



THREE PERFECT DAYS / VAIL, COLORADO

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THREE PERFECT DAYS**

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By Linda Hayes / Vail is a skier's dream come true. Just take a look at the numbers. Touted as the largest single-mountain ski resort in North America, Vail boasts 5,289 acres of terrain (including the famed Back Bowls and Blue Sky Basin), an 11,570-foot summit with a 3,450-foot vertical drop, 33 lifts, a 12-person gondola, 1,000 ski instructors, and an average annual snowfall of nearly 30 feet. Better yet, take a look at skiers' faces. They're smiling as they come off the hill. (You will be, too.) ° It all began 42 years ago this month, when, inspired by a stint with the U.S. Army's pioneering 10th Mountain Division ski troopers at nearby Camp Hale, the late Pete Seibert realized a dream of his own. He and partner Earl Eaton opened the resort with three lifts and eight instructors.

As the resort and its reputation grew, the mountains to the west (now Beaver Creek, Bachelor Gulch, and Arrowhead) were developed as sister ski resorts, adding formidable acreage and trails to the count of parent company Vail Resorts.

Still, Vail and its snow-capped peaks prevail. As you stroll over the signature covered bridge, past the landmark clock tower and serenading holiday carolers, you might pick up some buzz about yet another dream, a \$1 billion redevelopment effort dubbed Vail's New Dawn—proof of the resort's resolution to uphold its regular No. 1 ranking as a ski destination. That commitment and Vail's natural vitality can make a reality of your ski vacation dreams and keep you grinning well into the New Year.

DAY ONE / Toss back your European goose down comforter as you awaken to the sunrise, and you might think your suite at 1 Sonnenalp Resort of Vail is in the Bavarian Alps. But wait; that's Vail Mountain shimmering with fresh snow outside your window, and bluebird ski days like this only happen in Colorado.

Once out of bed, flip on local Channel TV8's Good Morning Vail to check the temps. Warm up your muscles with some stretches; then slip into appropriate ski clothes (layers are smart on December days, which can be cold despite the sunshine). Grab your goggles, helmet, and sunscreen, and you're on your way to the slopes.

Vail Village is small and pedestrian friendly, and it's a short walk along Willow Bridge Road

MAP AND ITINERARY

VAIL ON THE WEB
To get the edge on your trip to Vail, check out www.vail.com, where you'll find inside information about local events, shopping and dining, accommodations, ski school, snow conditions, and just about anything else you need to know. Interactive maps and mountain cams will give you a preview of Vail Mountain, with links to Beaver Creek/Bachelor Gulch. For more insight into lodging around the Vail Valley, visit www.visitvailvalley.com.

GETTING GROUNDED
Vail is nestled at the headwaters of Gore Creek in an alpine valley located at 8,120 feet, approximately 100 miles west of Denver. Vail Village is the heart, Vail Mountain the soul, and the easy-to-navigate Vail/Eagle County Regional Airport (EGE) the gateway. Shuttle vans and limousine services are available for the scenic 35-mile ride to town. If you decide to rent, opt for four-wheel drive and reserve in advance.

GETTING AROUND
The town of Vail and Vail Village are best explored on foot. Should you need a lift, many hotels offer free shuttle service, taxis are a phone call away (ask your hotel concierge), and ECO Transit provides bus service around the valley for about \$2 a ride, from 5 a.m. until 2:30 a.m. For info, call 970-328-3520.

VAIL'S WEATHER
As difficult as it may be to believe, the Vail Valley picks up 55–70 inches of snowfall each month from November through March. Be careful skiing the backcountry just after a snowstorm. Colorado leads the nation in avalanche fatalities. Winter highs at base elevation top out in the 20s, and lows tumble into the single digits. Clear, calm nights immediately following a snowfall tend to be the coldest in the valley. Lows can plummet well below zero in these cases.

April snowfall averages around 40 inches in the valley. As daytime highs rise into the 40s, beware of ice conditions near the base, especially on sunny afternoons. Most mountain snow melts during May and June. A sudden warm-up following a heavy snowfall can lead to stream

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Vail
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Venice
Washington, DC

vail village is small and pedestrian-friendly, and it's a short walk along Willow Bridge Road and over to breakfast at **2** Blu's. Order eggs the way you like them, preferably with homefries and a steaming cup of brew.

Fueled up, head to **3** Vail Sports at the top of Wall Street to pick up the skis/boots/poles package you ordered via rentskis.com (along with a multi-day lift ticket from vail.com) before you left home. The shop is stocked with the latest from K2, Salomon, and Volkl, and the pro staff will make sure that everything fits and is adjusted to your skiing style and ability.

