

Ritz in Beaver Creek – a world of luxurious comfort

By Susan Wood

BEAVER CREEK – After two hours of chatter hearing “turn,” “exit” and “continue” in the car from Denver, the GPS chimed: “You’ve arrived.”

Upon pulling into the circular driveway of the Ritz-Carlton, Bachelor Gulch, the navigation device couldn’t have been more sound in judgment. So, this is how the 1 percent lives.

In its chain of 32 luxury hotels, this Ritz-Carlton located at 8,300 feet and 20 minutes west of Vail on the mountain of Beaver Creek Resort has just captured a gold badge honor as one of the best hotels in the United States, according to *U.S. News and World Report* – and for good reason.



Ritz-Carlton, Bachelor Gulch has no problem catering to guests. Photos/Kathryn Reed

The attention to detail, and more specifically to the guest, is unparalleled.

The on-mountain hotel displays that ideal balance of mixing into its national forest surroundings and providing a look of elegance. A stroll into the “Great Room,” i.e. the comfy

lounge area that splits Spago's fine dining room and the Buffalo Bar's casual fare, makes it obvious this luxury mountain getaway was modeled after some of the great park lodges of our time. Think the Old Faithful Inn in Yellowstone National Park and the Ahwahnee Hotel in Yosemite. Even the grand, three-story stone fireplace that's the centerpiece of the Great Room may rival the one at the Ahwahnee's – a hard feat to pull off.

Massive timber logs notched to forge giant beams and broad gables provide a perfect backdrop when guests decide to relax and read in the cozy chairs surrounding the fireplace and large picture windows. One night, a man was comfortable enough to fall asleep in a chair right in front of the fireplace despite a sizable after-dinner crowd.

Ordinarily, this hotel is definitely a place for those who want to be isolated. Outside, there's no village. There's no town. In back, there's live music and yet another comfortable seating area around a large fire pit and heat lamps as well as picnic tables next to Daniel's outside bar. This is where bartender Devon Pierce will serve up his own "Red Twist" made with Malibu red rum, coconut liqueur and Sprite – all with a smile. Pierce likes his job and it shows.

"This is the best job here," he said.

Also rounding out the offering on the big patio is an afternoon Champagne station, a heated pool and three hot tubs – oh, and yes, a chairlift steps away from the hotel that whisks skiers up on the slopes of Beaver Creek, where the impeccable and exclusive customer service continues.

The Bachelor Gulch section of Beaver Creek Resort is quiet and seems private. Even on a powder day, one might be the only skier on the run while others pack the busy part of the Colorado ski area. It's a wilderness experience swishing through the aspen trees, private residences and resort cabins

that dot the landscape.

Bachelor Gulch was named for seven bachelors who settled in the area alongside the Ute Indians for prospecting purposes in the 1900s. They stayed for farming and ranching. (Note: the Trapper's Cabin hosted "The Bachelor" television show a few years ago.)

Today, skiers and boarders riding Beaver Creek and staying at the Ritz notice the level of service upon every turn. On a ski day, it starts by trading room slippers for ski boots at the Ritz ski valet and having a worker insist on carrying the skis and poles up to the lift line. Now, that's a true ski-in, ski-out experience – whether for a hotel guest, fractional timeshare participant or whole owner.

Chris Gerlach and his companion from St. Louis, who were riding the Beaver Creek shuttle bus after a food and wine event, liked the Ritz fractional timeshare experience so much he bought a house in the Bachelor Gulch neighborhood.

"I'd go home and not know what to do. There was no one there to say 'my pleasure,' every minute," he quipped about the Ritz guest services.

And to think, this luxury hotel that claims to go to "heaven and Earth and back" to answer the whims of its guests, admits to having room for improvement.

After 10 years as of last November, Beaver Creek's only AAA-rated 5-diamond resort is set in April to undergo a \$15 million remodel that's designed to improve the guest experience.

"The enhancement plans will add a renewed sense of energy to this iconic resort," Ritz-Carlton Bachelor Gulch General Manager Abdullah Vural said in a statement.

