

Est. 1878

RUSHING
T-RIDE

THE SECOND COMING OF AMERICA'S
GREATEST BACKCOUNTRY RESORT

BY PORTER FOX



Sam Cohen, a modern day prospector. PHOTO: LEE COHEN



"Like Babe on acid....," only much better.
Brad Foley in Mega Bowl.
PHOTO: CHASON RUSSELL

Down on the prairie, among the squares of fenced-in ranchland, dried-up creek beds and blue highways reaching to the state line, is the Colorado most Coloradans know. It's not down-at-the-heels, but not exactly prospering either. The 14,000-foot mountains the state is famous for are mere charcoal smudges on the southern sky. The homes are one-story with plastic roofs, plastic patio furniture and broken-down cars filling the driveway. This is mining country, farming country, government contract country, the taxi driver drawls as he pulls away from Montrose Regional Airport. For the next 30 minutes, pickup trucks and mini-malls rule the road—Ford, Chevy, Coors, Dairy Queen, the Centennial R.V. Park.

Then the road lifts...and things begin to change.

Cliff walls hem inward as the canyon deepens. Scarring from glaciers that carved the San Juan Mountains two million years ago score the walls. Homes up here are multi-storied, sided with natural wood. Most have wide, pitched windows that gape at the rimed peaks just now emerging above the canyon walls.

We've entered the high country, home of the late-20th century phenomenon known as Mountain Living—the latest refuge of American aristocracy. Where these hills once represented danger and death to prospectors trying to eke out a life, elevation is now equated with wealth and status. And nowhere in the Continental U.S. has the upward migration been more evident, or hotly contested, than the tiny box canyon opening before us—the little jerkwater called Telluride, that transmogrified in the 1970s into the West's hippie-est ski town, then morphed again decades later into one of the wealthiest zip codes in the country.

Edward Abbey's 1960s essay, "Telluride Blues—A Hatchet Job," lamented the town's first displacement—of mining families ousted by a flood of ski bums toting Rossignol Stratos and Marx-Engels readers. (His suggestion to native Telluridians: "Call in the cowboys from the outback every Saturday night and have them beat the living shit out of these long-haired weirdoes.") In 1987, Rasta Stevie's diatribe in *The Blizzard of Aahhhs*—ironically, on how Telluride's rich were now driving the

There's a lot of new in Telluride. But its history and mountains will always be the first draw. Just ask Andy Bagnall, the skier exiting the San Joaquin Couloir. His partners Dan Hehir and Dave Marinowski watch from above. PHOTO: GREG VON DOERSTEN



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE TELLURIDE HISTORICAL MUSEUM

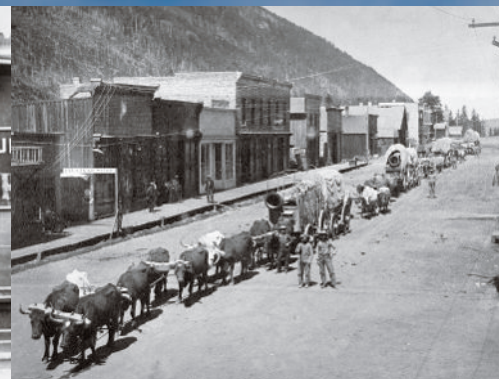


PHOTO: J. MEISLAHN



No need for a flashback. Today's Telluride is still about the good times. Skier: Chason Russell PHOTO: LEE COHEN

hippies out of town—became a ski bum mantra, and the town was slugged as a torchbearer for the struggle against gentrification in the West.

Throughout it all, the thing that seemed to fade into the background was the phenomenon that got everyone hot about the place to begin with—the 4,000 vertical feet of Alps-style terrain jutting straight up from town, graced with 25 feet of snow each winter. Trophy homes of glitterati like Tom Cruise, Ralph Lauren and Oliver Stone—each one miraculously bigger than the next, like a Gatsby-esque pissing contest—distracted the nation's skiers from epic descents on Palmyra Peak and Bear Creek Canyon. Which is to say, in the public eye, To-Hell-You-Ride got soft. That is, until a new marshal came to town.

