

Behind Vail's veil: The Rocky Mountain ski town offers wonders to the intrepid visitor



The famous "Back Bowls" at Vail Mountain ski area in Colorado. (Eric Althoff/The Washington Times) more >

By Eric Althoff - The Washington Times - Thursday, January 19, 2017

ANALYSIS/OPINION:

Vail, Colorado, conjures mental images of newly powdered slopes, fresh mountain air and wintry perfection upon which to set down one's skies. While all of this is indeed correct, Vail and its surroundings also offer exquisite cuisine, high-altitude adventure and, of course, even more examples of Rocky Mountain State craft beers.

It's a special place, and one that caters to a certain clientele at this cozy hamlet built in the style of a European alpine village. On a recent trip to experience it firsthand, The Washington Times found much to recommend about this singular winter paradise set high amid the country's tallest peaks.

Views, brews, blue skies and, oh, such wintry wonders.

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You get the sense as you descend toward Eagle County Regional Airport that you might actually hit the Rockies. Even descending from 35,000 feet toward the runway, it strikes you how close those peaks are — feeling almost like we might crash headlong before the wheels touch down.

Something still doesn't seem right, but then you realize that this airfield sits at a lung-busting 6,540 feet above sea level — even higher than Denver.

It's a small airport, and there is no jetway, requiring passengers to descend stairs onto the tarmac itself. It's a fairly mild day, and even without my sweatshirt on, I'm not feeling uncomfortable. The air smells great and the sun shines finely this day.

I meet my driver Patrick with the Colorado Mountain Express, an extremely friendly sort who heaps my bags into the Suburban that will take me the 39 miles from the airport to Vail. As we head east on I-70, ascending heavenwards with every mile, Patrick tells me of his writerly ambitions, and we swap war stories from the trenches of the inkwells.

I get to Vail itself, a sort of New World imitation of an Alps ski chalet. The town was founded in the early 1960s specifically to bring skiers to the mountains. After all, they would need a place to stay.

My place to stay is the Sonnenalp Hotel (20 Vail Rd, Vail, Colorado, 81657, 970/476-5656), an Old World-style resort that aims to link the Rockies, and its favorite wintertime activity, with the mountains of the Old Country where skiing began. It immediately jumps out how multi-ethnic is the staff here, with the clerk checking me in from Peru and a German standing near her.

My room door opens onto a small foyer, with a full closet directly ahead for coats and such. Immediately next to it is the bathroom, which features both a stand-up shower stall and a bath not quite big enough for two, but certainly fine for soaking wounded muscles after a hard day on the slopes.

Heading toward the living area, there is another closet, outfitted with two bathrobes as well as cubbyholes for all of my skiing paraphrenalia. I hang up my ski pants and jacket after their long journey from D.C.

The living area itself features two comfortable swivel chairs before an electrically charged fireplace. A TV on a swivel stand is atop the dresser, from whence it can turn to face either the living room chairs or the incredibly large — and incredibly comfortable — king bed. French doors open up onto a small balcony, but as it's covered in snow, I might just use it to fetch some cold air into my little home away from home.

It's beer o' clock, and I'm Colorado, so I hail an Uber and rock a few miles down the highway to Vail Brewing Co. (41290 US-6 B-2 & B-3, Vail, Colorado, 81657, 970/470-4351). It's a comfy space, with the hip and the local packing the joint on a Thursday night. (The quirkiness is on full display with the funky tap handles that come in forms such as bicycle pedals.) I've been on a self-imposed diet, and it's my first brewery of the year, but I'm ready for this.

Siddling up to the bar, I opt for the six sampler. Pete's Stash Pale Ale is light and drinkable, but perhaps better for the warmer months. The Free Rye'd Pale has a rather different taste profile from "the usual," with a malty aftertaste to complement its yummy foretaste. The Coconut Porter is OK but not amazing (I can be a wee cranky about experimental brews), and the Hut Trip Winter Warmer Ale brewed with chai iced tea is very unique and pleasant, but I'm not sure I'd buy six of them. The Aplenglow Amber Ale is incredibly smooth and very refreshing, and the Hot Mess Blonde is absolutely blissful.

Ubering back to Vail, I make my way to the base of Gondola 19, where I meet my hostess for the weekend, Maggie Meisinger, senior specialist for communications at Vail Mountain, and who has worked tirelessly for months to bring me here. Friendly and upbeat, Maggie fills me on local history and the business of Vail as we take the Eagle Bahn Gondola up to the Eagle's Nest, with the lights of town and scattered illuminations on the surrounding peaks all that brightens the dark.

While waiting for the next transportation leg to arrive, we grab a quick round of drinks at Bistro 14 (970/754-4530),

which offers a healthy and creative cocktail menu, including the pumpkin white Russian, which, on top of the beers I've already had in the valley several thousand feet below, makes me happy.

From there Maggie and I hop into a snowcat for a brief roll up the hill, seemingly into the dark primeval, that deposits us at the front door of Game Creek Restaurant (970/754-4275), a five-star chalet-style place that impossibly sits up here, thousands of feet above the valley and far from civilization. The staff must take a lift here every day and then down again.

Requiring such an effort to get here, one certainly hopes the meal will be worth it. But any doubts are instantly dispelled as I behold the prix fixe menu Game Creek Chef Steven Topple of Portsmouth, England, has fashioned. The knowledgeable sommelier recommends the Chassagne-Montrachet Les Chaumees 2011 for dinner.