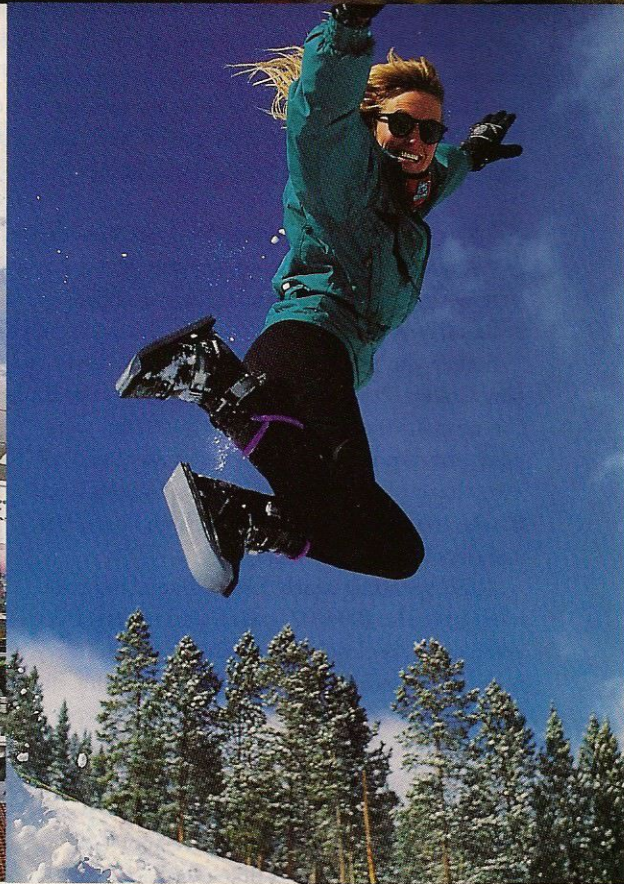
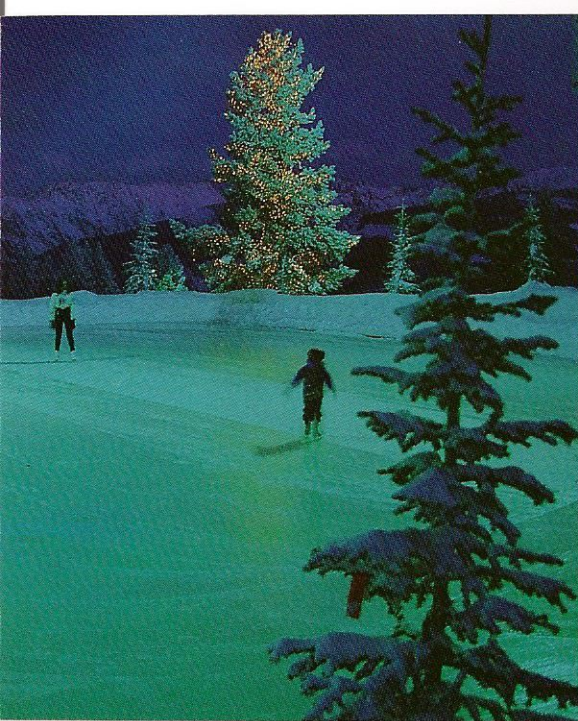


relaxed fit vacations **VAIL**

SOMETHING F

Has Vail become a Disneyland on snow? So what if it has?



OR EVERYONE

By Reade Bailey

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JACK AFFLECK

V

ail went public today and nobody on Vail Mountain seems to give a damn. It's a powder day—14 inches of fluff fell overnight—and we're more interested in getting our share of fresh tracks than shares of Vail Resorts stock.

The snow billows up above my head on every turn as I float down Headwall in Sun

Up Bowl. I find a rhythm. Sink down into the sweetness. Rise back to the surface. Repeat. All around me, skiers are tasting their own little slice of heaven somewhere on Vail's 4,000 acres.