Unlike the infamous Everett Morrow, the sheriff who got his kicks in the 1970s busting hippies for smoking pot and planting under-age drinkers in local bars so he could shut them down, Dave Riley arrived as Telluride's new CEO in 2007 with a clipboard, soul patch and an eye for the backcountry. For three years since, the man has opened more than 350 acres of jaw-dropping sidecountry, increased access to thousands of acres of backcountry and added a lift to access it in a purposeful campaign to restore T-Ride's reputation as one of the baddest mountains in the West.

In a town where social progress has long been the agenda—yes, in the 1970s everyone tripped on acid on the same day—Riley's changes haven't always been welcome. And a litany of challenges may well derail his initiative. But before they do, one thing is for certain. The Telluride of 2010 is skiing like the biggest of America's big mountains. And if things go according to plan, it may soon be the greatest backcountry ski resort in the country.

The town of Telluride has always been hard to get to. In the old days, when the Idarado Mining Company owned the town, mountains, roads and just about everything else east of Bridal Veil Falls, it could take weeks to make the journey from nearby Silverton or Rico. When Joseph Zoline arrived in 1968 from Beverly Hills—to develop a “world class ski resort”—the nearest airport was 130 miles away in Grand Junction, Colorado. The nearest population center: Denver, 325 miles northeast.

But visionaries are obstacle-blind, and the valley's skiing potential was too great to ignore—steep forested glades, a caldera-like bowl lined with cirques and chutes, and 13,320-foot Palmyra Peak topping it all. Skiing was always in the town's blood. Locals like “Senior” Mahoney grew up skijoring behind cars on Oak Street in the 1940s, then adventuring into the backcountry off the Pennsylvania mining tram and, ultimately, runs on East Bear Creek and Imogene Pass. Isolation be damned, Zoline dropped \$5 million on a 900-acre sheep ranch and built four double chairlifts and a base lodge. On December 22, 1972—with Mahoney as mountain manager—Telluride Ski Resort opened for business.

Telluride's marketing department has always had to work double-time convincing skiers that the trek up Route 145 is worth it. I get a taste of the pitch my first morning when public-relations man, Tom Watkinson, meets me at the bottom of Chair 4. The PR tour is always an odd experience—complete strangers acting like old friends, both parties expecting something from the other. A jumpy, blue-eyed reporter from *Military Times* promises to make this one even stranger. Thankfully,

Watkinson grew up in Telluride, and has a look about him that he's still growing up. So we get an unfettered local perspective on the recent on-mountain changes.

Watkinson explains Telluride's various ridges and features as we shoot up Chair 4. The resort maintains 120 trails over 3,845 vertical feet, serviced by 18 lifts, including two high-speed gondolas and seven high-speed quads. Most of the new sidecountry extends off Palmyra. The openings were designed in a stepping stone fashion, Watkinson says, from basic to extreme. The wide, easy grade of Black Iron Bowl—just a 10-minute hike from the top of Chair 12—represents the easiest terrain. The 10 fins and rocky couloirs of Gold Hill Chutes to lookers' left of Palmyra could be classified as intermediate. And the giant couloirs and cirques of Bear Creek off the backside are the playground of graduates. The result: a kind of Socratic academy for adventurous skiers, with thousands of acres of pristine mountainside as the classroom.

And that's exactly the point, Watkinson says as we ride the Gold Hill Express lift. After selling real estate for 40 years, Telski—the company that runs Telluride—and Riley are getting back in the business of selling skiing. Riley's idea being that to keep the denizens of the Mountain Life invested in Telluride—yes, they now hold a clear majority in town—you have to teach them to appreciate...the mountain.

Watkinson's radio squawks and he tells us the patrol just opened Gold Hill 9. The resort has had a thin year so far, so every opening comes with a sense of import. We ride the new Revelation lift to a groomed hiking path—blasted and leveled this summer to ease access to the Gold Hill Chutes. At the final hump before #9, Watkinson points out a series of steel footings that in the spring will receive a metal stairway. “It can be a little hairy,” he grins as we start up.

The cadet reaches the couloir first, hardly out of breath and without a drop of sweat on him. He steels himself for a moment then drops in, making four wild turns with his hands almost over his head, before disappearing around a dogleg a hundred feet down. Watkinson shrugs and drops in next, carving through the powder in that easy way ski town kids learn to do.

I follow and find the snow soft and thick. Three turns down I spot a swath of untracked powder to the right and angle toward it. The slope is just right and my skis lift up through the snow. I'm going fast enough to glide over any rocks under the surface, and for a few seconds the beauty of Riley's plan dawns on me.

