

Life at the Top

It gets lonely at the top. Or does it? These folks—a Vail patroller, a dozen Alta restaurant workers, an Aspen caretaker and a Buttermilk cafeteria family—live nearly two miles above sea level. You might say they're America's highest people.

BY READE BAILEY

Summit Sentinel

There is at least one address in Vail, Colo., where UPS won't deliver: 11,250 Skyline Drive. That's because ski patroller Stewart Kissel's apartment is at the summit of Vail Mountain—11,250 feet above sea level.

Since 1968, Vail ski patrollers have alternated two-year stints at the barren, two-room apartment, which squats next to Patrol Headquarters. Their daily routine ranges from the dull, like recording weather data and snowfall, to the dramatic—serving as point men on late-night searches for missing skiers.

A couple of years ago two girls became lost while skiing late one afternoon near Game Creek Bowl. When they were reported missing, Dave Durkee, the patroller then living at the summit, was called. Coincidentally, Durkee was hosting a poker game for a half-dozen buddies—all patrollers. They found the missing skiers within an hour.

But most days for the mountaintop resident are more like this one last March:

6:30 A.M. Kissel, a burly, 37-year-old Californian, is roused out of bed by the wet nose of Blue, his Australian shepherd. When Kissel moved to the mountaintop in September 1990, he initially broke with tradition by not having a dog. But within a month, lonely Kissel was at a Denver animal shelter explaining that he lived in Vail, but not in a condo, and yes he had a backyard—about 5,000 acres of backyard.

His small apartment is plain, furnished with a threadbare couch and dilapidated table. A couple of sailboarding

posters are tacked to the wood-paneled walls. "I like it," says Kissel. "It's like a cabin."

Kissel stops in the kitchen to gulp down a glass of water—a dozen glasses a day help him fight the headaches and sleepless nights usually caused by the thin air two miles high. With Blue at his heels, Kissel walks out his apartment door, a few steps across a walled-in deck and into Patrol Headquarters.

"That's where I live, and this is where I work," says Kissel, once inside Patrol Headquarters. "People respect that."

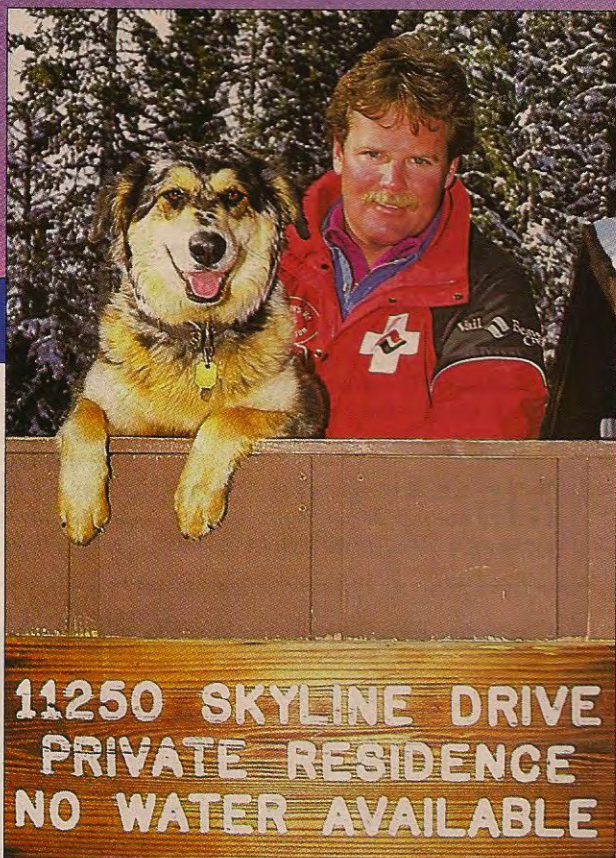
6:45 A.M. Kissel settles behind a computer in a small back office and punches up weather statistics—temperature, wind, barometric pressure—from computer-linked monitoring stations scattered around Vail Mountain. Then Kissel pulls on his red ski patrol jacket and heads outside to measure the snow that fell overnight.

