

The iconic Gore Range dominates the view from Vail's ski slopes.





The author finds a stash of powder in the glades.

VERY VAIL

A PASSION FOR POWDER

STORY AND PHOTOS BY **Lisa Densmore Ballard**

If you could visit all 481 ski areas in the United States and talk to each of the 10 million skiers and snowboarders who make turns at those areas, I'll bet you my favorite pair of powder skis that each one of them has heard of Vail, Colorado, and many of them have had a superlative experience there.

For starters, Vail is huge—the largest ski resort in Colorado—with 5,289 skiable acres and a 3,450-foot vertical drop. The resort has arguably the best snow and the most diverse terrain, a vibrant village, delicious dining, and entertaining events. No wonder Olympian gold medalists Lindsey Vonn and Mikaela Shiffrin call it home. >>>



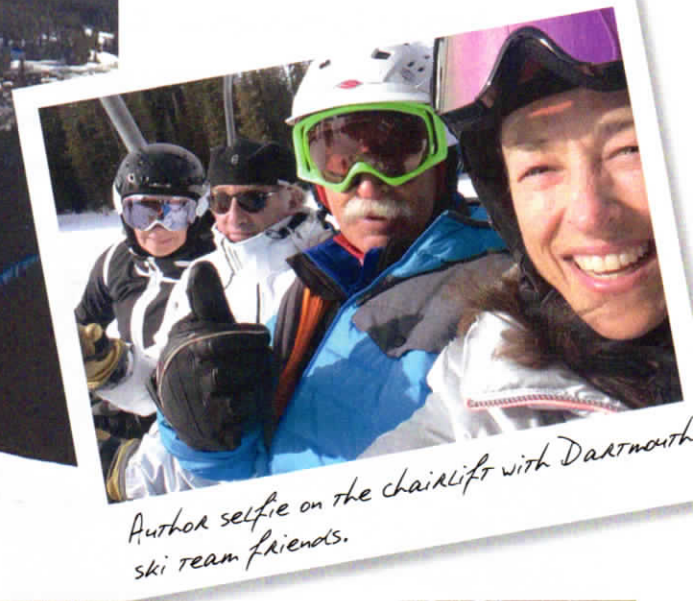
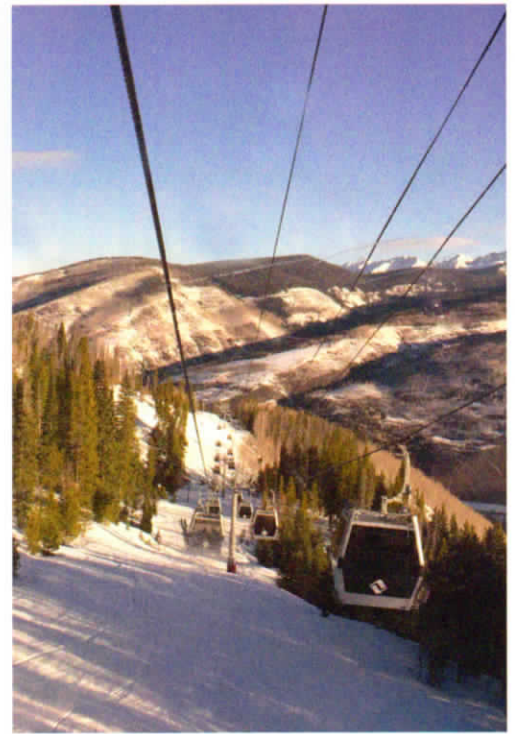
Clockwise from top left: A panorama from atop China Bowl. Vail's gondola. Gore Creek flowing through Vail Village. Skiers pausing at the top of Mongolia Bowl. Carving Vail's corduroy groomers. Skiers dancing down Bolshoi Ballroom.

ASPEN & VAIL

The first time I made tracks at Vail was in 1968 as a six-year-old. My parents planned the classic Colorado ski trip of that era to Aspen and Vail. Although both are high end, they are quite different, and they were 50 years ago as well.

Aspen was originally a mining town that became one of the earliest destination ski resorts in Colorado. Its first chairlift began turning in 1946. However, skiers had visited the area for a number of years before that, back when they had to hike for their turns.

Vail had to be created from scratch over what was originally ranchland owned by Earl Eaton and some old mining claims. A member of the US Army's 10th Mountain Division named Pete Seibert partnered with Eaton to establish Vail. It opened in 1962, boasting the