But nowhere do I hear talk of Vail's IPO, which is underway 2,000 miles away on Wall Street on this early-February day. Not in the liftlines, not on the lifts, not at Two Elk Restaurant over lunch, not even at Vendetta's during après-ski. Then it hits me. Though only a handful of suits are making millions on the IPO, all the skiers on Vail Mountain have been enriched by their experience on this glorious powder day.

SKI's readers have voted Vail the best resort in North America seven of the past nine years; a testament that Vail, with its aim of being all things to all people—an objective it usually meets—is definitely doing something right. Whether you pay \$50,000 for a lifetime parking space at the new Golden Peak base lodge or \$11.95 for the dinner buffet at the new on-mountain Adventure Ridge complex, you tap into the universal appeal of Vail. You share plentiful snow, the spacious Back Bowls, an impressive network of high-speed lifts and the charm of Vail Village.

After spending nearly \$30 million in improvements for the 1996-97 season and successfully completing its closely watched IPO, the industry buzz surrounding Vail is about stocks. But the recent capital improvements make the experience about options—lots of options. The new high-speed quad (Chair 6) at Golden Peak and the new LionsHead Gondola offer faster ways up the mountain. The 83,000-square-foot Golden Peak base facility is Vail's first-ever base lodge. And Adventure Ridge, located at the top of the gondola on Vail Mountain's western shoulder at 10,350 feet, is an on-mountain winter playground—with ice skating, snowmobiling, a tubing hill, snowboard halfpipe, novice skiing terrain, restaurants and bars—that swings until 10 pm every night.

"Adventure Ridge expands the winter vacation experience," says Paul Testwuide, 56, in charge of mountain operations. The layout of trails he looks at from his LionsHead office has certainly expanded since 1963, the year he left Sheboygan, Wisc., and moved to Colorado for Vail's second season. In the early days he tended bar nightly at the Red Lion, one of Vail's

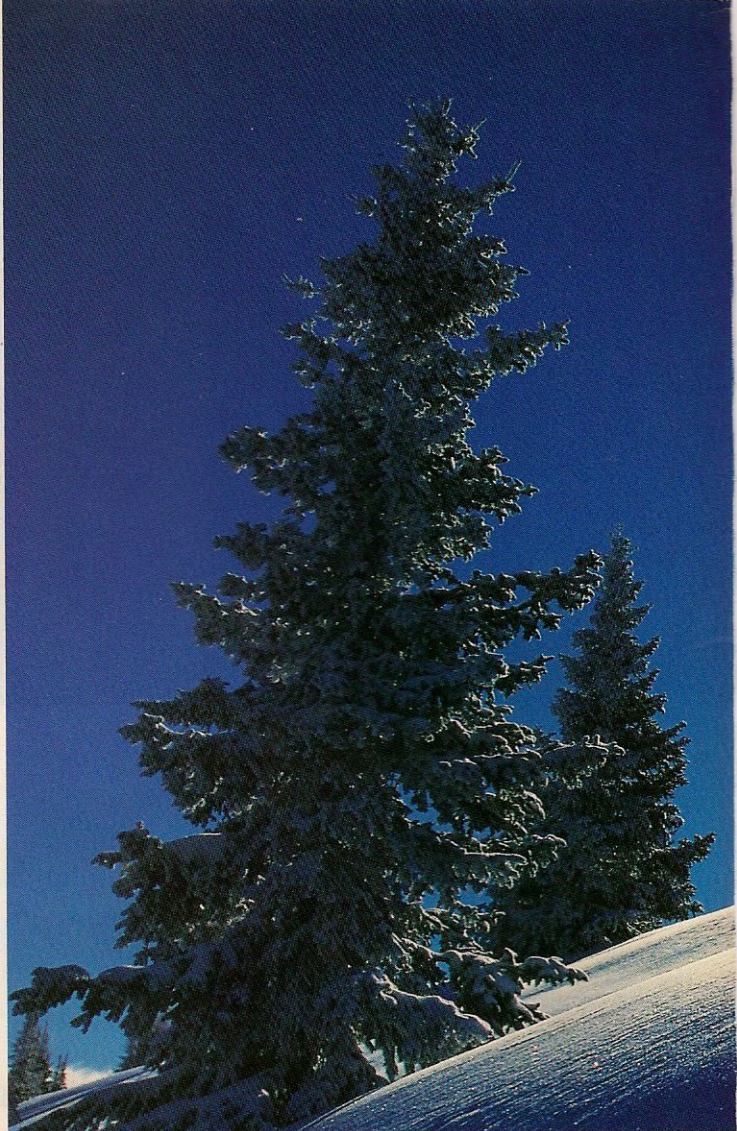
Adventure Ridge may be in the spotlight nowadays, but Vail's phenomenal skiing and upscale living are what keep die-hard aficionados coming back year after year.