Forget the marketing hype. Forget the acreage. The hallmark of a good resort is the ability to birddog powder, weeks after a storm. And the hallmark of a good person is someone who appreciates powder. So bring on the Fortune 500, introduce them to the white room and show them—firsthand—what we're all so crazed about. God knows we'll all be better off for it.

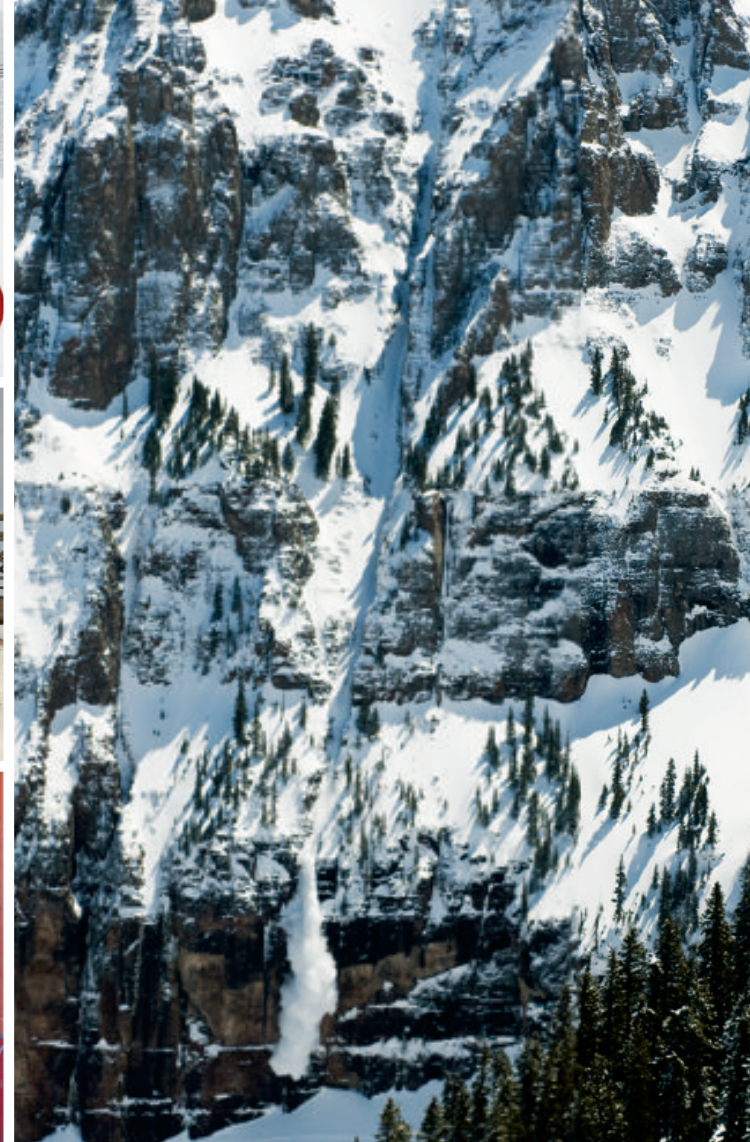
There are two reactions to the words “Dave Riley” in Telluride. 1) A rolling of the eyes and 2) the phrase, “He gets things done.” At first glance, the man appears more like a Silicon Valley CEO on vacation than an avid skier hell-bent on opening new terrain. He wears a mustache and a soul patch and is typically clad in some kind of technical microfiber—because when he's not working, he's skiing, or



Kathy Mahoney and Jay Goodwin (top); and the Telluride Bluegrass Festival, back when skis were straight and narrow, and mustaches and armpit hair were thick.

**EDWARD ABBEY'S SUGGESTION
TO NATIVE TELLURIDIANS:
“...CALL IN THE COWBOYS FROM
THE OUTBACK EVERY SATURDAY
NIGHT AND HAVE THEM BEAT THE
LIVING SHIT OUT OF THESE LONG-
HAired WEIRDOS.”**





Here, and just left: Peter Inglis (leading) and Josh Geeter descend the technical and exposed Heaven's Eleven Couloir. PHOTOS: BRETT SCHRECKENGOST

prowl the mountain looking for something to improve.