It's nearly 9:30 now, time to meet up with a guide at the Vista Bahn Express lift for a free **4** Mountain Welcome Tour. Vail Mountain is vast, and there's no way you'll cover it all on your three-hour tour. The Lionshead side is a good orientation point, with groomed cruisers like Simba, Bwana, and Born Free perfect for getting your ski legs—and lungs—in shape.

Post-tour, slide over into Game Creek Bowl (from the top of the Lionshead gondola); then take the Game Creek Express lift up to the old-fashioned **5** Wildwood Smokehouse for some beef brisket or a pulled pork sandwich slathered with barbecue sauce. Check out the views of Mount of the Holy Cross while you munch.

Grab a trail map and check afternoon grooming conditions. Polish off a few more runs up top—Lodgepole, Columbine, Pickeroon—via the Avanti Express lift, and make your way back down to the village. (The easiest route is Gitalong Road; try Giant Steps for a challenge.) The days are short, and there's holiday shopping to do.

Drop your equipment back at Vail Sports for overnight storage. Then hit shoppers' magnet **6** Gore Creek Drive. Turn left, and mine for fine silver, gold, and gemstone jewelry at The Squash Blossom. Ogle the pastels, bronzes, antique maps, and rare books at Gore Creek Gallery. Turn right, and The Golden Bear will be on the next corner. Shiny Golden Bear charms are an official symbol of Vail. Across the street, Gorsuch (a Vail original since 1962) is the place for high-fashion skiwear from PostCard, Moncler, Bogner, and Jos, as well as suedes, leathers, and classic Dale of Norway sweaters. With gifts checked off your list, join the lively après-ski crowd on the deck at **7** Pepi's Restaurant & Bar, named after owner and Austrian ski racer Pepi Gramshammer, for a fresh Spaten Pilsner.

On your way home, take a left out of Pepi's and cross the covered bridge. Along East Meadow Drive, the imported cashmere, tweed, and velvet apparel at **8** Scotch on the Rockies and fine Italian skiwear at **9** Valbruna make impressive presents. At the hotel, don your white terry robe and slippers and pop down to the spa for a soak in the outdoor hot tub overlooking Gore Creek. Or bring the spa to you with an in-room massage.

Dinner tonight is at **10** Larkspur at Golden Peak, where chef Thomas Salamunovich will wow you with savvy seasonal dishes, such as salmon with a pumpkin seed crust and duck breasts stuffed with foie gras duck confit. Afterward, stroll happily back to your suite. Leave an early wake-up call, drink lots of water, and dream sweet dreams of snow.

DAY TWO / You know the pre-ski routine (TV8, stretches, layers), so it's an easy up and out. Breakfast this morning is the bounteous buffet at **1** Cucina Rustica in The Lodge at Vail. After you've chowed down, grab your skis from Vail Sports and hop the Vista Bahn.

Before setting out for Vail's famous Back Bowls, take a couple of warm-up runs on Ramshorn and Christmas, on either side of the Mountain Express lift. Ride Mountain Express to the top, and make your debut on the "back side" with some exhilarating turns down The Slot and Forever, flanking the High Noon lift.

heavy snowfall can send streams over their banks from snowmelt. Beware of afternoon thunderstorms in the summer. Slow-moving storms can trigger flooding, and lightning is a hazard to hikers. Summer highs top out in the 70s and 80s in the valley. Lows dip into the 40s.

Weather information is provided by The Weather Channel.

For more climatological details, visit

www.weather.com.



Back on top, take the meandering Sleepytime all the way to the base of the Orient Express lift. Follow the signs to Blue Sky Basin and look for the Skyline Express lift. This is your ticket to ride Vail's latest and greatest new terrain in Blue Sky Basin.

The 360-degree vista will stop you in your tracks. Take a moment to gawk, and then follow Cloud Nine through the trees to the bottom, past the Cloud Nine lift, and hitch a luxury ride to lunch on the Orient Express lift. From there, you're a short slide downhill to Vail's signature **2** Two Elk Restaurant, where you can collect a bowl of chili or slice of gourmet pizza and catch some sun on the heated outdoor deck with dazzling views of the Gore Range for company.

Revved, knock back Whiskey Jack, a cruiser that will lead you down to the Northwoods Express lift again. Have some ski legs left? Stop in the Salomon Demo Center at the top of the lift, where sliders of all levels can try this season's hottest ski and snowboard equipment. Ready to call it a day? Now's your chance to ski to the village via Vail's famed Riva Ridge, one of the great runs in ski country.