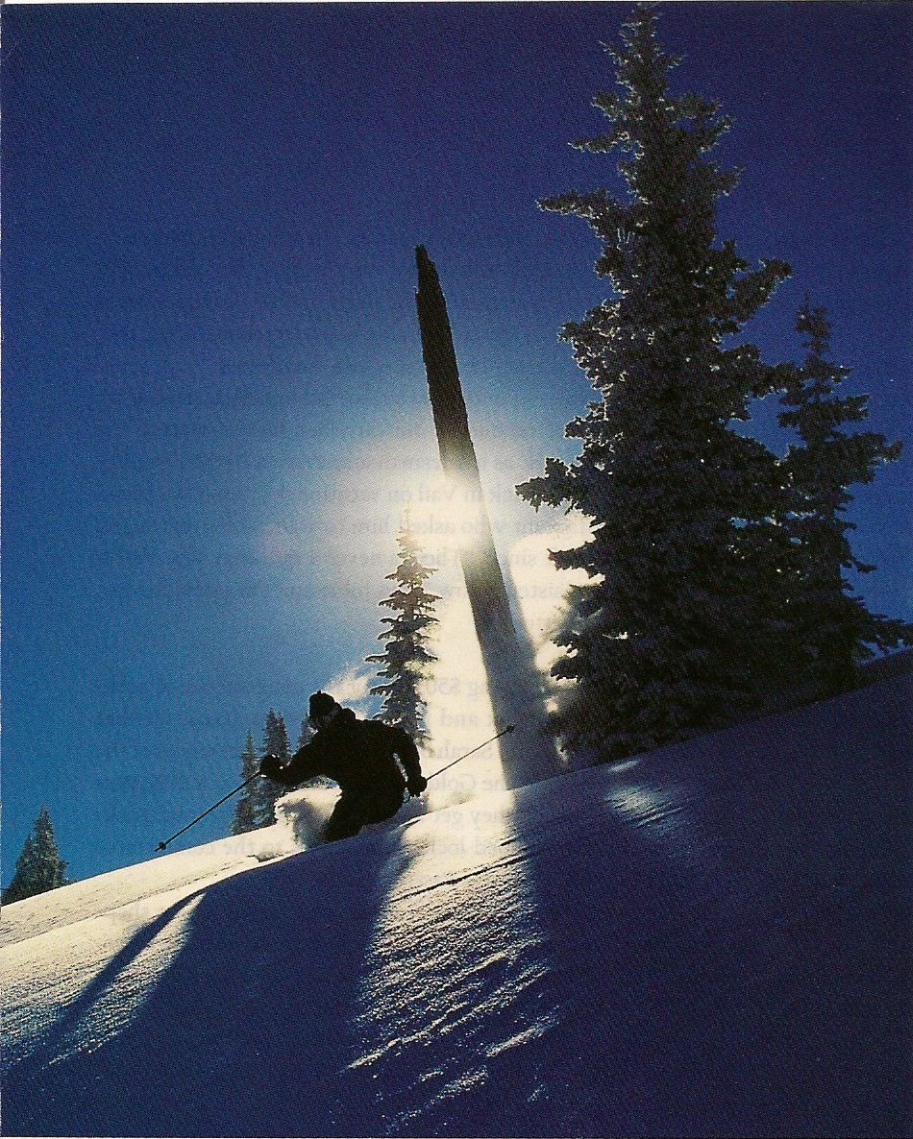
original buildings, and spent his days boot-packing the mountain's a handful of trails for lift tickets. Over the years, he has seen many changes. "People don't necessarily want to ski six out of six days anymore. They're looking for alternatives, and we work hard to please them."

