



HIGHS & LOWS

BY BRIAN E. CLARK

(dollar-wise) of Skiing Aspen

The first time I skied Aspen, way back in the mid-1970s, lift tickets were around \$15 at this iconic resort in the Rockies. I was a junior at the University of Colorado, slept in a cozy sleeping bag on the floor at a friend's house during that visit and ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch on the slopes. They were yummy, if I recall correctly.



For dinner, my companions and I made an inexpensive meal of pasta, tomato sauce and a soybean meat substitute, plus an earthy, multi-grain bread someone in our group had baked. We may even have splurged on a bottle of (most-likely cheap) red wine.

For breakfast, we drank tea, and ate bagels and granola we'd picked up at a health-food store in Boulder. And when we went out at night for some beers at a bar to listen to music, we only spent a couple of bucks each.

The cost for a weekend of great skiing? Less than \$70, including the \$5 I pitched in for gas.

I've been back to Aspen a few times in the years since then. The skiing snowboarding at the four "hills" in and around town (Aspen Mountain, also known as Ajax; Buttermilk, Snowmass and Aspen Highlands) remain excellent. The prices, however, have gone up a wee bit.

If money's no question, you could easily spend thousands of dollars on visit by staying at the five-star Little Nell (thelittlenell.com), where luxury rooms in this slope-side hotel run more than a grand a night during the high season.

You could also rent an entire villa through airbnb.com with seven bedrooms, 9.5 baths, a pool and other luxurious amenities for (hold your breath...) \$9,000 a night, plus fees.

The less expensive, but quite posh, 128-year-old Hotel Jerome (<https://aubergeresorts.com/hoteljerome/>) (now an Auberge resort the was recently renovated) is around \$500 a night, while the quite pleasant Lime-light (<https://www.limelighthotels.com/aspen>) has rooms that begin at around \$400 a night. The Lime-light also has incredible breakfasts, included with your overnight tab.



To buff up your skiing and riding skills, you could hire a private instructor (aspensnowmass.com/plan-your-stay/lessons/private-lessons) at \$820 a day - be sure to book seven days in advance for this "bargain" price - plus a 20 percent tip for a total of around a cool \$1,000. Or pay only \$170 (again, the seven-day advance price) for a group lessons (class size is usually less than five in a group) to help you find the best powder stashes and bowls and steeps with the fewest people.

For a heli-skiing adventure, book a trip with Helitrax (helitrax.com) for a day of untouched powder far away from the madding crowd. Plan on spending around \$1,4000. And if you're a certain age and your mogul skiing needs a tune-up, sign up for one of the (aptly named) "Bumps For Boomers" (bumpsforboomers.com) clinics. They run four-days and cost \$1,696.

You'll need mid-day sustenance, so why not swoop into the Cloud Nine Alpine Bistro at Aspen Highlands (aspensnowmass.com/our-mountains/aspen-highlands/dining/cloud-nine-alpine-bistro) for some fondue or raclette, steak tartare, caviar and champagne for \$75 and more. beside the Aspen Mountain gondola, where a wagyu - a kind of Japanese beef - double cheeseburger will run you \$22. Want truffle fries and a beer? Add another \$16 to your bill.

After a day on the slopes, you could wander over to the 02Aspen Spa (02Aspen.com) for a 60-minute, \$175 Skier Massage. And when it comes time for dinner, there are a number of Aspen restaurants where an evening meal with wine and desert costs \$150 and up. You could stay put at the Little Nell, where a special wine dinner at Element 47 (thelittlenell.com/dining/element-47) could run you and five friends \$1,000. When I was there, I got to tour the wine cellar and hold (very carefully) a bottle of wine that was worth \$4,000. I gave it back to the sommelier quickly.

Oh, and that \$15 lift ticket from 40-plus years ago? It's now \$179 if you walk up to a ticket booth the day you want to ski. Buy your multi-day ducat a week in advance and you can save up to \$30 a ticket. And if you're under 18 or 65 and over, all four mountains have additional discounts.

Or you could have bought an IKON (ikonpass.com) or Mountain Collective (mountaincollective.com) pass good for two days at numerous resorts in the West, including Aspen. IKON passes are no longer available



this ate in the season, but a Mountain Collective pass can still be purchased for \$509. After the first two days are used, additional days are 50 percent off. It can also save you a bundle if you use it at other member resorts such as Mammoth, Squaw Valley, Alpine Meadows, Taos, Jackson Hole, Snowbird or Alta.