A light snow is still swirling, obscuring the spectacular views of the craggy Gore Range to the east and majestic Mount of the Holy Cross to the south. In a few hours, Kissel's lonely mountaintop will buzz with thousands of skiers unloading from Chairs 4, 5 and 11. But it's quiet now except for the

sounds of Blue romping through the snow. "Mornings are great," says Kissel. "It's so still."

The makeshift weather station, nestled in a grove of trees near the top of Chair 11, is protected by a hand-written sign that warns, "Anyone seen in this area will go straight to Eagle County Jail." Kissel first checks a 10-foot-long stake in the snow for the settled snow depth. Then he eyes a smaller, movable stake with a plywood base—two inches of new snow has fallen. Simple, but effective.

The daily chore of recording weather data can be one of the drawbacks of living at 11,250 feet. "I don't pay rent, but there's a price for living up here," says Kissel. "If I find Bo Derek's sister and she drags me down to Eagle for the night, and I don't make it back here to do the weather, I'm fired."



Stewart Kissel and pal Blue stand by to welcome guests to their mountaintop apartment.

JACK A FLECK

CARL SCOFFIELD

Summit Sentinel

7:00 A.M. On mornings when more than six inches of snow has fallen, Kissel is up at 4:30 to phone nearly 50 ski patrollers and lift supervisors. (This assures that avalanche control can be done and lift loading areas cleared so the mountain will open on time.) But today, because of the light overnight snowfall, Kissel has only a handful of calls to make.

One of the most important calls he makes on a big snow day is to ski patrol director Brian McCartney, who sleeps peacefully knowing a patroller lives at the summit "I have the luxury of going to bed and knowing that Stewart will let me know what's going on," says McCartney. "It's nice to have someone up there who can just look out the window."

7:15 A.M. *Rrrrrring.* It's the Vail marketing department calling, requesting weather information for its daily

snow report hotline. All the sleepy-eyed skiers, just now starting to wake up in their condos and hotel rooms, will want to know how much snow fell—and how cold it is at the top. Says Kissel: "I'm the conduit."

7:30 A.M. Kissel's computer and phone work done, it's time for another chore: shoveling off his front porch, which will be invaded later by hundreds of lunchtime skiers.

"There are 15,000 people running around up here during the day, so I really don't feel that isolated during the winter," says Kissel. "And if I need to go to town, I can zoom down there on a snowmobile and make it back up in eight minutes."

Getting back up during spring, summer and fall is a different story. It takes Kissel 45 minutes in his pick-up truck on dry summer access roads and nearly two hours in spring and fall when snow

and mud cover the roads. And since there are no snowcats to haul water, he has to carry a 250-gallon tank on his truck. "I conserve," says Kissel. "Water is a precious commodity up here."

7:45 A.M. Kissel is back behind a desk in Patrol Headquarters, fielding phone calls until the day's dispatcher arrives. "Once the dispatcher shows up at 8, I put on my ski boots," says Kissel. "Then I'm just another Joe Blow ski patroller."

8:00 A.M. The dispatcher arrives. Because today is actually Kissel's one day a week off—at least from his Joe Blow ski patroller duties—he heads back to his apartment. There is laundry to be done and errands to run in town. For one, he has to stop by the post office—the postal service won't deliver to 11,250 Skyline Drive either.



Feeding the ski fever: Watson's Shelter workers crowd around boss Robert Travis (front center) in front of their workplace, mid-morning at Alta.

