

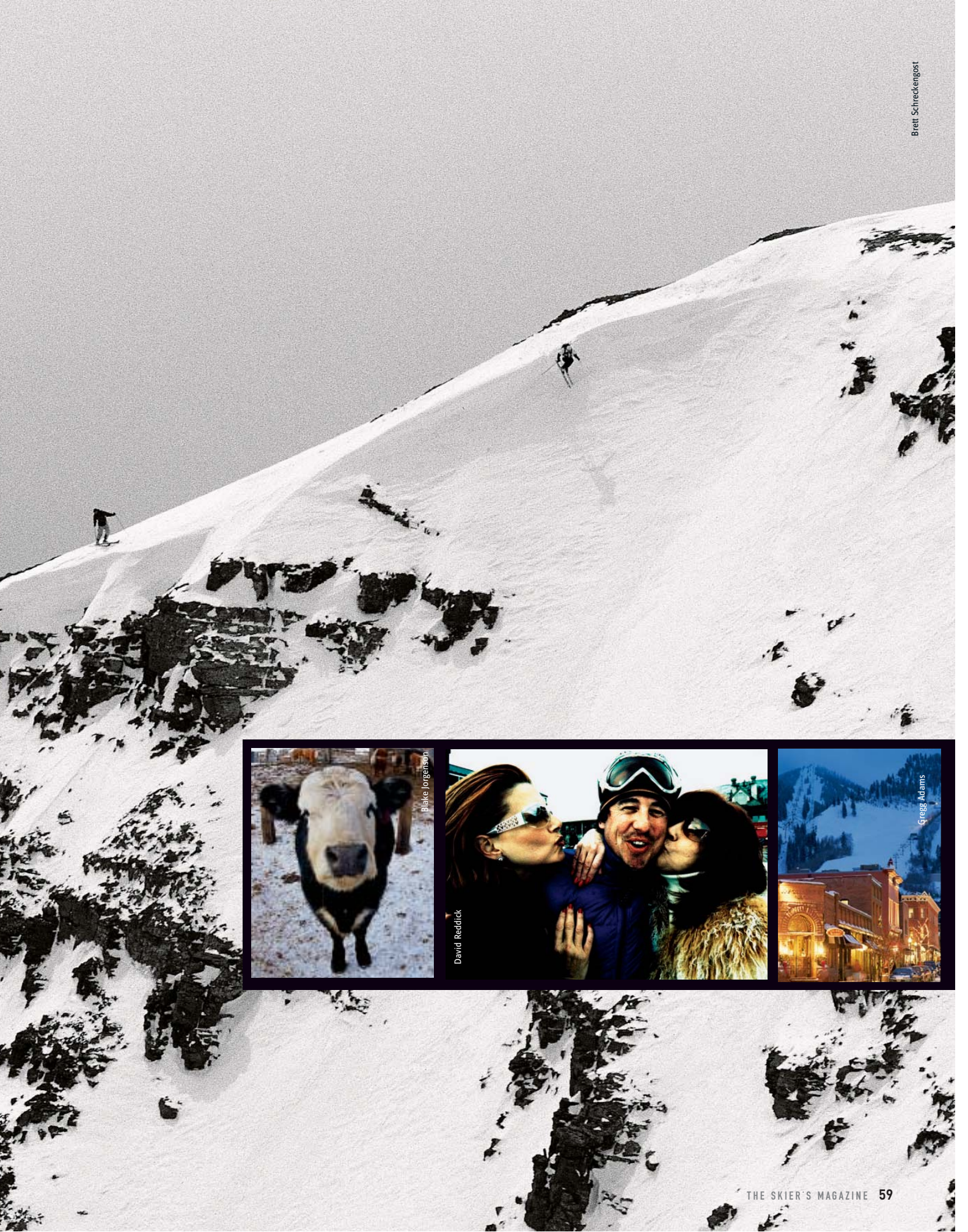


ASPEN eXtremes

THE WEIRDEST SKI TOWN IN AMERICA

BY PORTER FOX

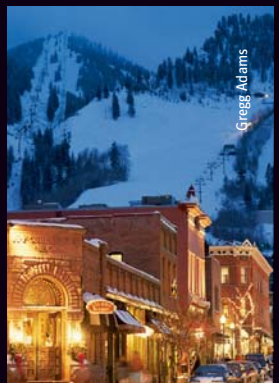




Blake Jorgenson



David Readick



Gregg Adams



here are certain things you do in certain places. Like in Venice, you ride gondolas through the canals while fat men sing in a language you don't understand. In Switzerland, you dip scraps of food in melted cheese. In Vegas, you pay people to dismantle your life. In the wealthiest ski town in America, in the morning, you eat ribs with breakfast.

