

the new frontiers TRAVEL WINTER 2006

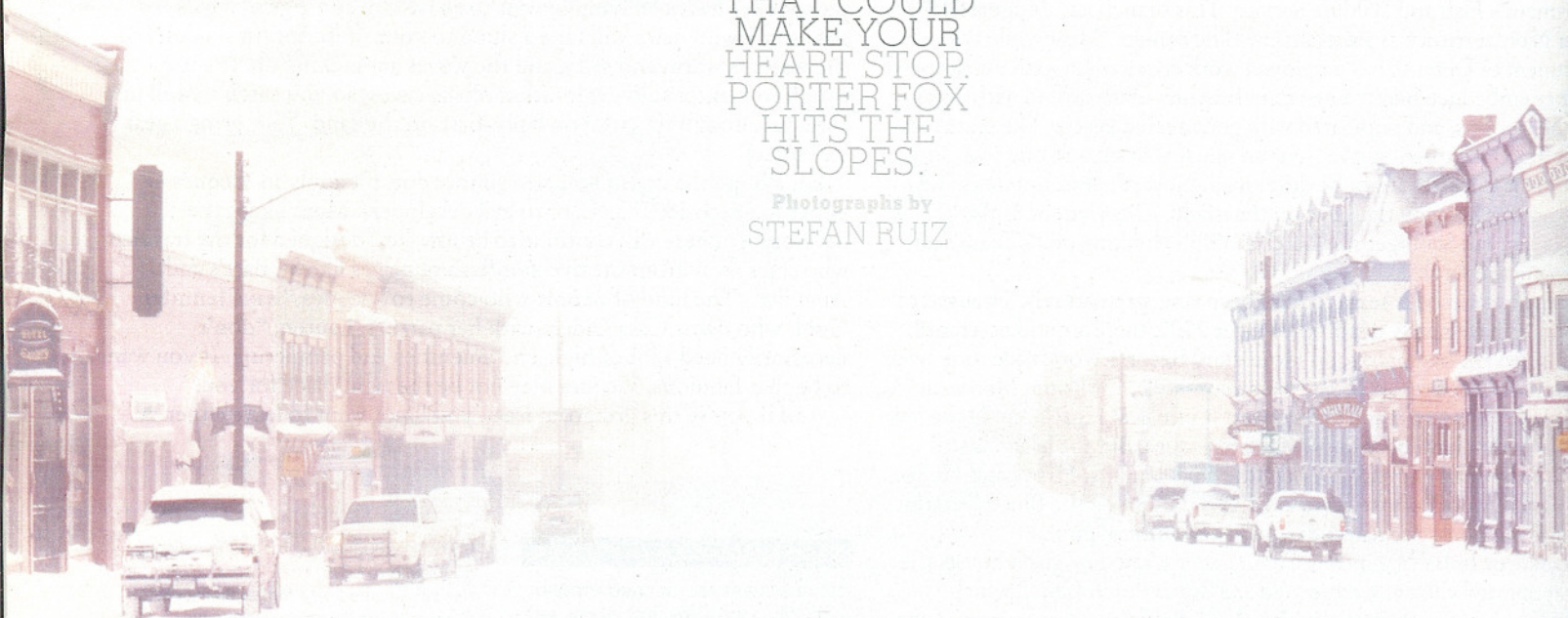
Going wild in Lapland



# POWDER TRIP

SILVERTON  
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MINING TOWN  
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PORTER FOX  
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SLOPES.

Photographs by  
STEFAN RUIZ





A

aron Brill watches calmly as the Silverton Mountain ski patrol sets a stick of dynamite on a nearby slope. A half-dozen snow-covered ridges ripple in either direction from our vantage, about 500 yards from the blast site and 12,000 feet above sea level. Just downslope stand five of Silverton's expert skiers, all anxious to drop into the yawning snowfield beneath them and all a bit unsure how best to brace for the impending explosion.

Brill edges his snowboard into the hill and gestures for us to cover our ears. As the owner of America's first do-it-yourself backcountry ski resort with his wife, Jenny, he's accustomed to these nerve-rattling moments. The patrol prepares to detonate and clear a potential slide, and Brill offers this advice: "It's going to be big."

And it is. Almost as loud as the explosion Silverton made in the ski world when it opened six years ago in southwestern Colorado. After a trip in 1992 to New Zealand's public ski fields, where clubs throw a rope tow and a hut on the side of a mountain and call it a resort, the Brills decided to defy the American winter resort trend of high-speed lifts and billion-dollar, Disneyesque theme villages, and to create Silverton. "I was just impressed by the amount of rawness to the skiing," says the 35-year-old Aaron. The Brills' concept is simple: pure skiing for pure skiers. The idea behind it is that cheaper prices and a spectacular spray of ridges, couloirs and jagged peaks are more important to serious riders than slope-side massages and gourmet dining.