Powder to the People

The things some skiers will do for first tracks on a powder day. Consider the dauntless dozen who live each winter in Watson's Shelter restaurant mid-mountain at Alta, Utah:

- They sleep in their ski clothes. "Sometimes we don't even change our underwear," says Melissa Altman, 21, of Cincinnati, who spent last ski season at Watson's.
- They live three to a room in cramped dormitory-style quarters, sharing one pay phone and three bathrooms. "You have to race for the bathroom in the morning and then sit on the floor to hold your place in line," says Kristee Doerfler, 24, of Milwaukee.
- If they miss their employee dinner at 5:30, a sign on the wall warns of the consequences: "If you don't eat at that time, you're on a diet." (No pantry raiding is allowed.)
- After the lifts close at 4:30, there is only one way to get back home to

Watson's. They walk. The 1,200-vertical-foot hike up the snow-covered Corkscrew trail can take nearly an hour. Only the boss, Robert Travis, who lives down in Little Cottonwood Canyon, gets to use a snowmobile when he heads up to Watson's each morning. And the telltale footprints in the snow always let him know what to expect. "If the footprints are straight, there was no hanky panky the night before," says Travis. "But if the footprints are wandering all over the place, I know the kids were half-gassed and it's going to be tough getting them out of bed."

Restaurant workers have lived at Watson's each winter for nearly a decade. The official reason is to get an early-morning start preparing fresh food for the cafeteria and the elegant Chic's Restaurant upstairs. But ask any of them why they live at 9,800 feet, and they respond: "First tracks!"

On powder mornings at Alta—which come just

native and the Watson's baker. He's sitting on a bunk bed in the tiny, cluttered room he shares with two other employees. Dirty clothes are piled on the floor. Five empty whiskey bottles line a wall shelf. A Jim Morrison poster covers one plywood wall. This could pass as the world's highest and most remote college dorm—with at least one exception. "We're skiing, not studying," says Altman.

Still, as Altman's roommate, Dawn Adams, says: "It's like a college dorm because we're so tight." Across the hall, Fillmore's roommate, Galen Dimmateo of New Jersey, agrees. "Everyone is like family because we work together and live together. We all look out for each other." Like being sure to hike back up the mountain with a partner—especially after a hard night of partying.

Getting down the mountain is easier. They either ski down—even at night—or slide down. "We wear garbage bags like diapers," says Altman. "And then we body slam all the way down Corkscrew." The record for sliding down while holding hands and forming a human chain: Nine (set last winter).

The exhausting hike back up, however, usually keeps Watson's employees home at night. The large cafeteria becomes an after-hours living room, with its greenhouse-like windows offering a stunning view of Alta's West Wall. A TV and VCR provide some diversion, as well as a link to the rest of the world.

"We're pretty isolated—that's the worst part," says Doerfler. "World events seem far away. For a couple of days, I didn't even know the Gulf War had ended."

Says boss Travis: "Cabin fever can get acute up here. You've got to be laid-back to fit in."

Skiing waist-deep powder is the spiritual reason for living at 9,800 feet. But there's also a practical consideration: the rare opportunity to actually save money while living and working at a ski resort. Watson's residents don't pay for rent or food, and the hike discourages spending sprees.

"In San Francisco, I used to spend \$1,000 a month just on entertainment," says Didier Hammond, the maître d' at Chic's and, at age 30, one of the oldest live-in Watson's employees. He is playing cards as he talks—cheap entertainment, indeed.