And so I am. And they're good. Why shouldn't they be? This is ranch country. Cattle amble through verdant pastures; the great Colorado Rockies water the land every spring with deep, green rivers. This is the Wild West, as Teddy Roosevelt and Wild Bill envisioned it. This is cowboy country, where heifers outnumber people. I guess that's why the person next to me is wearing that enormous hat with the rhinestones running up over the brim like a troop of glittering ants. Maybe that explains the woman sitting next to him, mummified in denim.

But what about this house? This 56,000-square-foot domicile sitting on the ridge like a cedar-shingled Wal-Mart? Is this a ranch? Is this where cowboys mingle with ski bums and tip back Bud Lights at the end of the day? Where do the cattle stay? In the spa? Is that why these ribs are so tender?

There is something askew here. This is ski town U.S.A., with the old silver mines; the rusting F-150s; Ajax, Aspen Highlands, and Snowmass, all world-class resorts within a 15-minute drive; and the endless peaks that light up like fireworks when the sun levels on the horizon. I've been on the hill, yesterday with 6 inches of fresh snow on slopes that wind and dive like only western trails can, and there *are* skiers here. Good ones, who know how to link tight turns through a gap and then drop the hammer on broad, steep bowls. But this is not ski town U.S.A. This is the fourth richest real estate market in America—which is, incidentally, the richest community on Mother Earth. This town is to the top 1 percent of money-gatherers in the world what Denny's is to Middle America: a little slice of heaven.

And, like Denny's, there is this conundrum—a very appealing, slightly addictive product with questionable nutritional value. The questions linger. How

does a sudden influx of wealth and fame affect a ski town? Does the spotlight chip away at the very tenets the community was founded on? Does the incursion of money infect the sublime ski town mentality that its citizens are living life *exactly* how they want? Do the bejeweled newcomers affect the integrity of the resort that was founded not so much on *who* lived there, but *what* lived there—namely, mountains and rivers and heaps of snow seven months out of the year?

These are the questions running through my barbecue-doped mind—while Jack Nicholson roams the snowy streets somewhere in his New York Yankees hat; while Robin Williams says something funny to someone and then doesn't stop talking for an hour. While the ski bums—hardly noticeable, yet vitally integral to this alpine hamlet where the average casa rings in at \$2.7 million—comb out their dreadlocks and walk to the lift to push Gore-Tex, I sit in Rusty's Hickory House greasy spoon, licking my fingers from the best half-rack of baby-back ribs I've ever had and consider how to go about discovering the soul of an alleged soulless place.

This is the week to do it, if it is to be done. Everyone is here. That's what the locals say. Not in the rib joint; it's too small for that. But in town. In *Aaaahhh*spen, as they lockjaw on the Upper East Side, for the U.S. Comedy Festival. But everyone is not who you might think. Here, everyone isn't a quantitative term so much as a qualitative one—referring to a small slice of humanity who no longer relies on society for their well-being, but conversely, society relies on them. Steve Martin, for example. Mike Myers, Ted Turner, Jimmy Buffet, George Lucas, Robert McNamara, Prince Fucking Bandar bin Sultan bin Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia.

They're all here, because "everyone who is anyone has spent time in the valley," says 87-year-old Aspen icon Klaus Obermeyer. He spends his days outrunning the ski patrol on Ajax's groomers, and nights dancing with socialites at parties around the valley. Gary Cooper once asked the Austrian racer at the Hotel Jerome, "What've you got that I don't got?"