Silverton's ungroomed atmosphere has its own exclusivity; ruggedness keeps the average ski bunny sticking to kiddie slopes elsewhere. There are no marked trails — the only lift is a 1973 Yan double chair that the couple bought from Mammoth Mountain in California for \$25,000 — and the snowpack in the temperate San Juan Mountains makes the area highly susceptible to avalanches. Most of the season, every group has to ski with a guide, carry avalanche gear and sign a waiver that says they are skiing at their own risk. Some of the outlying trails require up to 40 minutes of hiking. Even the après ski is bare-bones. The base lodge is a simple Quonset hut equipped with a few sofas, school-bus seats and a keg. The town, six miles down a dirt road, maintains a laid-back vibe as well, with kitschy souvenir shops, Old West saloons and locals moseying along Greene Street.

Despite the extreme terrain and the lack of amenities, Silverton has been sold out nearly every weekend since it opened. This season, which started in late September with 36 inches of new snow, the Bureau of Land Management granted the Brills a new permit to allow up to 475 skiers a day, from the previous limit of 80 people. What makes this all the more remarkable is that the ski industry has been stagnant since the late 70's; in

the last 23 years, 35 percent of all United States ski resorts have closed because of increasingly expensive overhead, like fuel and insurance costs, as well as unpredictable snowfall and not enough new skiers. Large resort destinations like Mammoth Mountain and Aspen have all but given up on depending solely on profits from ticket sales and have shifted their attention to real estate expansion to lure renters and second-home buyers.

Mammoth's billion-dollar development plan includes more than a dozen new restaurants and a spa featuring yoga camps and motivational speakers like the wellness guru Dr. Andrew Weil. Another developer recently announced plans to demolish condominiums at the bankrupt Elk Meadows ski resort in southern Utah and build a \$3.5 billion members-only resort, where in warmer weather you can tee off at the Jack Nicklaus-designed golf course. At Wolf Creek in Colorado, a 10,000-person city is being planned adjacent to the mountain's base, even though the resort opposes it. (Last May, United States Senator Ken Salazar pushed for a congressional investigation of Wolf Creek village's development company, headed by Billy Joe "Red" McCombs, on allegations of collusion with the United States Forest Service.)

The result is that formerly hardscrabble ski hamlets like Telluride and Sun Valley, which were popular in the 60's, have become glitzy shells of what they once were. Shimmering minks and 50,000-square-foot chalets have invaded the hills where mountain freaks and antelopes once roamed.

For passionate skiers like Bruce McQuistan, Silverton, with its anti-development model, is a utopia. McQuistan is the consummate ski bum, having spent most of his life chasing snow around the world. When Silverton opened, the Seattle-based computer programmer scooped up one of Silverton's lifetime ski passes, as well as a nearby bungalow. McQuistan knew the skiing would be exhilarating — Silverton receives more than 400 inches of annual snowfall — but he was also keen on being a part of a new archetype in American skiing. "There's too much real estate

development, too much focus on the wrong stuff in the West — catering to ease instead of challenge," he says. "I see resorts spending a lot of money on fancy lodges when a shelter would be enough. And we're not froufrou types."

As we unload at the icy, 12,300-foot summit, he points out some "natural amenities" that, in his opinion, elevate Silverton high above its posh brethren. Dozens of snow-filled gullies plummet 3,000 vertical feet from a granite ridge to the valley floor. More gradual snowfields begin midmountain and spill into steep glades near the bottom. A ring of snaggletoothed peaks extends beyond the resort. The terrain is awe-inspiring — comparable to only a few of the best resorts in North America, like Whistler and Squaw Valley — and certainly the most