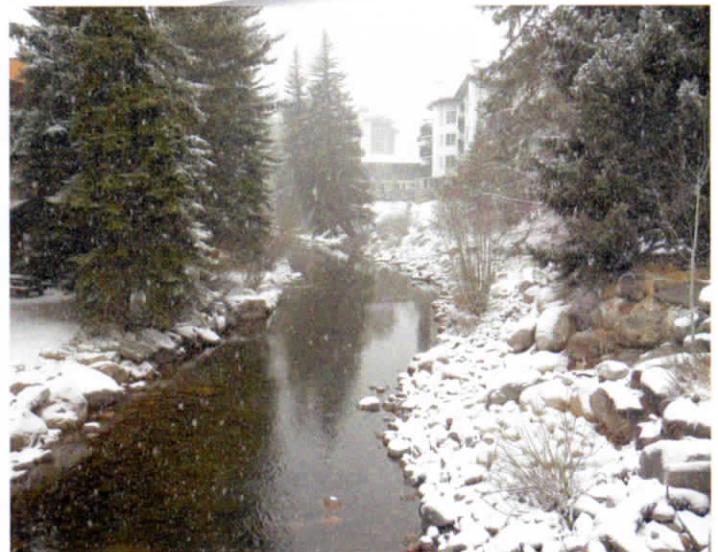
Author selfie on the chairlift with Dartmouth ski team friends.

country's first gondola as well as a couple of chairlifts and a Poma lift.

Aspen and Vail came to define skiing in the Rocky Mountains during the heyday of ski area development in the 1960s and '70s. Visiting these two iconic resorts was on my dad's and every other avid skier's bucket list.

FIRST TRACKS

When it opened, Vail wasn't nearly as big as it is today, but it was still enormous compared to ski areas in the Northeast, with more than 3,800 skiable acres. Back then, Vail's Sun Up and Sun Down bowls were known collectively as "the back bowls." The originals. Years later, while skiing at Whaleback, I remember joking about taking a run in the back bowls. Perhaps it was a latent wish to return to Vail and test myself again. The



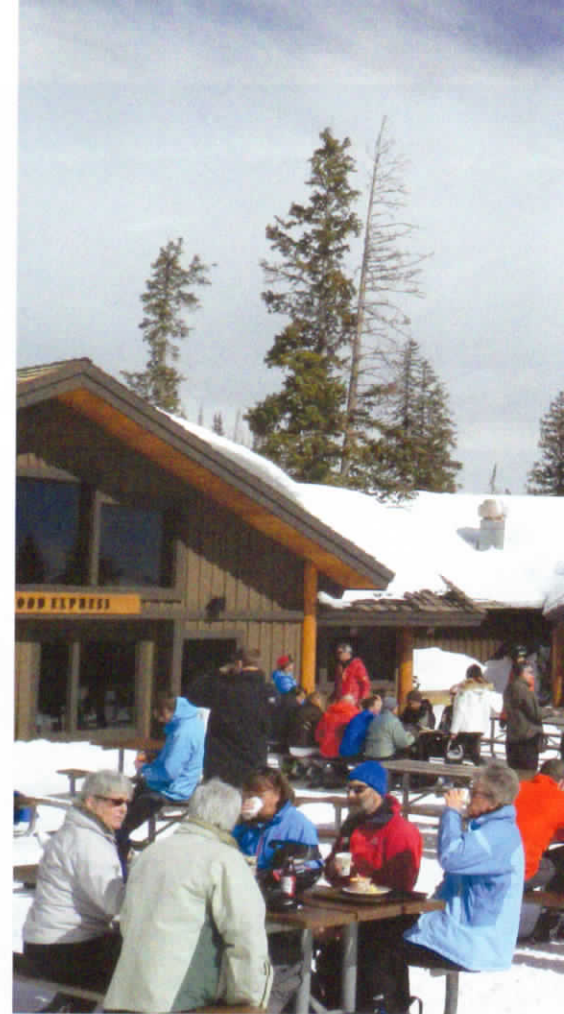


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first time I skied the real ones did not go well.

On the first morning of our family ski trip, my dad and I went straight to Sun Up Bowl as soon as the lifts opened. My dad vibrated with excitement, as it had snowed a foot overnight, but I didn't share his enthusiasm. I was too young, and the powder was too deep. After three turns, I sat down and cried. My father had to ski the rest of the run with me on his shoulders. Luckily, I was a skinny little thing, and he was an expert skier.

"How were the back bowls?" quizzed my mother when we met her in Vail Village for lunch. My father, winking at me, exclaimed, "Fantastic! Very Vail!"

THE VAIL STANDARD

Over the years, both the resort and the mountain have expanded. What was once a small cluster of hotels is now a grand, upscale resort. Some credit Gerald Ford, who owned a home in Vail, with catapulting the

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Wildwood,
a popular
lunch spot
at the top
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Right: *Wind
Sculptures*
by Lyman
Whitaker,
one of many
sculptures
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resort into the realm of the rich and famous after he became president of the United States in 1974. But the resort was already building a reputation as a world-class destination.

I returned to Vail off and on throughout the 1980s, '90s, and 2000s, skiing the back bowls—not just the originals but also China Bowl, Mongolia Bowl, and Blue Ski Basin—as Vail added them. The place seems to get classier with time. On my more recent visits, the boutiques in the village sold as much Prada as Spyder, and sculptures by accomplished artists now adorn every snowy nook and street corner. Last March, I ate bison burgers for lunch in the elegant Two Elks Lodge and coveted a new ski outfit. Very Vail!