Riley grew up skiing the Lake Tahoe area and was president of Mt. Hood Meadows Ski Resort and CFO of Jackson Hole Mountain Resort for almost 20 years before signing on with Telski in 2007. He's the kind of CEO who keeps a daily blog on the resort's website and can be reached anywhere/anytime if the matter is urgent enough. His time in Jackson was especially helpful, he says, in learning how the backcountry can help, or hurt, a resort. These days, the equation is simple: more is better. "Five years ago it didn't seem like that big of a deal," he says. "Everyone is looking for an adventure now."

Riley has mitigated local opposition to change with public planning meetings to discuss proposed improvements. It's unclear how much the meetings influence policy, but it's overly clear that few other resorts go to that extent. (Unless forced to by law.) This spring, Telski posted an online survey regarding a revised master plan. Among other ideas for expansion: a new lift amidst 1,500 acres of fluted ridgelines and powder bowls in Bear Creek. (Telski purchased a mining claim in the Upper Basin last April, a potential site for a lift.)

With all the skier-centric change, though, there's still an elephant in the room—that will likely be Riley's focus for the next five years. The awkward nature of "The Town of Mountain Village"—the mid-mountain development that was supposed to be the nerve center of the resort but has become its Achilles' Heel—begins with the name, the two designations sparring with one other within the phrase. (Think: the Mountain of Mount Everest or the Restaurant of Burger King.)

Descriptions of the village, which sits 700 vertical feet above town and is connected by a free gondola, range from "a collection of monolithic globbs" to a "haunted grotto." The overwhelming impracticality of the place is so palpable that last year a film company shot a comedic spoof there called, "The Lost People of Mountain Village," likening the

empty storefronts and lack of people to the disappearance of the Anasazi Indians. In one scene featuring an empty house with 19 bathrooms, an actor playing an expert on the phenomenon comments, "Most anthropologists would concur that [the bathrooms] could not have had a utilitarian function, there were simply too many of them. They must have had some ritualistic or ceremonial significance."

The village has always been a part of Telluride's master plan—Zoline's initial concept being to build a ski resort around the sheep ranch that he could then divide and sell. The problem is you can't always control what developers do with land once you sell it, and instead of building cheery hotels and B&Bs to bring life to the village, contractors erected massive second homes that today are either empty 50 weeks of the year or in foreclosure.

The predicament is one that nearly took down resorts like Stowe and Squaw Valley, closed Idaho's Tamarack Resort, and forced Moonlight Basin in Montana into foreclosure. Riley is thus approaching it head-on. Last year, he visited 18 European resorts over 20 months to interview mayors and CEOs about how their resorts ran (so well). "Hot beds," over "cold" ones was the answer. Translation: hotels that bring in people are good; empty trophy homes are not.

This is not the kind of jargon you expect to hear from a ski area CEO, but then rank-and-file CEOs haven't fared so well at Telski in the last 10 years. (Before Riley, there hadn't been one since 2005, when Raymond Jacobi left suddenly after just 10 months.) What's more, Riley's crusade seems to have larger implications—in that his research might not just be a fix for Telluride. He may well have stumbled across a formula to get the West's ski resorts back on their feet. Rule one: Turning a ski area into a real estate brokerage works great until you run out of real estate to sell. And two: To keep people coming to your resort—you need to teach them to love to ski.

It doesn't take much to change a ski resort. Six inches of featherweight snow does it my fourth day in town. Local skier and guide Brian O'Neill calls at eight and says we have to go into Bear Creek. The area is known as much for breaking legs and backs as the incredible runs there. (Two days before, an off-duty patroller was caught in a slide, broke both his elbows and had to self-rescue out.) But it's the first powder day in two weeks and I tell O'Neill I'll meet him at the top of the Revelation lift.

Feathery crystals hiss under my skis as I slide into the maze. In T-Ride's New Social Order, a powder day means something different to everyone. To the middle-aged woman in front of me wearing a one-piece Bogner suit, it means the corduroy is going to be fantastic. "Do you have the grooming report?!" she excitedly hollers at the liftie. He glances back, mystified, just as she takes one of the most horrific falls

imaginable, from the standing position.

I skate past her (Liftie: "Nice move.") and continue up the chair—then spend the next 10 minutes gaping at the 360-degree view. The San Juan's hold the highest concentration of 14ers in Colorado, and for the first time on the trip they are visible: Mount Wilson, El Diente Peak, Wetterhorn, and Mount Sneffels.