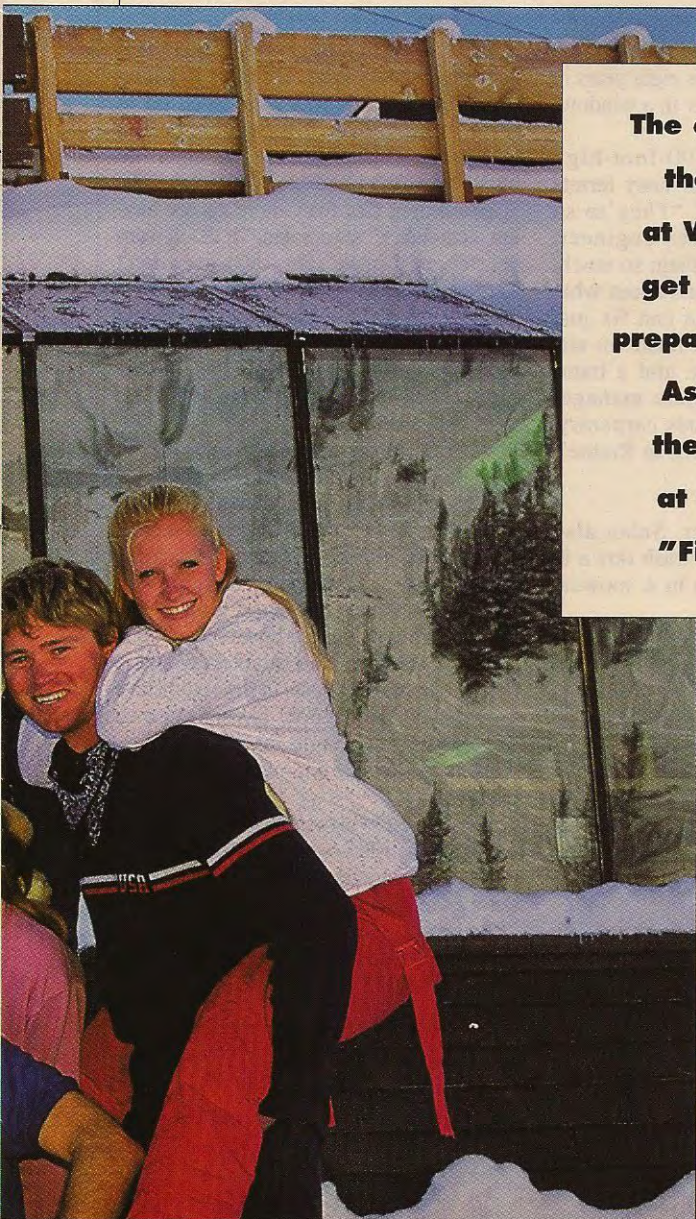
The most popular form of free entertainment, of course, is skiing. And with most of the Watson's employees working half-day schedules, they can ski at least a few runs every day. More, if they sleep in their ski clothes.

**The official reason
the crew lives
at Watson's is to
get an early start
preparing fresh food.**

**Ask them why
they really live
at 9,800 feet:
"First tracks!"**

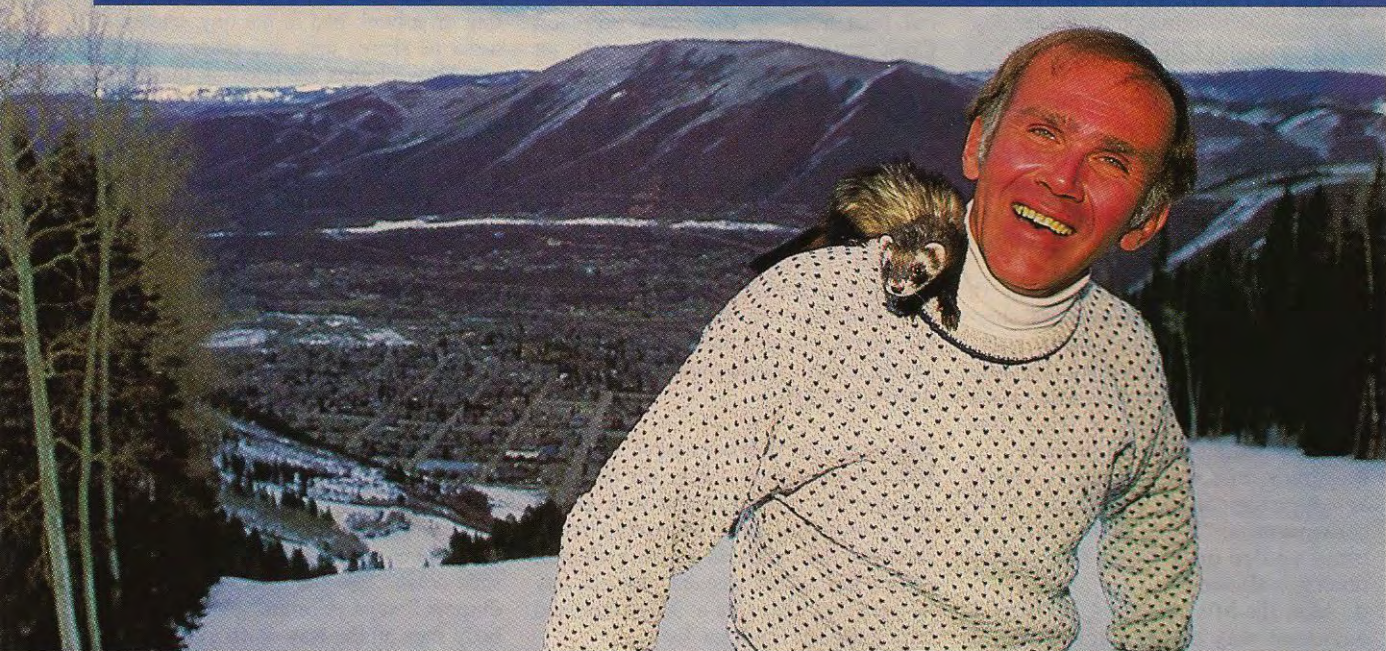
about every other day—Watson's residents post a lookout to watch for skiers riding up the Wildcat lift from the base. "We yell, 'Here they come!' and then we all ski down to the Germania lift," says Doerfler. (The Germania lift starts about 50 yards from Watson's and ascends to Alta's summit.)

