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In Aspen, high life and high slopes on a low budget

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It's 3 in the afternoon as I force my way into the dark, steamy interior of Cloud Nine Alpine Bistro at Aspen Highlands, where shirtless men and scantily clad women dance on tables in their ski boots. Waitstaff push through the throngs while bearing $120 bottles of Veuve Clicquot. Routinely, the gyrating skiers pop the cork, empty the bottle by blasting their fellow revelers with bubbly and then order another round.

I shouldn't be surprised. This is Aspen, after all, playground of the rich and richer.

I'm about to roll my eyes and snark about the 1 percent when the song changes to a bass-heavy tune I adore, and I have a "when in Rome" moment. Before I know it, I'm dancing along with the scions and trust-funders, and they're surprisingly inclusive. Someone even sprays me with Veuve, and I open my mouth to try to catch some of the liquid gold.

This is an après-ski party like no other, one that's far beyond my usual budget. But I'm on a mission to hack Aspen and enjoy it as if I've got a private jet parked on the airport runway. So far, I'm doing great. The cost of entry to this raucousness? A mere $8, the price of a mug of mulled wine.

I wink at one of the more enthusiastic dancers, a skinny man who barely looks 20 and who's clutching three bottles of champagne as he bounces up and down. Then I head out into the fresh air, click into my skis and glide to the base area, glad to notch one more win in my experiment to ski and party in the Colorado town for a weekend without going broke.

Budget, definedBefore talking about what it means to ski Aspen on a budget, let's just state the obvious: Skiing and snowboarding are expensive, whether you're in the Rockies or the Poconos. It's tough to get firm data on the cost of a ski weekend, but my back-of-the-envelope math puts a weekend trip to the slopes somewhere between $600 and $800, including lodging, lift tickets, gear rentals and food.

And if you want to ski Aspen, you're going to pay a premium. This is because Aspen sits in one of the most gorgeous valleys in the world, where the Elk Mountains cut sharp silhouettes against turquoise skies, and the trees for which the town is named create a mythical ambience. The resort is made up of not one, not two, but four individual mountains - all connected by free shuttles buses - and the terrain offers something for everyone. The snow-sports schools are world-renowned and well planned (the $10 million kids-only Hideout at Buttermilk opened last year to unanimous accolades).

But what really makes Aspen so desirable is supply and demand. It's a remote, luxurious destination that's in high demand among very wealthy people and is priced accordingly.

Problem is: I can't afford that. My ski-weekend budget is somewhere in the $300 to $500 range. But I love skiing Aspen. This is where my husband and I got engaged, and it's one of the first places we brought our first son when he was a baby. Plus it's got some of the best skiing in Colorado, which might explain why I jumped in the car one weekend this past January, determined to pull off a "cheap" Aspen weekend. What I learned is that visiting Aspen on a budget is possible with two caveats: You must be willing to plan in advance, and you can't be fussy about polyester bedspreads.

Miles to goGetting there: From my house in Boulder, Aspen is a four-hour drive. But if you're a plane ride away, use your airline miles to bypass Denver and fly directly into the Aspen/Pitkin County Airport. Most major commercial airlines fly there, and if you book far enough in advance, that $950 round-trip flight from the District to Aspen is free, except for the $15 charge to use your miles. Once you arrive, hop on a complimentary shuttle into town, and don't even think about renting a car.

Lodging: You can sleep in Aspen for less than $100 per night, but you'll be sharing a tiny room in a hostel-like setting and sleeping in a twin bed. More common in the winter are budget motels around town and in Snowmass Village that average about $150 per night. But - and I say this kindly - you get what you pay for.

Which is to say, thread counts don't factor into the equation when you're at the St. Moritz Lodge & Condominiums, a charming lodge built in the style of a Swiss farmhouse and located in downtown Aspen, two blocks from the free bus and walking distance to Aspen Mountain. But at $74 per night during the high season, this minuscule shared room with two twin beds is a steal. Upgrade to a private hostel room (same as a shared, but you pick the roommate) for $169.

Hitting the slopes: If you're going to ski in Colorado, Wyoming, California, Utah, Vermont or certain Canadian destinations, the best discount for lift tickets is the Mountain Collective ski pass, which offers two days of skiing or snowboarding at 12 world-class resorts. It's on sale now for 2016-2017 for $379; children's passes are currently $1 with an adult pass purchase.

If you're sticking to Aspen, the best deal is the resort's seven-day advance purchase discount when you buy two or more days. (A two-day advance ticket is $238, compared with $278 at the window; the more days you purchase, the greater the discount.) Children age 6 and younger ski free at Aspen Snowmass, and kids ages 7 to 12 ski free when they rent gear through Four Mountain Sports.