THIS IS WHERE STEVE MARTIN PERFORMED HIS FIRST STAND-UP GIGS; WHERE IVANA TRUMP SCRAPPED WITH MARLA MAPLES OVER DONALD; WHERE KATO KAELIN MET NICOLE BROWN SIMPSON; WHERE CLAUDE LONGET SHOT SKI SENSATION SPIDER SABICH AND THEN MARRIED HER ATTORNEY FROM THE MURDER CASE.



Highlands Ridge



Patrolling the top of Highlands Bowl.



Every once in a while, a hot dog finds a bun.

Tomas Zuccareno

Tomas Zuccareno

Tomas Zuccareno



Mattias Fredriksson

"Two riders were approaching, and the wind began to howl."
Sverre Liliequist, dropping in on the Jimi shrine.



The Elk Mountains: Reason enough to ponder your existence.



Reason enough to stop pondering all together.
Kilfor Berg, Snowmass.

Tomas Zuccareno

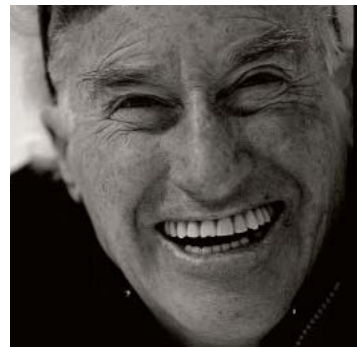


Brett Schreierengost

Obermeyer smiled; a girl fainted; and another quip was added to Aspen's celebrated history of one-liners.

And a long history it is. This is the town that uncovered the largest silver nugget in the world near the turn of the last century. This is the site of Aspen godfather Walter Paepcke's campaign for cultural reform in the 1940s—a vision he dubbed the "Aspen Idea" that brought together intellectuals through architecture, art, music, and philosophy. This is where Steve Martin performed his first stand-up gigs; where Ivana Trump scrapped with Marla Maples over Donald; where Kato Kaelin met Nicole Brown Simpson; where Claudine Longet shot ski sensation Spider Sabich and then married her attorney from the murder case.

But there's no need to harp on the past. We have right now, this very second, outside on a beautiful Sunday morning at the Ajax Tavern. There are more



David Reddick

Do you feel faint? Klaus Obermeyer.

fully, no sudden movements, no direct eye contact.

"He's just a little boy in a man's costume," the second one says. Stop, observe, appreciate—the fêted Aspen cougar lurks. This pair is the real thing,

"THERE WERE ENTIRE HOUSES OF GIRLS!" SCOTTY SAYS. HE'S BACK THERE NOW; HE'S T.J. BURKE COURTING BRYCE. "AND YOU JUST WENT OVER THERE!"

people in the bar than on the chairlift, most wearing a combination of cowboy-hat-fur-rhinestone-ski-pant. The clothing choices here are stunningly, and ironically, similar to a certain class of people whom most of Aspen's patrons exploited to amass their wealth. Namely big hair, bigger sunglasses, tight clothes, and colors that someone was fired for in 1978. The sight brings to mind a Wal-Mart in Ohio, or Russia.

"Dang!" The fast, high-pitched voice resonates across the bar. Small animals and 20-somethings perk their ears and freeze. Approach the subject care-

not the cheesy Atlantic City species, but the kind that wears the skins of animals and looks at you not so much like you are a human being but rather a delectable little slice of sashimi, waiting to be eaten. They are sweet and talkative, downright lovable, and surreptitiously dangerous.

The first won't tell me how old she is, neither will the second. But I'm reasonably sure they *look* 15 years younger than they actually are. The rundown is this: Gucci glasses, Tibetan lamb Ralph Lauren cashmere, Louis Féraud fur (one of 22 in the closet). The completed picture is bedecked, festooned, striking.

There's the Dead. Then there's the just plain grateful.

Number One: "I resent havin' to cull through the married men."

Number Two: "I think it's the economy."

Number One: "You don't just walk in here and get accepted, ya know."

Number Two: "It's the gene pool."

Number One: "It's a lifestyle."

Number Two: "She hit that on the head."