On my first nighttime visit to Adventure Ridge, the place buzzes with activity. Adventure Ridge has been attracting an average of 1,200 people per

night, and tonight is no exception. Inside Eagle's Nest, which is the upper terminal of the new gondola, there is an eclectic mix of four restaurants, packed nearly to capacity. Outside, people skate on the small rink, snowboard in the halfpipe, ride inner-tubes down the tubing hill and speed away into the darkness on a snowmobile tour.

After riding up the new, heated 12-passenger gondola, my first stop in Eagle's Nest is the tastefully decorated Blue Moon bar/restaurant. Guitar player Bill Mullins is belting out "Satisfaction," accompanied on tambourine by a 30-something woman from the crowd. When the song ends, she yells "I need a shot," and Mullins immediately segues into "Wild Thing."





The crowd of about a hundred, mostly couples in their 30s and 40s, sings along enthusiastically. There's really no dance floor, but several people push some tables aside and start dancing. The next song is "La Bamba," but I leave before being swept up in a conga line that snakes through the bar.

Just a few feet away, but a world apart in atmosphere, is Terminal Pizza. It was formerly the unloading area for the old four-person gondola, and its concrete walls give it a stark, industrial feel. Two of the old gondolas still hang overhead from the original tracks. Loud music blares. A half-dozen TVs are tuned into ESPN2, while a large-screen TV plays ski and snowboard movies. A side door opens onto the top of the snowboard halfpipe. Teenagers in Vail used to get so bored that they would ride the in-town shuttle buses just to heckle other riders. Now they hang out here at Terminal Pizza, listening to music, watching videos and ripping up the adjacent halfpipe.

Vail teens aren't the only locals enjoying Adventure Ridge. I meet two 20-something Vail employees on a break from taking runs in the halfpipe. Chris Marsh is a 26-year-old children's ski instructor, and 29-year-old Bill Auerswald is an attorney for the resort. Says Auerswald: "I'm at my desk, Monday to Friday, 9 to 5, so it's cool to have the option to come up here at night. I can get up here and have fun in the halfpipe and remember what business I'm in."

Upstairs are two more restaurants with totally distinct at-

mospheres. The Wine Stube is an upscale sit-down eatery frequented by couples, while the Shooting Star is the daytime cafeteria converted into an all-you-can-eat buffet at night for dinner. Several hundred people, mostly families and couples, fill the room. They line up at the 50-foot-long buffet table (\$11.95 for adults, \$7.95 for children), load their plates high, and then listen to the mellow sounds of musicians Kelly Kristensen and Roy Bloomfield.

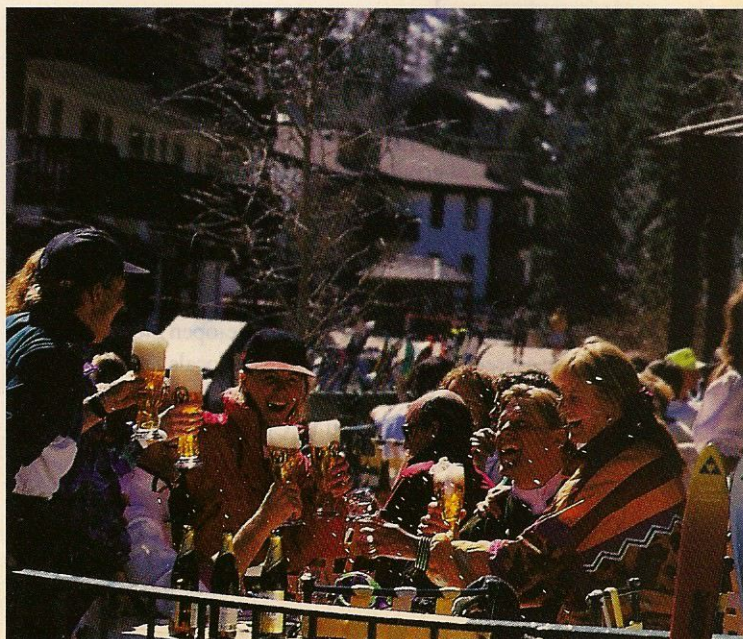
Outside the large windows, snow has begun to fall. It's reflected in the lights illuminating the beginner slope of Chair 15 and the nearby tubing hill. Inside, the Hunter family from Peoria, Ill.—David, Sally and their four children—are just finishing dinner. "The buffet is great for kids because they can see what they're getting," says Sally. Adds David, a doctor, "And eight bucks is an incredible deal for Vail."

