

Beaver Creek is image oriented, with a mountain to back it

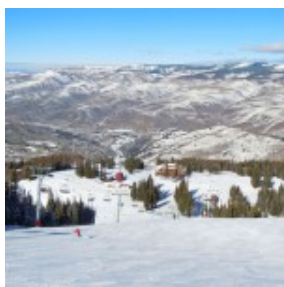
By Susan Wood

BEAVER CREEK – Deer who?

Beaver Creek, the Vail Valley-area ski resort that considers the comfort of the roaming resident elk like it does its patrons, takes the experience of a real snowsports vacation to new heights.

Where else would a family-oriented ski area in the Vail Resorts' six-area lineup offer such skiing extremes to differing abilities, yet appeal to the pleasure of all who seek a getaway that consumes the enthusiast in sense of fun and adventure without being overbearing? The advertising tag line "not exactly roughing it" couldn't be more appropriate.

At the top of the 11,440-foot summit off the Cinch Express chairlift lay the possibilities. Many long groomed runs mark the front side of the resort like its Park City, Utah, counterpart – Deer Valley. On a powder day, skiers are advised to head over to the more unkept Grouse Mountain.



The Gore Mountain Range in the

distance from
Beaver Creek.
Photos/Kathryn
Reed

Turn right off the BC summit, and you can test your nerve and skill on the famed Birds of Prey Men's Downhill Course – characterized as one of the three toughest in the world. Plans are in order to expand the expert offering to women racers just east of the men's downhill for the 2015 World Championships. The U.S. Forest Service has accepted the plan and has put it out for public comment.

“This is an enormous deal – tremendous for our community. It focuses the world spotlight here,” said resort spokeswoman Jen Brown, herself a member of the U.S. Ski Team as a teenager.

Still, one doesn't have to be a world-class racer to appreciate the thoughtfulness and attention to detail of Beaver Creek. At that same summit, a few beginner runs meander down the slope.

“At most resorts, green skiers only experience the bottom level of the resort where there's not as good of snow (as the top),” tour leader Dawn Fogarty said before taking her group of 11 eager skiers on a two-hour excursion. Fogarty volunteers 20 days of her life in exchange for a ski pass. Same with her smiling counterpart Jim Knez. The duo, an architect and retired airline pilot, respectively, appear to genuinely like their extracurricular jobs. They gleamed at the prospect of taking the long, open Harrier run billed as the volunteers' favorite.

She summoned a shot of gourmet hot chocolate at the start of the tour for those who followed, brought history lessons to light and introduced a wide reach of the 1,815 acres of terrain – from runs off the Rose Bowl chairlift to Bachelor Gulch. Fogarty designed one of the first homes in the area.

Now a stately Ritz Carlton with a mountain motif stands at the base.

Seven elk herds roam through the area, and the resort accommodates them. Clusters of trees no wider than 150 feet apart dot the runs because research shows the elk won't cross otherwise. Right above the gulch, a 400-acre Nordic trail system for cross country skiing and snowshoeing provides another option to alpine skiing. Just below the 9,560 summit, Trapper's Cabin became known as the site of a famous date of the "Bachelor" television show. The ski-in, ski-out cabin, where a private cook can be hired, is located off the Intertwine run toward the Strawberry Park Express lift. Strawberries once grew there.

There's no shortage of options to feeding the regulars or newbies at Beaver Creek. The Spruce Saddle Restaurant at mid-mountain, with its new nearby wedding deck overlooking the Gore Range, combines regular ski area menu items like pizza and soup with sushi. The \$9.95 lunch special – something Vail Resorts implemented as one answer to the recession – featured London broil with mashed potatoes and a roll.

Evening dining takes the other extreme. After hours, one can sign up for a pricey but exquisite, on-mountain dinner at Beano's Cabin off the Larkspur chairlift. Just take a snowcat-driven sleigh ride below millions of stars to get there. Along the way, a banjo picker from Tennessee makes the 15-minute ride go by fast. Take the "cabin" in Beano's to heart. Bring your wallet. The meals combined with a cozy atmosphere reflect a luxurious dining experience that runs in the hundreds of dollars.

And for more of the casual outdoor option during the day, Mamie's Mountain Grill lets you throw your own burger on the grill and either sit out on the patio or eat inside the nearby yurt. The welcome tour was treated to a cup of hot chocolate with whipped cream, while basking under the afternoon sun.

“It’s days like these that I feel sorry for people who don’t ski,” said Kathy of Atlanta, while relaxing from the tour at one of the picnic tables.

It’s no wonder Knez smiles a lot. He’s had one of the toughest jobs on the mountain – handing out warm chocolate chip cookies at the village base at 3:30pm.

“That’s when you’re everybody’s best friend,” he said.

It seems many of the Beaver Creek workers aim for that goal. The ski resort comes with extensive training in guest services for a culture where no stone of helpful and hospitable service is left unturned. Ambassadors, within a program Vail Resorts implemented to assure above-and-beyond care, roam the grounds and make contact to see to it guests who may pay \$108 for an adult day lift ticket can share every request or whim at the drop of a hat.

Among the whims of bargain seekers, weekly lift ticket specials and discounted menu items are offered. Events cater to the desires of most in the family. Upcoming is the Beaver Creek Master Chef Classic presented by Bon Appetit on Jan. 27. Those wanting to eat up the slopes may participate in the Talons Challenge in which one can ski or ride 13 black diamond and double black runs in one day – Feb. 26.

Go online for more information. As of this past week, the 30-year-old ski resort had a snowpack of 49 inches on its 25 lifts that serve 149 runs from a base of 8,100 feet at the village off Interstate 70.

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