It's precisely at the moment Number One claims the key to living in Aspen is "Emergen-C" that the pendulum swings and you start to think that maybe this town has lost some of its moral fiber. As the sun makes little rainbows through the assortment of mimosas and Bloody Marys on the table, you wonder if Aspen has indeed been watered down. You wonder if the Californians and Chicagoans and New Yorkers have infested it like carpenter ants, burrowing holes in its foundation with their dreams of what the town *should* be like.

But you can't be sure. You have to visit the other side. The dark side, the underbelly—where the dishwashers and taxi drivers, and anyone who really gives a shit about not missing one powder day all year long saddles up.

A familiar smell wafts up the stairs as you descend. Old beer. Carpeting. Plaster. They've somehow fit 17 vintage video games into the back of the bar and as you eavesdrop around their greenish glow, the same conversation repeats itself: "What in the fuck are we doing here?"

The bar may as well be empty as far as the talisman of the Roaring Fork Tavern (RFT) is concerned. But it's not—something that concerns the 40-odd patrons standing around the bar, waiting for Scotty to pour them a drink while he preaches about the old days.

"You could rent a three-bedroom for \$300 a month," he says. He pours me another kamikaze with warm Gordon's vodka and something that looks, and tastes, like a permutation of limeade and Comet. He's lived in Aspen for almost 30 years, at the RFT for most of that tenure, and is trying to explain the difference between now and then—now being now and then being some time between 1964 and 1981 when Marvin Davis bought the Aspen Ski Company (along with Twentieth Century Fox) and began the metamorphosis to *Aaahhhspen*. "Then," he says, "everybody had a house."

"Everyone," he repeats. "Ev-er-ee-one. Get it? We lived here; this was our town. We ran things back then." Scotty's excited, and I see why. I wrap my arm around the shot for fear he's going to take it back and visualize the descriptions. There were parties back then, he says, every night, all night. The town was filled with miner's shacks, not a mansion in sight. It was the second ski town in America, right after Sun Valley, and the honorable citizens of back-water Aspen skied all day, every day: powder, bumps, you name it.

The pendulum swings. Not because of the stories of what *used* to be, there isn't a ski town in America that wasn't better *back then*. It's the energy. The vibe. Scotty's got it. And so does half the bar that is now listening, more than listening, chiming in. These citizens—skiers—are for real, and as much

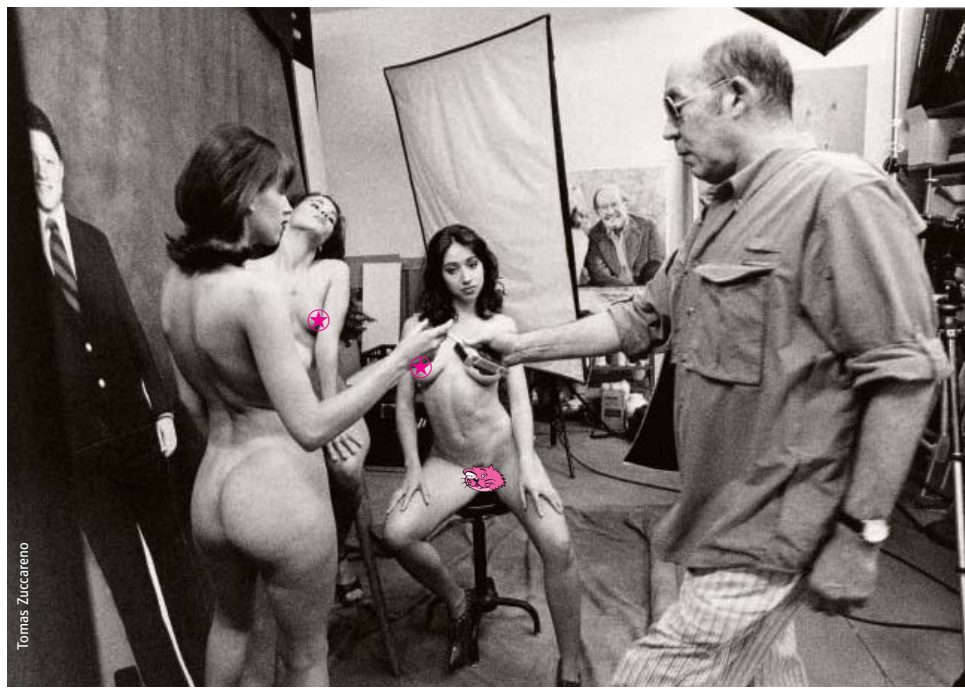
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When the going gets weird, the weird move to Aspen. Hunter S. Thompson and Slick Willy entertaining some local "entertainers."