When I head outside to the tubing hill, I see the Hunters again. Every family member has an oversized innertube and they're trying to get in as many runs as they can. "This sure beats sitting in front of the boob tube in the condo," says Sally, as 12-year-old Amy goes whizzing down the hill.

I can't help myself—I have to give it a try. First I'm pulled up the 200-vertical-foot hill by a rope-tow built specially for tubers. Then I flop onto my innertube face first and plunge

down the steepest of several snow-bank-lined chutes. The ride lasts only a few seconds, but skimming along just inches from the snow is a rush. I whoop shamelessly in delight.

I'm still yelling an hour later, but now I'm driving a snowmobile at high speed down Eagle's Nest Ridge. Led by a guide, 10 of us race up and down ski trails. The trees rushing by are a blur as I lean into a turn. The sensation of sliding on snow is viscerally appealing to everyone in our group, even the pair of



non-skiers. Bob Bessier, 33, and Sue Marshall, 32, are visiting from Chicago for several days. "We're not skiers, but we wanted to do something exciting," says Bessier with a huge grin. "This is a blast."

Not everyone is so enthralled with Adventure Ridge. Environmental groups say the on-mountain complex is an improper use of public land and the nighttime lights may be affecting wildlife. "The Forest Service rubber-stamped the project without any public input," says Rocky Smith, an ecology coordinator with the Colorado Environmental Coalition. "We know there would have been some negative comments. You can see the lights for miles, and the lights and snowmobile tours may be hurting wildlife. If Vail wants to have these activities, they should be on private land—not public land."

The next day I take a daytime tour of the Eagle's Nest/Adventure Ridge area with Susie Tjossem, the director of recreational services for Vail. Tjossem, 43, came to Vail in 1974 to teach children's skiing for "one winter" and never left. She has been working ever since to meet the needs of kids and their parents. "We built Adventure Ridge because parents wanted more recreational activities for their kids," says Tjossem as we ride the new gondola. "But the parents have actually been as excited as the children. They've been out ice skating and on the tubing hill, smiling and giggling. It's low-key, almost hokey, but it's also magical."

The concept of Adventure Ridge—especially the *free* nighttime gondola ride—has created balance within the resort. "We wanted to break down that image of Vail being all snooty and overpriced," says Tjossem. "And we think we've hit a home run. People are leaving with a whole new image of Vail."

Even the new business center, open daily in Eagle's Nest, has helped shift perception. You can access your e-mail at one of seven computers, check stock quotes on a Bloomberg Business News terminal, make copies and send and receive faxes—all for free. Kathy Vest, who is working the front desk when Tjossem and I stop by, says that all visitors, whether or not they use the center, are impressed.

More than just a mode of transport to Adventure Ridge, the new high-speed gondola has also re-established LionsHead as a mecca of top-to-bottom cruising runs. Before the first high-speed quads were installed for the 1985-86 season, local skiers used to ride the old gondola and then rip down 2,230 vertical feet. But the new lifts lured locals to other parts of the mountain and LionsHead was largely forgotten. Now locals are gradually returning to old favorites like Bwana, with its series of rollers and Born Free, with its wide-open faces.