Grabbing grubFood in mountain towns generally adheres to two truisms: It's expensive, and the quality rarely justifies the price ($18 cheeseburgers and $12 beers). One option is to cart a bag of groceries to the high country - and I did that in Aspen, stocking my mini-fridge with yogurt, granola, summer sausage and a six-pack. But that's only so much fun. Much better is hitting the happy hours around town, of which Aspen has many.

The Limelight Lounge, on the ground floor of the impressive Limelight Hotel (which I highly recommend for lodging when budget is not an issue), is a must-stop. With a daily happy hour that lasts from 3 to 7 p.m. and offers $10 wood-fired pizza and $3 Buds, with tax and tip, my dinner cost $17. I asked a few locals about their favorite happy hours, and they delivered a list so extensive that I was hard-pressed to try even a few of their suggestions. Justice Snow's cocktails generally run upwards of $20, but hit it at happy hour, and you'll pay just $5 for a killer margarita. Mezzaluna's happy-hour drinks start at $3, and food starts at $7. The Red Onion, a favorite of locals, has a double happy hour daily, from 3 to 6 p.m. and then from 10 p.m. to midnight.

More budget hacksOne more way to save money in Aspen is to take advantage of all the free or cheap things in and around town. The Aspen Art Museum offers free admission daily. There are more than 60 miles of maintained cross-country Nordic ski trails available free to the public. Work out your kinks and sore muscles at Yoga for Skiers on Aspen Mountain, available Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays from 9:30 to 10:30 a.m. for $5 a person. The resort encourages uphill travel, so if you have backcountry ski gear or snowshoes, strap them on and get a great workout at no cost. (If you use the carpetlike adhesives called "skins" and ski uphill to Up 4 Pizza at the top of Snowmass's Sheer Bliss lift, you get a free cookie; trust me when I say white chocolate macadamia nut has never tasted so good as when you've climbed 3,214 vertical feet.)

Snowmass offers a multitude of free and inexpensive child-friendly activities with its Very Important Kid (VIK) programming (think bowling, magic shows, crafts and more) throughout the season. The Ice Age Discovery Center lets you touch mastodon and mammoth teeth and explore the region's fossils for free.

Skip the expensive coffee shop latte and opt for the free Lavazza coffee that Aspen Snowmass serves at the bottom of each mountain every morning. The resorts also have free mini Clif bars and hot cider at the mountains' guest-service locations. There's a free shuttle from the town transit center to any of the four resorts, or, if you drive, park for free at Buttermilk or the Snowmass Village Recreation Center and take the regular bus up to Highlands and Snowmass, respectively. Finally, early- and late-season ski-and-stay packages are frequently offered on the resort's website and can save you hundreds of dollars.

All told, my Aspen weekend cost me roughly $400, less than the cost of a room at one of the town's fancier hotels. I skied many laps on Highland Bowl and got a workout skinning up Snowmass. I gorged on pizza at the Limelight and also got in a dance party. I marveled at beautiful and provocative works of art, and I strolled Hyman Avenue, window-shopping at boutiques I could never afford to patronize. More than that, I simply relaxed at one of the most beautiful places in the world. Surrounded by mountains and snow and friendly, happy people, I realized that what I had there and then was, indeed, priceless.

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If you goWhere to stay St. Moritz Lodge & Condominiums

334 W. Hyman Ave.

1-800-817-2069, 970-925-3220

stmoritzlodge.com

Offering shared and private hostel rooms, regular hotel rooms, and condominiums, this clean, budget-friendly lodge includes free breakfast. Kids age 17 and younger stay free when accompanied by a parent. Shared hostel rooms start at $74 per person.

Where to eat The Red Onion

420 E. Cooper Ave.

970-925-9955

redonionaspen.com

A prize-fighting saloon and brothel in the late 1800s and now a popular local hangout, this casual bar and eatery has double happy hours and arguably the best burger in town.

Limelight Lounge

Limelight Hotel

355 S. Monarch St.

855-565-0985

limelighthotel.com

With $10 happy-hour pizzas and $3 beer - not to mention live music and a vibrant, welcoming atmosphere - this is the spot for delicious cheap eats.

What to Do Aspen Art Museum

aspenartmuseum.org

637 E. Hyman Ave.

970-925-8050

This museum of contemporary art offers free admission and ever-changing exhibitions.

Snowmass Ice Age Discovery Center

130 Kearns Rd., Snowmass Village

970-922-2277

gosnowmass.com

Admission is free at this natural history museum at the base of Snowmass resort.

Very Important Kids Programming

Multiple locations in Snowmass Village

970-429-8173

viksnowmass.com

With free or inexpensive daily activities for children, VIK provides many options for families at the end of the ski day, including bowling, crafts and more.

Informationaspensnowmass.com

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