Chris Davenport, Kid 'n' Play style at Snowmass.

Tomas Zuccareno



Tomas Zuccareno



Thomas Zucareno

Aspen is famous for its white lines. Snowmann should be to.

LIKE DENNY'S, ASPEN IS A CONUNDRUM—A VERY APPEALING, SLIGHTLY ADDICTIVE PRODUCT WITH QUESTIONABLE NUTRITIONAL VALUE.

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as things might have changed, they're still here. The more we talk and the more I prowl over the next five days, the more I realize—they're everywhere.

There's Mike and Andrea at the Highlands who've survived scratching out a living in the "hole" and skiing 100 days a year (for 18 of them) with "pizza and flowers." There's Craig Morehouse and his girlfriend who scored a rental amidst a cluster of mountain mansions and spend most nights spinning vinyl in the loft while fat flakes spiral onto



Matt Power

Walking the dog
Aaahhhspen style.

their porch. There are others: John Doyle, Andre Wille, Billy Madsen.

Scotty's arm begins to twitch as he talks. People don't want drinks anymore; they are drinking *him* in, gulping down his stories. He leans over the bar and hisses a final volley in my face. "There were entire houses of *girls!*" he says. He's back there now; he's T.J. Burke courting Bryce. "And you just went *over there!*"

The pendulum swings again. Snow collects outside and a few stragglers pick their way down Ajax's flanks in the waning light. The bottom feeders shoulder skis and head to the RFT, the moneyed to Little Nell's where furs collect as quickly as gossip around walnut chairs and tables. A steady tide of people flow in and out of the comedy shows at the St. Regis hotel, all of them supporting Paepcke's dream with their wallets. Everyone is here; everything is here. The town is a virtual Avalon under buzzing gaslights and leftover Christmas bulbs. A couple mingles through the streets and looks at

each other and the mountains above them and ponders their lives in a way they never have before.

And this is what you *do* here. This is why these ski towns *exist*. That is why Kevin Costner lands his GIII at the Aspen airport; why Scotty breathes second-hand smoke all night while slinging bottom-shelf cocktails. That is why this place feels like home to the 30,000 people who winter here. Because it sits at 8,000 feet and jagged mountain ridges circle it like a bear trap and when you are that couple walking under the lights you understand—if not why—then at least how long you're here on Earth. And you start to make plans.

There are skiers here, but not like you find at other resorts. There are the pros and bums, but there are also diehards like 70-year-old brothers Jack and Don Crawford who organize expeditions to Morocco and Europe every year and bought into the L.A.-Sun Valley ski train when it threatened to go under in the '60s. There is the usual crop of up-and-coming jibbers, but there's also 89-year-old Dick Durrance who leaves his assisted-care facility in Carbondale to practice the technique he helped shape on the hill 60 years ago.

There's Mike and Andrea, and they are probably watching a movie right now over a \$6 bottle of wine. There are the cougars who are closing in on their prey as the midnight hour approaches, and Jack and Don who are just hitting their stride. There are all these things at once, and the sum of it is Aspen at full tilt. They're all here; they've all survived; they're all dependent on one another; and if that doesn't make this a soulful ski town, then there isn't one anywhere in the world.

There are just a few more Austin Healeys here, and Frank Lloyd Wright rip-offs, and Rolexes. There are a couple more bottles of Cristal next to the hot tub, but there are also epiphanies, and passion for mountains, and steep snowfields that make millionaires and ski bums ponder their existence side-by-side as they slice through the snow. It's all here, even ribs with your breakfast if you want. So you eat them, like everyone else, and then push your plate away because this business of who is a skier and who is not, about what makes a ski town—or a soul—and what does not, is not a question to be posed in a place like this. This is a place to ski. ❄️