

ALL ABOARD FOR

Steamboat

WITH SIX MOUNTAINS, AN AUTHENTIC WESTERN TOWN AND 150 HOT SPRINGS, STEAMBOAT IS THE PLACE FOR A WINTER VACATION. BY HELEN HAYES

My trusty steed picks his way through the snow, with no sound except for the squeak of his hooves. We head up the hill, through pockets of aspens standing naked against the elements, and at the top, are rewarded with a view over nothing but wilderness. No farms, no towns, no sign of civilisation.

Our guide, on this two-hour ride at Del's Triangle 3 Ranch, waves her gloved hand toward a mountain range in the distance and tells us that it is the Continental Divide. She drawls "if y'all went to the top and peed on the other side it would run into the Pacific, and if you did it on this side it would run to the Atlantic." Who knew?

I do know that this ride, always at a walk, is relaxing and strangely therapeutic, even when the wind picks up and it starts to snow. It is invigorating, and all too soon we are dismounting back in the yard, and warming up with a hot chocolate.

As we see on the drive back into Steamboat Springs, Del's is one of many ranches in the area, which retains its western roots and gives the vibrant ski resort a hefty dose of authenticity. Set in the Yampa Valley, history goes further back than ranching and mining, back to the days when the Ute Indians hunted here and also visited for its 'medicine' springs, hot springs which still lure people today.

Mountains of fun

With an array of peaks covered in snow in the winter months, it wasn't just the hot springs that attracted visitors. In 1915, a Norwegian man, Carl Howelsen, established a ski jump on a hill very close to downtown, laying the foundation for what would become a world-class ski town attracting many thousands of people from around the world every year.

Now called Howelsen Hill, Carl's pride and joy is the oldest ski resort still operating in the USA. I mull over this fact while looking at the well-lit hill from the hot tub on the back deck of our gorgeous condo, a stone's throw from the western outfitters, restaurants and boutiques on Lincoln Avenue. Carl would be very happy.

In the 1960s, another mountain was developed as a ski resort, and it is around here that Steamboat really picked up steam. These days, there are six peaks to explore in 1200 ha of terrain, and we are champing at the bit to get out there. We organise a guide/instructor through the Snowsports School, and are in his hands all day. Joe Penland knows this place inside and out, and we follow in his tracks as he points out places of interest and gives helpful information on where we should ski and how to get around.

First cab off the rank is to tap Buddy's Head. Huh? Joe skids to a halt at a sculpted





bust of a man by the name of Buddy Werner and said that it is a good omen to tap Buddy's Head every time you come up here. Buddy is one of the 89 Olympians who have come out of Steamboat, and his name pops up around the resort, along with his mum.

Joe also shows us a tree fort consisting of four pine trees that are 200 years old and have grown together in a loved-up tangle, points out a tree on the Why Not run where 'King Bob' the porcupine lives, and introduces us to camp robbers. That is the name given to gray jays, a small but active breed of bird that will come down and take food out of your hand. We don't believe him until he pulls a little bag with some bread crusts in it out of his ski jacket, crumbles them up and puts some of the palm of his hand. In seconds, a bird sweeps in and grabs the tasty morsels. Note to self: bring bread tomorrow.

After a great lunch at Hazie's, named after Buddy Werner's mum, Joe completes our education around all corners of the resort, telling us which of the glades are best for tree skiing, where we might see moose and where the more advanced skiers and riders among us might want to go. With more snow than anywhere else in Colorado, snow that is actually 'trademarked as champagne powder' and terrain for everyone from beginners to advanced, it would be easy to stay a week, a month, a season here.

Eat, stay, play

There is plenty to do off the slopes once your skis or snowboard are tucked away in the warming rooms overnight. The Outlaw Coaster will lure thrill-seekers for a blast down the tracks, or if something more relaxing is on your mind, head out to the gorgeous Strawberry Park Hot Springs.



One of 150 springs in the area, Strawberry Park is situated in a beautiful natural setting, with a range of pools, carved out of natural rock, which are different temperatures from very hot to freezing. There is a spa on site as well.

There are some excellent places to dine both on and off the mountain. We love lunch at the Gondola Pub and Grill at the base, and slip into food comas after divine dinners at both Café Diva and Cloverdale. We resist the temptation to try the wine in a can – both white and red – at Four Points Lodge. Wine in a can – really?

We stick to wine in a bottle to commiserate our last night in this vibrant mountain resort, a late dinner after an exhilarating and fun few hours of night skiing. It is the perfect end to a perfect day, spent skiing in the playground of tree runs on



Opening image: Two of the author's family waiting patiently for their mother as she checks out inside the tree fort.

Clockwise from left: Steamboat's historic Lincoln Avenue lit up for the holidays with the resort looming up behind, Riding through a grove of aspens at Del's Triangle 3 Ranch; The lounge at One Steamboat Place; One of the gourmet dishes at Cloverdale Restaurant.



Morningside, feeding the camp robbers, zipping down Buddy's Run and basically enjoying the fresh mountain air and each other's company.

Tapping Buddy's Head really did work. •

Photography by Helen Hayes and Steamboat.

TRAVEL FACTS

GETTING THERE

- Qantas flies to Los Angeles with connections to Steamboat/Hayden Airport. Or fly via Dallas to Denver. Go Alpine provide easy transfers from both airports to Steamboat. qantas.com.au; goalpine.com

WHERE TO STAY

Moving Mountains has a large portfolio of accommodation options from condos to apartments and houses and provides a great service to really look after guests. We stayed in the Governor's Penthouse in the Olympian building in Steamboat Springs, close to the shops and restaurants of Lincoln Avenue, and then moved to One Steamboat Place at the base of the ski resort. It was so convenient to use the ski valet through Black Tie Ski Rentals, and the gondola is just steps away.

movingmountains.com

WHERE TO DINE

- Café Diva: cafediva.com
- Cloverdale: cloverdalerestaurant.com

THINGS TO DO

- Del's Triangle 3 Ranch: steamboathorses.com
- Strawberry Park Hot Springs: strawberryhotsprings.com

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Black Tie Rentals has a great range of ski and snowboard gear and you can organise it before you leave home. blacktieskis.com
- Steamboat Ski Resort: steamboat.com
- Steamboat is part of the Ikon Pass, which gives access to 35 destinations around the world, including Thredbo. ikonpass.com