Spokeswoman Jen Winkeller told *Lake Tahoe News* the update

would provide “a contemporary perspective to the existing rugged décor while preserving the Ritz-Carlton elegance and comfort.”

For starters, linens in the guest rooms as well as furniture, paintings and other decorative items will be updated. Even without feeling they need upgrading, food and beverage outlets will get a makeover as well.

For now, in-room dining has an extensive list of burgers – from bison and lean elk to vegan and gluten free. On the lobby level, Peet’s coffeehouse provides casual drinks and snacks. The Buffalo sports bar offers middle-of-the-road entrees and appetizers. (Recommended: two people may gnaw on the nachos for two meals.) For fine dining, Spago’s fun Jersey-cow seats at its restaurant and bar are almost as recognizable as its famous chef, Wolfgang Puck – who pops in on occasion to check on staff or for special events. (Recommended: at the bar, the Perfect Martini is off-the-charts refreshing with its mix of Absolut Pears Vodka, pear puree and fresh lime juice.)

And eating and drinking isn’t the only way to unwind here after a full or half day on the slopes.

The Ritz-Carlton, Bachelor Gulch comes with a 21,000-square-foot spa and fitness center featuring 19 treatment rooms surrounding a rock-lined grotto designed to emulate the mines of the 1900s that mark the area’s history. The grotto has a large hot tub filled with salt water from a free-flowing waterfall to place sore shoulder and back muscles under. Between the soothing hot water, comfortable seating and dim lighting, it’s easy to fall asleep and lose track of time. That’s why the outside hot tubs provide a refreshing option for those who relish the 10-degree night air in their faces.

Before settling into a guest room, the spa’s steam room and sauna allow for a warm-to-the-bones, melt-into-the-night way of tucking in for the evening.

The 180 guest rooms, divided by their offerings of a valley or mountain view and gas fireplace and/or balcony, have some nice touches without overstating its wooden mountain decor. The fridge is stocked every day with free Colorado-brewed beers and fresh water. Wander from the oversized bathtub or glass-lined shower in a soft, cushy robe and you may never want to leave the room.

But when deciding to meander through the Ritz, guests never know what may come their way. Staffers stand sincere and ready to accommodate. Chestnuts roasting on the fire are handed out one night, mulling wine on another night. (Note: if not for attending Beaver Creek's recent Food and Wine Festival where wine poured day and night, I would have sampled the latter.)

A guest can even order what time housekeeping shows up, as I discovered upon checking out. The request can be "put in your file," front desk staffer Jacki Smith indicated. Smith added how the hotel undergoes changes to improve the guest experience. These include reorganizations to keep the chain solvent, as in the Bachelor Gulch hotel's foreclosure deal.

Nowadays, that's a part of the hospitality world. (Note: The Ritz-Carlton, Lake Tahoe underwent the same type of restructuring at about the same time.)

In the meantime, staffers have come to embrace the Ritz lifestyle nearly as much as the guests.

Tim Rowland may argue with Pierce that he has the best job.

Rowland, who operates the hotel shuttle vehicle, has double duty as a caretaker for one of the Ritz's mascot dogs, a St. Bernard named Bachelor. (An ice sculpture of the canine greets guests at the front door.) Bachelor greets guests in person at 11am and 3pm. He's groomed twice a month for the job and racks up "an expensive food bill," Rowland noted.

"It's a good company to work for. They train you well and

there are a lot of perks,” he said, while driving us to Vail to ski one morning.

What’s his favorite perk?

“The hotel discounts,” he said.

Guests may say the same thing this year to mark the hotel’s 10th season. Through March, the Ritz is offering its Ritz Kids recreation program for \$10 an hour. Also for 10 bucks, guests may get a fourth night when they stay for three on the 10th anniversary package deal. There’s also a \$10 apres ski menu at the Buffalo Bar from 3-5pm, and late-night dinner specials at that price after 10pm.

Otherwise, guests coming to stay after March 31 may need to pull out their wallets. After all, it’s the Ritz-Carlton.

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