"It's a real battle to get the first chair," says Ross Fillmore, a Montana



JACK AFFLECK

Handling With Care



JEFFREY ANTONSON

Jim Salan's handyman skills helped him land the Ruthie's caretaker job—and the apartment with Aspen's best view.

"It's wonderful not having Jehovah's witnesses or politicians knocking on your door," says Jim Salan, who's been the live-in caretaker and handyman since 1989 at Ruthie's Restaurant high on the shoulder of Aspen Mountain. "And during the Winternational fireworks, I have the best view—they explode right at eye level."

Salan, a former Ford Motor Co. engineer from Michigan, says that with a laugh on this warm, late-March day, as he sits at a picnic table on Ruthie's Restaurant deck. With his plain sweater, worn black stretch pants and long sideburns that are more Seventies than Aspen hip, the compact 44-year-old seems out of place amid the blonde starlets in \$1,000 outfits sunning themselves. Until you realize that this deck is his front porch.

Just a few steps away, in the sprawling building's lower level, is Salan's two-room apartment, tucked between the prep kitchen and the employee locker rooms. His apartment is neatly organized into den (with computer, bookshelves, desk), bedroom (TV, stereo) and bathroom (running water). Salan doesn't lack other creature comforts either—he gets to use Ruthie's kitchen and laundry facilities.

Best of all is the view of Aspen 1,100 vertical feet below. The view alone makes this the most deluxe apartment

Salan has lived in during his eight years in Aspen. (He spent one winter in a windowless, basement apartment.)

Salan shares his 9,100-foot-high apartment with a couple of nosy ferrets named Farrah and Fred. "They're so curious," says the former engineer. "Maybe that's why I like them so much, because I'm always curious about what makes things tick." Salan can fix just about anything—"He can make an airplane out of baling wire and a hammer," says Aspen mountain manager John Reveal—and he does carpentry, electrical and plumbing jobs at Ruthie's and around Aspen.

As Ruthie's caretaker, Salan also takes the restaurant's trash down to town late each afternoon in a snowcat

'During the Winternational fireworks, I have the best view of all—they explode right at eye level.'

and returns with food. During the winter of 1989-90, Salan was also called on to ferry a half-dozen firefighters to the mountain's summit when a late-night fire broke out at the Sundeck Restaurant. "The Aspen Skiing Co. feels more secure having a caretaker," says Salan. "It deters vandalism, and I make sure water lines don't freeze and break."