I'm not sure at what point Vail became the ski resort standard, or more accurately, the pinnacle to which other glamorous ski resorts compared themselves. Sun Valley renovated its famous lodge, adding a fabulous spa and luxurious suites, to better vie for the top-dollar guests who might otherwise go to Vail. Jackson Hole has long played up its Western heritage to attract skiers away from Vail, but cowboys are just as common in Colorado. Even Big Sky in Montana now calls itself “the biggest skiing in America” because it's bigger than Vail.

When they're not in Vail, discerning skiers copy it. I saw a woman drinking a latte in a delicately embroidered, silk Bogner ski suit inside the Stratton base lodge—very Vail! I got on the lift at Stowe with a guy who had custom-made skis sporting a colorful design he had created—very Vail! A friend bragged about how he skied 15,000 vertical feet at Killington in a day—also very Vail. One day I floated through powder over my thighs at Waterville Valley, like skiing the back bowls at . . . you guessed it.

THE OTHER VAIL

In reality, there's nothing like the real thing. I've traveled to Vail three times in the last seven years, twice to attend CarniVail, an annual gathering

of Dartmouth skiers that includes not only many of the college's legendary ski racers but also ski patrollers, ski teachers, ski jumpers, cross-country skiers, and anyone else who has a passion for attaching a couple of high-tech planks under stiff plastic boots and letting gravity do the rest.

Last winter's event honored Dartmouth ski teams from the 1980s, my generation, and ranked among the most fun times I've ever had on the slopes. Ironically, there was no powder, and the back bowls, which are not very far "back" any more, were frozen chunks of unskiable clumps. That's when I found the other Vail.

With a former Dartmouth ski team member who's now a Vail local as our guide, a group of us out-of-towners headed to Mongolia Bowl to a black diamond run called Bolshoi Ballroom. It was steep and perfectly groomed. My skis arced turn after powerful turn, bending and accelerating again and again. My thighs begged me to stop, but I kept on going, down, down, legs burning, heart racing with adrenaline and cheeks cramping from the ridiculous grin on my wind-chilled face. When I finally stopped at the Orient Express, the high-speed lift that returns skiers to the top of Mongolia Bowl, I smiled even wider. I felt like a principal dancer who had just given her best performance in 25 years on Vail's corduroy stage.

For the rest of the weekend, my Dartmouth friends and I carved up the groomers, flitting down Bolshoi Ballroom at least once a day but also trails like Poppyfields in China Bowl and the appropriately named Cloud 9 in Blue Sky Basin. While I'll always have a passion for powder, Vail had proven to be exceptionally pleasing, even without fresh snow. It was a side of Vail I had never appreciated before.

EPIC SKI DAYS

"I wonder how much vertical we skied today?" I asked at dinner after the second day of carving an infinite number of turns down immaculately manicured slopes. "Your ski pass will

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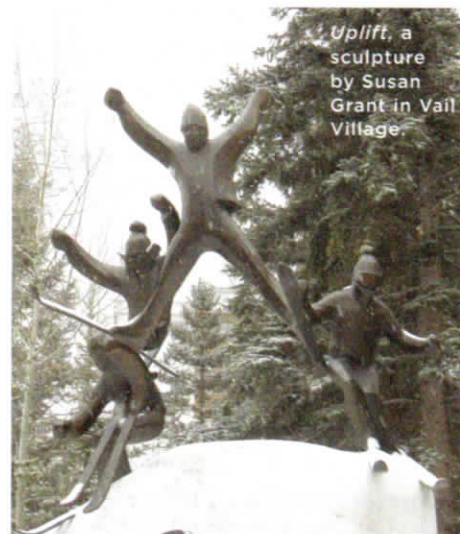
tell you," answered one of my ski team pals, referring to the "Epic" lift ticket that Vail issues to all skiers. Vail and its 10 sister resorts in the US, plus another 30 worldwide, are all part of the Epic program, a frequent-skier program on steroids. Epic tracks what you buy, how fast you race, and where you ski, everywhere in the system.

That evening, I entered my lift ticket number online and found I had logged 15,447 vertical feet the first day and 15,319 vertical feet the second day. I recalled that skier from Killington and thought, "Very Vail!"

After one more day of flying down groomers, it was time to head home. "How was your trip?" asked my dad when I called a couple of days later. "You wouldn't believe how good the grooming is now," I raved. "Very Vail!" he replied, a knowing tone in his voice.

Vail is expensive and pretentious, but perhaps that's because people with discriminating taste seek the best. The skiing in Vail is undeniably superlative—and very Vail. ←

FOR MORE INFORMATION about Vail, including lodging packages, go to www.vail.com. For more information about the Epic program, go to www.snow.com.



Uplift, a sculpture by Susan Grant in Vail Village.



ONLINE EXTRA

For insider information on Vail and more photos, visit www.hereinhanover.com.