



LARRY PIERCE/STEAMBOAT RESORT

BEYOND ASPEN

Major ski acquisition brings Winter Park, Steamboat to the fore

By Matt Alderton

ASPEN, COLO., IS THE quintessential winter travel destination, and the state's best-known ski resort, the four-mountain Aspen Snowmass, is one reason. Whether your preferred take on cold-weather cavorting involves scenic skiing, succulent suppers, sumptuous spas or five-star shopping, its opulent slopes are a place to partake in it all.

However, Aspen Snowmass isn't

Colorado's only destination for winter fun. In fact, the state has 26 ski areas and resorts, each with distinctive attributes that set it apart.

Two of those, Winter Park Resort in Winter Park, Colo., and Steamboat Resort in Steamboat Springs, Colo., have offerings so special that Henry Crown & Co. — owner of Aspen Snowmass operator Aspen Skiing Co. — recently invested in them. In July, the company joined forces with private equity firm KSL Capital Partners to acquire Winter Park and Steamboat's parent company,

Intrawest Resorts Holdings.

Although Aspen Snowmass will remain independent of Intrawest's holdings, the \$1.5 billion transaction is expected to infuse Winter Park and Steamboat with capital they can use for improvements.

"(KSL) has been pretty vocal ... about the new ownership's intent to invest in our assets at a faster cadence than we might have historically," says Lis de Roziere, vice president of corporate finance and investor

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relations at Intrawest. “There will be some exciting changes.”

Although it’s too early to know what exactly might change, de Roziere vows that at least one thing won’t: Winter Park and Steamboat will retain those special assets and amenities for which they’re known.

STEAMBOAT

Ride Hills and Horses

Steamboat’s natural “Champagne Powder” snow, which is so unique that it has its own trademark, is a popular draw for tourists.

“Our snow averages 6 percent water content compared with an average of

15 percent at other locations,” says Loryn Kasten, Steamboat spokeswoman. “Powder skis and snowboards float atop the snow, giving skiers and riders the feeling of weightlessness.”

It’s not just the snow that sets Steamboat apart, however. It’s also its culture.

“We started as a ranching community, and we are still a ranching community,” says Kasten. “We’re not a contrived cowboy town. We really do have people who make their living as cowboys in our community, and that creates a very genuine Western aura that people like.”

Of course, where there are cowboys, there are horses. At Steamboat in winter,

the equines lead sleigh ride dinners that depart from the Haymaker lodge. Guests can enjoy specialty drinks and pre-ride appetizers before embarking on a 25-minute excursion that concludes with a three-course dinner. Off the resort, Kasten recommends Saddleback Ranch, an 8,000-acre, fourth-generation, family-owned working cattle ranch where guests are treated to 30-minute sleigh rides followed by dinner, a roping lesson and dancing.

Saddleback charges \$90 for adults, \$60 for children 6 to 12, and \$30 for children under 5. Steamboat’s 2017-2018 prices

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GETTING THERE

STEAMBOAT: Fly into Yampa Valley Regional Airport in Hayden, Colo. After you pick up your luggage, visit **Black Tie Ski Rentals**, which has a booth in the baggage claim area during ski season. Black Tie will hook you up with a personal ski concierge who will custom-fit and hand-deliver to your hotel all the ski gear and equipment you need for your time on the slopes.



Steamboat

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Winter Park

CARL FREY/WINTER PARK RESORT; PROVIDED BY DENVER INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

GETTING THERE

WINTER PARK: Fly into Denver International Airport. While you're there, relieve some of the stress from your journey by seeking out the airport's **Canine Airport Therapy Squad** (CATS), which consists of volunteer pet owners who roam the airport with trained and insured dogs dressed in special "Pet Me" vests. Available for hugs, petting and pictures, the dogs promise to make you smile even when winter storms delay your flight and your arrival at the slopes.

are expected to be announced later this year.

WINTER PARK

Board America's Only City-to-Slope Train

One of Winter Park's greatest assets is its proximity to Denver. While the city of Aspen is three hours and 160 miles from Denver, Winter Park is just 80 minutes and 66 miles. That can make a huge difference during peak season when traffic in and out of the park can add hours to a trip.

That's if you drive. As of January 2017, you no longer have to because Winter Park reinstated the Winter Park Express, a ski train that brought skiers to the resort from Denver for nearly 100 years until its third-party operator ceased service in 2009.

"We started as a ranching community, and we are still a ranching community."

— Loryn Kasten, Steamboat Resort

"Winter Park was created because of its proximity to the railroad track. So, the train has always been part of our DNA," says Steve Hurlbert, resort spokesman.

Winter Park was able to revive the beloved rail service upon finding a new, trusted operator — Amtrak. The trip takes two hours one-way and leaves Denver in pre-dawn darkness, arriving at Winter Park just as the lifts are opening.

"It's the only service in the country that

takes people directly from a train station to the slopes; you can be on your skis and on the lift a minute after the train pulls in," says Marc Magliari, Amtrak spokesman. "It enables people to avoid what can be a pretty awful slog up to the resort on I-70 and U.S. 40, particularly on a weekend morning when there can be hours and hours of going not very far, not very fast."

In February, Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper told USA TODAY, "This ski

train is the only place in America, the only place in the world, where you can get out of your hotel bed, walk over to the train station, get on a train, and the train lets you off at the ski lift. ... It's as good as it gets anywhere in the world."

Denver recently launched a new light-rail public-transit service, the A Line, to Denver International Airport. It gives visitors access to the slopes not only from the rail, but also from the runway.

"You can fly into Denver, stay a night downtown, then come up to the ski resort — without having to worry about renting a car," Hurlbert says.

USA TODAY reporter Trevor Hughes contributed to this story.