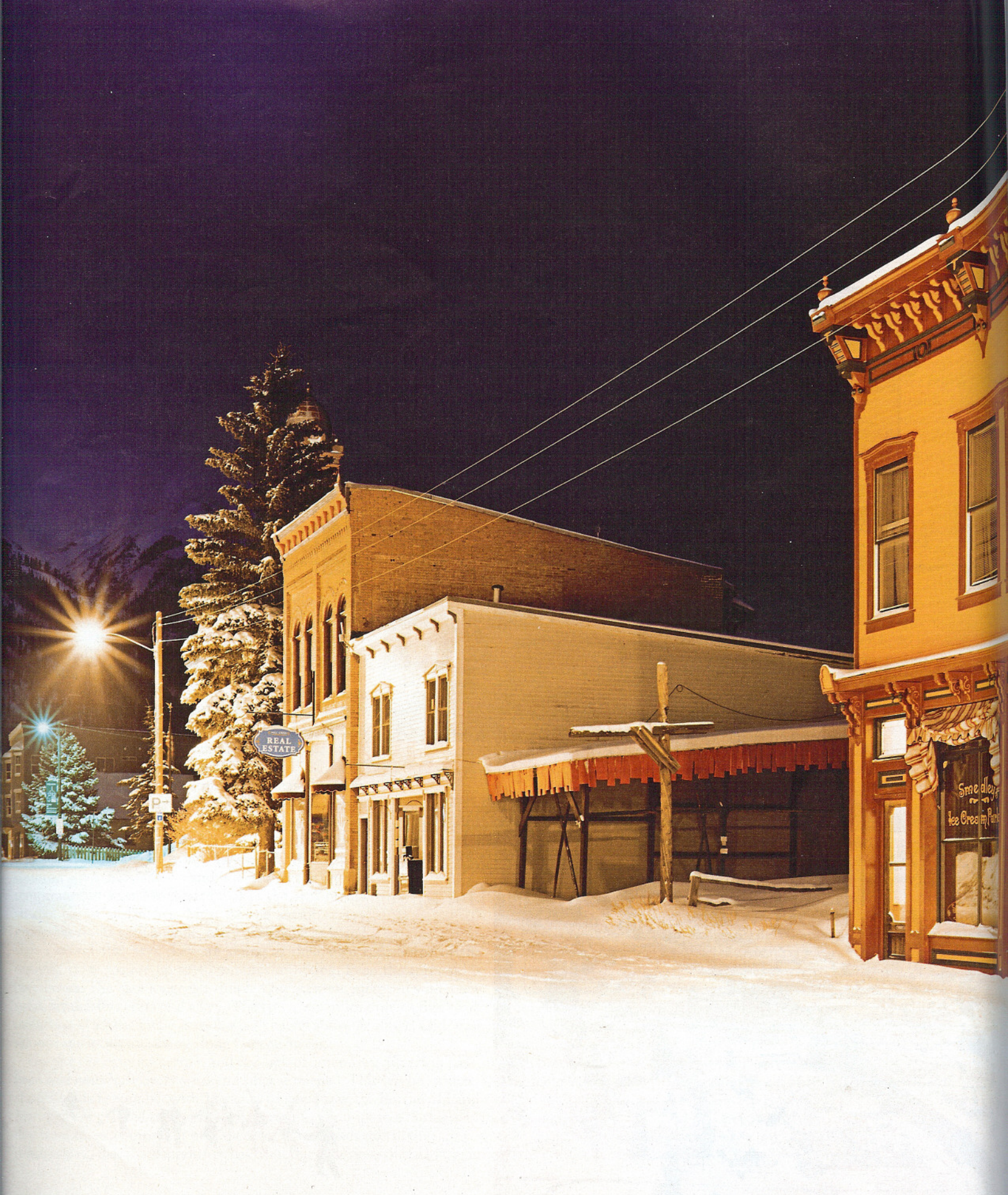
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**COLD FRONT** ABOVE: THE GRAND IMPERIAL HOTEL, A RELIC OF THE TOWN'S VICTORIAN DAYS, IS A GATHERING PLACE FOR LOCALS AND SKIERS. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: SOME SILVERTON ENTHUSIASTS HAVE BOUGHT LOCAL VICTORIAN HOUSES LIKE THESE TWO; SKIERS TRAVEL IN GROUPS TO OUTLYING TRAILS; AN AERIAL VIEW OF THE FORMER SILVER-MINING TOWN. PREVIOUS SPREAD, LEFT: THE TOWN OFFERS LITTLE IN THE WAY OF ASPEN-STYLE AMENITIES. RIGHT: ON THE BACKCOUNTRY HILLS, SKIERS MUST CARRY AVALANCHE GEAR AND SIGN A WAIVER SAYING THEY ARE SKIING AT THEIR OWN RISK.









**FORECAST CALLS FOR SNOW** SILVERTON RECEIVES MORE THAN 400 INCHES OF SNOW A YEAR. OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT: THE SILVERTON FOUNDERS AARON AND JENNY BRILL (SEATED THIRD AND FOURTH FROM LEFT) WITH OTHER SKIERS AT THE MOUNTAIN-BASE LODGE; A FORMER TOWN RESIDENT HANGS OUT AT THE GRAND IMPERIAL HOTEL.





challenging in Colorado. As we strap skis to our packs to hike the last 800 of Storm Peak's 13,487 feet (the highest inbounds resort summit in America), McQuistan says he hopes the new permit won't change things much.

You'd be hard-pressed to find much happening in town the next morning, an hour before the lift opens. As the sun climbs over the San Juan Mountains, a teenager races his pickup down the main drag.

