, primarily for children, and also provide transfers to nearby ski resorts.

The Colorado Dude Ranch Association currently lists ten ranches open for the ski season. One is about 20

miles from the Steamboat ski resort, in the north of the state. Called Home Ranch, it was created from scratch in 1978 and has 14 cabins and lodge rooms, all beautifully designed and finished in a respectful, authentic style. It's a great place, in a great setting near the top of the River Elk Valley.

A slightly more convenient but no less spectacular alternative is C Lazy U, so called because of a creek whose winding path across the ranch seemed to spell out a 'C' followed by a 'U' lying on its side.

More centrally located, it is near the town of Granby, which has a small ski area called SolVista Basin, and is less than 20 miles away from Winter Park, a major Colorado ski attraction with 3,060 acres of slopes. A shuttle service runs to both ski areas.

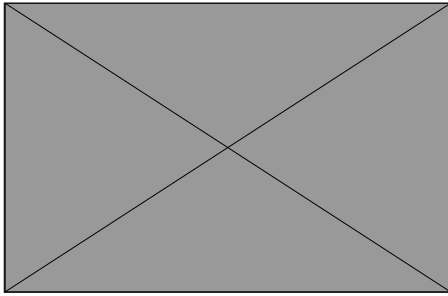
C Lazy U has 40 cabins and rooms overlooking its sweeping ranchland; they are currently being modernised 'to make them look older', says general manager Connie Dorsey. The interiors have slate and wood floors, timber-clad walls and more gnarly, natural-wood fittings (towel racks, sink stands, mantelpieces) than you could shake a stick at. An artful designer's touch is evident throughout, notably in the wall lights fashioned from old paraffin



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### COLORADO

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to the Vistabahn lift; but with ski lockers and valet services located almost on the snow apron rather than in the hotel, guests can at least make the walk unencumbered with equipment. The locker room is in a part of the Gorsuch rental shop, and there's an adjoining reception area which provides Lavazza coffee, muffins, and the Wall Street Journal.

Four Seasons hotels don't make design statements; and it would take an electrical fault to create a buzz in the lobby of one of its resort properties. Paying attention to guest needs is what the Canadian company does supremely well. The bedside lights that fade to the faintest glow, just sufficient to stop you knocking over your glass of water; the telephone in the loo; the bookrack on the chromium 'bridge' across the bath; with details like that, you know you are in good hands. The rooms are blighted by a lowering amount of beige, but the bathrooms are masterpieces: that's where the cool crowd would gather if you threw a party in a Four Seasons suite.

The standout feature at Vail is the sensational, 75-foot-long outdoor pool. In the evening, to bask in the warmth of the water and the glow of the bright underwater lights while snow tumbles out of the sky creates a sensual overload that can drive a man to try lying on a sunbed covered in three inches of snow. Luckily, the hotel keeps a heated cabinet of robes on the poolside for such an eventuality.

#### SKI ACCESS

**HOTEL TO SNOW** 1,085 paces (five steps up, three steps down) to the Gorsuch ski room plus a further 125 paces from there to the snow

**VALET SERVICE** In the morning the valets will take guests' skis from the locker room to the snow

**SKI SERVICES IN THE HOTEL** Equipment rental, lift tickets, ski-school bookings. Children keep ski equipment at the hotel: their lessons start a hotel-bus-ride away at the Golden Peak base

#### THE SLOPES

Vail has 5,289 acres of ski terrain, more than any other resort in the USA. And with a front face that is seven miles wide, and seven 'back bowls' beyond, it seems even bigger than it is. Much of the skiing is best-suited to intermediates, but in the bowls – particularly the wooded parts of Blue Sky Basin – experts can find challenging skiing; and there are also some steep blacks on the front face. The eastern part of the area isn't as quiet as it

## Colorado The lowdown

#### WHERE TO STAY

**Viceroy Snowmass.** 130 Wood Road, Snowmass Village (00 1 970 923 8000; [www.viceroyhotelsandresorts.com/snowmass](http://www.viceroyhotelsandresorts.com/snowmass)); doubles from ???.


**Ritz-Carlton, Bachelor Gulch.** 0130 Daybreak Ridge, Avon (00 1 970 748 6200; [www.ritzcarlton.com](http://www.ritzcarlton.com)); doubles from ???.

**Four Seasons Resort Vail.** One Vail Road, Vail (00 1 970 477 8600; [www.fourseasons.com/vail](http://www.fourseasons.com/vail)); doubles from ???.

C Lazy U, 3640 Colorado Highway 125, Granby (00 1 970 887 3344; [www.clazyu.com](http://www.clazyu.com)); doubles from ???

#### GETTING THERE

British Airways flies direct from Heathrow to Denver from £??? return. United/United Express fly on to Eagle Airport (for Beaver Creek and Vail); United and Frontier fly on to Aspen. Colorado Mountain Express (00 1 970 754 7433; [\[press.com\]\(http://press.com\)\) operates minibus shuttles from all the above airports to the resorts; for example, Denver Airport to Beaver Creek would cost approximately \\$90 per person, one-way.](http://www.coloradomountainex-</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)

 **Journey time** Campeche and Mérida and between several US airports - including

Holiday packages to both the Viceroy in Snowmass and the Four Seasons in Vail are available from Crystal Finest (0871 971 0364; [www.crystalstalski.co.uk](http://www.crystalstalski.co.uk)/finest). A week at the Viceroy costs from £1,679 per person (based on 2 sharing), room-only, including scheduled BA flights from Heathrow to Denver and transfers; with flights into Aspen (on United, via Chicago) the price is from £2,182. A week at the Four Seasons costs from £2,310 per person (based on 2 sharing), room-only, including the BA flight to Denver and transfers.