Between playing Mr. Goodwrench and his job as caretaker, Salan squeezes in a few ski runs almost every day. "How many people can say they ski to work?" he asks, with a smile.

Getting to his apartment in winter is easy, thanks to chairlifts and skis, snowcats and snowmobiles. In summer he simply drives his 4WD vehicle up the mountain. But in early spring and late fall, when the access road is a quagmire of snow and mud, he has to hike or snowshoe up.

That kind of stress, however, is welcomed by Salan, who developed ulcers during 14 turbulent years in the automotive business. "I saw people having nervous breakdowns all around me," says Salan, who once saw his engineering crew cut from 21 to 7.

He moved to Aspen in 1983 and never looked back. Although Salan does admit to occasionally feeling isolated—especially during the mud seasons—he shrugs it off. "I've been too busy to have a social life. Besides, people say, 'Wow, you live on the mountain!'"

All in the Family

The Ultimate Aspen Vehicle," declared *Aspen Magazine* last winter in its annual Best Of issue: "Snowcat".

Little did Ben Herr and his family know when they moved to the summit of 9,900-foot-high Buttermilk Mountain that they would be on the cutting edge of chic in a razor-sharp town. Their family chariot is now—out of necessity—a 1981 Tucker snowcat.

The Herrs operate the Cliff House cafeteria at the top of Buttermilk, where they live in a small apartment. Although their two-room place houses only 400 square feet, "After 2:30 p.m., the whole building is ours," says Deseree Herr. And that's a cavernous 9,000 square feet.

The transplanted Texans ran the 90-seat Buttermilk Tiehack restaurant for a couple of years, then seized the chance last year to operate the 400-seat Cliff House. "It was a better business opportunity for us," says Ben, a tall, slender man of 38 with short-cropped hair and a twang of his native San Antonio. "And then there's the view."

The jagged, snow-covered ridges of the Pyramid Peaks are spectacular, seemingly close enough to touch from the windows of the Cliff House. Ben, however, gets so caught up in the cafeteria's hectic pace that he sometimes doesn't even

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notice. "You start taking it for granted," he says. "But then you stop and look out the window and it really strikes you."

When Ben, Deseree and their two young daughters moved to the mountaintop in the fall of 1990, they were greeted by a herd of deer on one side of the restaurant and a herd of elk on the other. The former city dwellers have learned to appreciate being close to nature—and each other.

"We're always together," says Deseree, a 25-year-old with long blonde hair. "That's a plus."

As she says that, Ashley, the Herrs' 4-year-old daughter, bursts into the cafeteria, where Ben and Deseree are talking to a visitor on this snowy, late afternoon in

March. Ashley has just finished her final "Powder Panda" ski school lesson of the year. She wears ski boots and a snow suit, rosy cheeks and a toothy smile, and chatters non-stop about the skiing.

"Ashley will grow up to be a great skier," says Deseree, who, with Ben, was able to ski only a handful of times last winter because of long hours spent running the cafeteria. "And once she starts school, she'll make friends, and they can come up and go skiing."

But living 1,900 feet above town does have its disadvantages. "People think it's a fairy tale life, but it's not," says Deseree. Although it's only 10 minutes round-trip by snowmobile to Buttermilk's base, the Herrs have to use the snowcat when their daughters come along, and that adds 30 minutes to the trip.

"I don't feel isolated living up here," says Ben. "Just confined sometimes." That feeling is heightened by his need to regularly check five furnaces during the winter.

The thought of having their mountaintop to themselves—without the daily headaches of running a business—had the Herrs looking forward to summer. They planned to spend May in San Antonio while Buttermilk's snow melted and then return to the Cliff House—by car, not snowcat. ♦

Ben and Deseree Herr, operators of the Buttermilk mountaintop cafeteria, take Ashley (left) and Ana out for a spin in the family chariot, a Tucker snowcat.

