

Did short-term rentals kill the mountain town?

By Tom Vanderbilt, *Outside*

Brian Barker was living in Portland with a well-paying union job as a spokesperson for the fire department. But despite having “a job you don’t leave”—he had an itch. “I wanted to go live in the mountains,” he says. “I didn’t want to sit in traffic all the time. I was tired of living in the city.”

So he began searching. Missoula, Boise, Truckee—“anywhere within 30 minutes of a ski area.” In 2014, he relocated to Crested Butte, a 1,500-person-strong former coal-mining town nestled in Colorado’s Upper Gunnison River Valley. It’s often referred to as the last great American ski town, a distinction that locals, despite acknowledging it with a hint of self-deprecating smirk, do not really go out of their way to dispute. Phenomenal skiing aside, it is the sort of place where doors go unlocked (except, occasionally, to keep bears out); where locals on the Crested Butte Bitch and Moan Facebook page gripe about tourists (typically Texans) exceeding the 15-mile-per-hour speed limit downtown; where powder days mean closed stores and canceled meetings; where even the gas pumps at the local Shell station seem to take things just a bit more slowly.

“This is a great place to raise kids,” Barker, a divorced father of two young children, tells me one evening, wearing a baseball cap, a vest, and a hint of stubble. We’re seated at the Brick Oven, a locals’ hangout on Elk Avenue, the town’s main spine, where tidy wood-frame buildings in a rainbow palette glow beneath the snow-capped mass of the eponymous mountain.

This postcard existence comes at a price, though. The cliché

about remote adventure-town idylls is that people either have a second home or a second job. Barker has three jobs.

Not long ago, Barker stopped by the property-management company that oversees his rental to talk about a water heater on the fritz. “The manager said, ‘I know you have kids, but the owners are thinking about turning your place into a VRBO. You should probably start looking.’”

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