The Brown Bear Cafe offers a \$4.99 breakfast, which only the locals can finish. Fine dining consists of prime rib at the Pickle Barrel restaurant, and the fanciest accommodation is the Grand Imperial Hotel, a Victorian pile. At the Avalanche cafe, there are vague signs of gentrification. A fence made of discarded skis leads to the front door of the two-room coffee shop, where a sign instructs customers to keep dogs tied on the porch. Inside, the magazine stand is stacked with back issues of Harper's and the fiction quarterly Zoetrope: All-Story. Jay Canode, the 34-year-old owner, says that the challenging nature of Silverton skiing acts as a natural deterrent to expansion. But, he adds, growth will eventually come. "The idea is not to sell your soul but set up situations," he says. "It's a matter of zoning and whatnot, thinking ahead. Do you want to be looking at a big house on the hill or not?"

The next day, back on the mountain, McQuistan skates across the summit ridge as we traverse for the final run of my trip. Aaron leads on his snowboard, a grease-stained North Face down jacket strapped to his pack. He finds a powder stash on a steep, swooping snowfield, rides ahead and waits for us on a cat track 2,000 vertical feet below.

It hasn't snowed in two weeks, but the slope is blanketed in boot-top powder. There isn't a person in sight, just me and the hiss of snow under my skis. That night, over a bottle of pinot noir at Pasta La Vista, McQuistan explains that this unsullied scene is hard to find in America anymore. And one that inspires him to help keep one of the West's last authentic ski resorts exactly as it is.

"We like to think of it as being done for the love," he says. "The love of a place, the love of an economic idea and the love of skiing." ■

## Essentials Silverton, Colo.

**GETTING THERE** Several major airlines, including Continental and American, serve the two nearest airports, **Durango-La Plata** and **Montrose**. From there, it's about 60 miles of white-knuckle driving to the town.

**HOTELS** **Grand Imperial Hotel** A local institution since 1882, with 40 Victorian-style rooms and an outdoor hot tub. 1219 Greene Street; (800)341-3340; [www.grandimperialhotel.com](http://www.grandimperialhotel.com); doubles from \$60. **Inn of the Rockies at the Historic Alma House** Turn-of-the-century inn with an on-site spa. 220 East 10th Street; (800)267-5336; [www.innoftherockies.com](http://www.innoftherockies.com); doubles from \$85.

**RESTAURANTS** **Brown Bear Cafe** The place for cheap, hearty fare (biscuits and gravy, steak dinners). 1129 Greene Street; (970)387-5630; entrees \$5 to \$16. **Pasta La Vista** Basic Italian dishes like spaghetti and

meatballs and pizza. 1225 Blair Street; (970)387-5352; entrees \$10 to \$17. **Pickle Barrel** Family-style restaurant set in a historic stone building. 1304 Greene Street; (970)387-5713; entrees \$8 to \$25.

**SKIING** The mountain is open Thursday to Sunday, November to April, from 8:45 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Advance reservations are needed only for guided skiing (\$99 to \$129 a day guided; \$49 a day unguided). (970)387-5706; [www.silvertonmountain.com](http://www.silvertonmountain.com).

## Plus More Grass-Roots Skiing

**Cannon Mountain** Bode Miller learned to ski at this classic New England spot. Franconia, N.H.; (603)823-8800; [www.cannonmt.com](http://www.cannonmt.com); open November to April, 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.; \$54 a day. Lovetts Inn, located nearby, is a historic 1784 bed-and-breakfast that has played host to the Kennedys and Bette Davis (603-823-7761; doubles from \$125).

**Mount Baker** Has an average snowfall of 647 inches. Bellingham, Wash.; (360)734-6771;

[www.mtbaker.us](http://www.mtbaker.us); open November to April, 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.; \$32 to \$40 a day. The Inn at Mount Baker is a bed-and-breakfast with great views of the mountain (360-599-1776; doubles from \$130). **Red Mountain** The best glade and tree skiing in the Pacific Northwest, Rossland, British Columbia, Canada; (877)969-7669; [www.redresort.com](http://www.redresort.com); open December to April, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.; \$52 a day. The Ram's Head Inn is a European-style lodge and a four minute walk from the mountain (877-267-4323; [www.ramshead.bc.ca](http://www.ramshead.bc.ca); doubles from \$135). **Turner Mountain** Small volunteer-operated resort. Libby, Mont.; (406)293-4317; [www.skiturner.com](http://www.skiturner.com); open December to April, 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.; \$26 a day. The Kootenai River Guest Cabins and Flyshop has full-service units with shuttle service to the mountain (406-293-7578; doubles from \$75).