Say goodbye to your skis (you'll pick up new ones tomorrow). Making tracks toward your hotel, pass over the now-familiar covered bridge at the bottom of Bridge Street and climb the stairs to the **3** Colorado Ski Museum in the Vail Transportation Center. Lose yourself here as you travel back through more than 130 years of Colorado snowsports history. Collections include photographs, videos, ski equipment, and artifacts, as well as a realistic diorama of life with the 10th Mountain Division ski troopers. If you're a boarder, don't miss the definitive exhibit on snowboarding's origins.

After an ambitious day on the slopes, you're booked for a visit to the intimate Sonnenalp Spa. Have a heated stone foot treatment, which pampers your tired tootsies with a hot bath, an exfoliating scrub, and a heated stone massage. After that, the rest of your body gets the attention with a moisture-lush aromatherapy wrap featuring warm birch arnica oil to soothe muscles and joints.

Now it's time for another treat—dinner at a new Vail hotspot, **4** Kelly Liken, the namesake restaurant of a young chef who has come up through the ranks of local kitchens. Smallish in size, the restaurant specializes in regional products. Try the elk carpaccio, potato-crusting trout, and Colorado lamb with lamb shank ravioli.

After your meal, make a detour to **5** The Tap Room, at the top of Bridge Street. Microbrews on tap are a featured libation, but, if you're in the mood for a martini, the bartenders at the New West-style bar will cheerfully oblige. Upstairs, the dance floor at the Sanctuary cooks until the wee hours. Boogie back to your hotel and hit the sheets.

DAY THREE / Sleep in a bit this morning. When you're ready, treat yourself to breakfast in bed from room service, or dress for the day (in ski clothes, of course) and wander downstairs for pancakes or made-to-order omelets at Ludwig's.

Beaver Creek, Vail's sister ski mountain, is on the agenda today. Get there via a 20-minute Express ECO Transit Bus ride from the **1** Vail Transportation Center. Catch up with the morning's buzz along the way, and then hop off at the Beaver Creek Village stop.

Make a beeline to **2** Beaver Creek Sports, where your pre-ordered skis will be waiting for you (the on-line deal applies here, as well). Your multi-day ski pass will get you on the hill here, too.

Village-to-village skiing is the ticket at this cutting-edge resort. Stick a trail map in your pocket; then it's up the Strawberry Park Express lift you go. Notice the presence of more than a few people with snowshoes in their laps or cross-country skis dangling from their feet. They're on their way to ③ McCoy Park, an extensive system of Nordic/cross-country and snowshoe trails at the top of the lift. This is an excellent alternative to a day of downhill skiing. You can rent cross-country skis or snowshoes at the Nordic Sports Center at the base of the lift. Trails are well-mapped, marked, and groomed, and you can ride the lift back down.

For downhillers on the Strawberry Park lift, Pitchfork and Stacker are fine first runs. Next ride up, peel off to the right and connect to Bachelor Gulch via Primrose. Just before the Bachelor Gulch Express lift, veer off onto Grubstake and down to Bachelor Gulch Village.

Anchored securely at the base, ④ The Ritz-Carlton, Bachelor Gulch is resplendent in its National Park Lodge motif. Give in. Park your skis and wander through the Great Room (give Bachelor, the hotel's mascot Labrador, a pat). Grab a snack at the Daybreak Deli, but don't linger too long; the lift closes at 3:30 (your connection to Intertwine trail back to Beaver Creek).

Plot a comeback tour over a Beaverita at the wild and woolly ⑤ Coyote Café. Return your gear to the shop, take a wistful stroll around the ice rink, and then catch the ECO Transit bus and hightail it back to Vail.

After a quick steam or a swim in the Sonnenalp's heated outdoor pool, head off to a grand finale dinner at ⑥ La Tour Restaurant. Paul Ferzacca, the owner-chef here, has turned this longtime favorite eatery into one of the area's finest restaurants, featuring simple yet distinctive French cuisine. Contemporary preparations—sautéed diver sea scallops with PEI mussel risotto, beef short ribs braised in red wine, veal sweetbreads with wild mushrooms—are irresistible, especially paired with selections from the award-winning wine list.

Content, wander back through the village. Wind up around Don Watson's piano at the King's Club lounge in the Sonnenalp, with a toast to the snow gods, a resolution to return, and a heartfelt chorus of "Rocky Mountain High." **/END/**

Linda Hayes is a Colorado Rocky Mountain resident and a noted food and ski writer.

Photography by Ken Redding

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All information is current at publication. But changes do occur.
Please verify information before your trip.

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