San Francisco residents Jennifer Toy and Roy Barroca spent six weeks skiing around the West using the Mountain Collective passes they bought early for even less money. They lived in their tricked-out Ford E-350 van, often paying less than \$50 a night for parking in RV lots. In Aspen, they favor Highlands because of its "locals" vibe.

Not everyone travels in a van, however. But you still don't need to have a trust fund to enjoy Aspen, says Jim Moneghan, a retired Denver policeman who skis all over Colorado. He often stays at rooms he books through Airbnb in nearby Basalt, which is 12 miles from Aspen's Intercept parking lot, which has more than 200 paved spaces and free shuttles to all four of Aspen's mountains.

He's also stayed in Carbondale, which is 26 miles from the Intercept lot, and gotten a room with a private bath for \$70 a night. (There are also Airbnb options in Aspen, but they could easily run twice as much a night during the high season.)

Moneghan eschews eating in Aspen, though he does scout around the web for the best apres-ski deals at local watering holes that sometimes offer free or discounted food with drinks. However, he chooses restaurants in Basalt because the prices are less.

But if you truly want the Aspen experience, here are some tips from locals on places to stay, dine and enjoy yourself at (relatively) bargain prices.

You'd never know it from Aspen's pricey reputation, but the town has two hostel-like lodges with dorm bunks with shared bathrooms for those who are willing to rough it a bit, plus rooms with either shared or private baths.

The St. Moritz Lodge (stmoritz.com) is at the base of Shadow Mountain in the quiet, West End of town only two blocks from free bus shuttles. Rates for a clean and comfortable dorm room start at \$75 and the inn offers gratis continental breakfasts and apres-ski snacks.

The other other bargain option is the Swiss-style Mountain Chalet Aspen (mountainchaletaspen.com)



which opened in 1954, is just two blocks from the gondola at Aspen Mountain and has a 1970s ski-bum vibe. (If I stayed there, I might have a Rip Van Winkle flashbacks.)

Lodging options range from basic dorm rooms with shared baths starting at a more-than-reasonable \$59 a night to two-bedroom apartments that begin at \$429 a night. Breakfast is included and all guests have access to the steam room, hot tub and sauna.

If you have youngsters in tow, Snowmass offers free ice skating at the Base Village and free s'more from 3:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. every afternoon at the Base Vil-

lage and the Snowmass Mall. Just look for the s'mores carts at the fire pits. It's a perk of the family-friendly mountain's V.I.K. (Very Important Kid) program.

For inexpensive food in Aspen, check out the bar menu at L'Hostaria, but be sure to get there before 6 p.m. or you may find yourself in a line behind locals. Zane's Tavern, with locations in Aspen and Snowmass Village, offers Philly cheesesteak sandwiches (\$12.95), grilled fish tacos (\$3.75 each) and other classic bar food at reasonable prices.

Grab a slice of cheese pizza at New York Pizza for \$4.50. The Woody Creek Tavern, where Hunter S.

Thompson used to hang out, has veggie burgers (\$12), fish sandwiches (\$15) and chicken enchiladas (\$16). Steakhouse \$316, where you can order a steak sandwich for \$20 or a Bistro filet for \$22 from the bar menu.

If you want to do some kicking and gliding or skating on your Nordic skis, or hiking or running on snowshoes, Aspen has nearly 60 miles of free trails between Aspen, Basalt and Snowmass. Need rental gear? Then head for the Aspen or Snowmass Cross Country Centers.

If you're looking for some culture, check out the free Aspen Art Museum (aspenartmuseum.org) or take a

tour with the Aspen Historical Society (aspenhistory.org) and learn about some of the town's storied mansions, the Hotel Jerome, the Wheeler Opera House or go on a pub crawl. All cost less than \$20 a pop, except for the opera house, which is free. And if you like to learn about the history of Aspen skiing, along with a dose of mining history, ski with a docent at Aspen Mountain or Aspen Highlands.

For other things to see and do in Aspen, see the Aspen Chamber of Commerce website at Aspenchamber.org.