On the eastern flank of the mountain, locals are discovering that the new Chair 6 at Golden Peak is an alternative to the Vista Bahn because it links you to Chair 11. In 20 minutes, depending on lines, you can be dropping into the Back Bowls. "There have been powder days when the Vista Bahn maze is full and I walk over to Chair 6 and get right on," says Dirk Johnson,

a diehard local who will ski Vail Mountain *every* day this season except for the handful of holidays restricted by his community season pass. The former collegiate racer and pro bump skier is one of the best skiers in Vail. He skis in perfect control, no matter what the terrain, yet he also skis fast. *Really* fast.

Maybe Johnson, who first moved to Vail in 1981, is making up for the six seasons he missed out on when he returned to the "real world" to work as a salesman and drive a BMW. In 1993, when he wound up back in Vail on vacation, he ran into a friend managing a restaurant who asked him to wait tables that night. Johnson hasn't left since. "There's never a question that Vail is going to have consistent snow," says Johnson. "On a powder day, there's no place better."

Some people are paying \$50,000 for the convenience of parking at Golden Peak and riding Chair 6 to access all that powder. Take Mike and Sarah Sylvester, who are members of the new Passport Club in the Golden Peak base lodge. For 50K, plus \$1,350 in yearly dues, they get a guaranteed underground parking space, maple-trimmed locker and access to the comfortable lounge area in the exclusive Passport Club.

"This is a whole new level of ease," says Sarah, as she shepherds three of her own children, plus two friends' kids, on a late-March day. "It's so convenient with the kids," says the New York City resident with a second home in Vail.

Greg Miller, who works the front desk at the Passport Club, explains: "People think this is heaven. It's just the kind of pampering they're looking for."

Through a locked door and down the hall is heaven for a younger generation. It's also known as the Wreck Room pizzeria and it serves breakfast, lunch and six beers on tap. A snowmobile hangs from the ceiling, which has exposed pipes and is painted purple. Even at 10 am rock music blares loudly.

Upstairs at Bella Riva—a 180-seat, sit-down restaurant that serves breakfast, lunch and dinner—floor-to-ceiling windows look out onto a large terrace and Vail Mountain. On the other side of the bar area is the Great Room—a huge space decked out with a three-story fireplace and a massive, 1,600-pound chandelier. Skiers relax on couches in front of the fireplace, boots off, feet thawing.

The main floor is also home to the best organized, most spacious rental shop I've ever seen. Large signs direct skiers to the appropriate counters, where rows of gleaming new equipment wait to be rented.

"One of the raps against Vail was not having a real base lodge," says Golden Peak general manager Eric Pottorff, who has been guiding me through the new lodge. "I think this has something for everyone."

Adam Aron, CEO of Vail Resorts, knows that his ski areas will stay on top if they can keep providing an experience all people can enjoy. He also knows that as an industry leader who sits in a showcase office with a panoramic view of Beaver Creek, he's bound to be criticized. But he has taken it all in stride, including

the snide “corporate theme park” digs in competitors’ advertising.

“Adventure Ridge is one of the biggest successes in the history of our company,” says the 42-year-old Aron, who joined Vail Resorts in 1996 after a fast-track career that has included high-profile jobs at Hyatt, United Airlines and Norwegian Cruise Line. “At the same time our major competitors were badmouthing Adventure Ridge, they all had someone here checking it out.”

Adventure Ridge isn’t the only move for which Vail is being criticized; Breckenridge and Keystone aficionados worry that those resorts will lose their distinct personalities under Vail Resorts’ reign. But Aron is quick to say that the merger of Vail and Beaver Creek with Breckenridge and Keystone will have no such impact. “It’s very important to us that the resorts not become homogenized,” he says. “We’re going to preserve the unique personalities of the resorts.”

The personality of Vail, he notes, will continue to be a split one. “We are trying to be all things to all people—trying to be sensitive to affordability issues at the same time we want the high-end cachet,” explains Aron. “But the common bond is offering the best ski experience to everyone.”

I think back to that recent powder day, to that incredible ski experience, and nod my head in agreement. I may not own a single share of Vail Resorts stock, but—like so many other skiers—I know there will always be a piece of Vail waiting just for me. ♦