Brian isn't there when I get to the top of Revelation, so I start hiking the corduroy bootpack alone. There are only three other people on the trail, one a snowboarder cradling a PBR. The scree on Palmyra has been covered and Bear Creek, too, looks like something plucked straight from the Alps. I stop at the first access gate, then continue to the second. The signage proclaiming the San Juan's notoriously unstable snowpack is terrifying, complete with a skull and crossbones icon.

Not that it deters the crowds... People have been skiing Bear Creek for 50 years and will continue to do so no matter what resort policy is. ("But I wouldn't take my kids there," Senior Mahoney says later that day.)

Brian and photographer Brett Schreckengost show up a few minutes later and fear dissipates into anticipation. When Brett gives the nod, Brian makes a half dozen effortless turns down Delta Bowl and I follow. His track is to my left, but everything else is white. I make 10 more turns down the bowl and run out to the top of Eagle's Nest. The slope there avalanched a week ago and we drop through the soft debris and scrub pines, making wide arcs down the face to an apron and another plateau.

From there we can see most of Bear Creek—The Uppers, Wedding Chutes, and Little Wasatch Face. The terrain is simply massive, on the

scale of Jackson Hole's Granite Canyon or Pas de Chevre in Chamonix. And it is far more accessible than either. Again, I get the feeling that the hope of powder never dies here.

We ski a tongue called Eagle's Claw in a foot and a half of powder, then a long snowfield to the creek and Waterfall Traverse. "Egress" is a popular word in Telluride, and at the bottom I see why. Every bit of snow, avalanche debris and human that enters the upper basin must pass through a rock chasm about 30 feet wide called Waterfall Chute. There are moguls in it, of course, and at the bottom we traverse right to Grandfather Apron and Monkey Swing for one final shot. Then it's out Bear Creek Road and the long traverse to town.

I zip around trees, streams, and even a black Lab and his owner before passing through a gate into town. Then, as if the whole morning



In the '90s, local jam band Zuba penned this lyric about Telluride's class struggle: "I don't want to see/ none of those marijuana-smokin' freaks/ living in a teepee, and looking so freaky/ up my beautiful Bear Creek." We don't know where Brendan Clarke lives, or what his drug habits may or may not be, but he certainly knows how to get his freak on in the Nellie Mine area of Bear Creek. PHOTO: BRETT SCHRECKENGOST

LEFT: In Telluride's New Social Order, a powder day means something different to everyone. For 17 year-old Sam Cohen, it meant having to ski with his dad and get shots like this. So lame! PHOTO: LEE COHEN



“THE NEW TERRAIN REPRESENTS A KIND OF SOCRATIC ACADEMY FOR ADVENTUROUS SKIERS, WITH THOUSANDS OF ACRES OF PRISTINE MOUNTAINSIDE AS THE CLASSROOM.” ✂



T-Ride local Garrett Russell channels his inner hippie into some free-spirited flower powder in this far-out photo (taken by his brother, who is pictured on page 84). PHOTO: CHASON RUSSELL



BRETT SCHRECKENGOST



This RV has something the Town of Mountain Village doesn't: a person who lives there. PHOTO: CHASON RUSSELL



"Senior" Mahoney getting bombed with Snow Safety Director Craig Sterbenz. PHOTO: BRETT SCHRECKENGOST

had been a dream, I find myself skiing—no Brian in sight—out of the woods and down snow-covered South Fir Street. I stop at the stop sign, shoulder my skis and walk toward the gondola. Halfway there, Brian leans out of Telluride Properties, where he is a broker, and waves. He's already ditched his jacket and changed into a button down—the transformation somehow jarring after the run we just skied. Then he tells me it's time to go to work and disappears behind the door.

For every place there is an equal and opposite counter-place. In the San Juans, the tiny town of Ophir stands as an upside-down reflection of Telluride. Barnboard shacks and two-story homes line a handful of dirt roads, the whole valley practically swallowed by the surrounding peaks. Mountain bikes and skis hang from porch roofs. Little smokestacks spew wood smoke, and paper cutouts of snowflakes hang in the windows.

Sean McNamara meets me at the door of his house and starts in on stories of the old days about eight seconds later. He's a ski bum storyteller by trade—Telluride, Verbier, Mark Shapiro and Ace Kavale's Clambin crew—a longtime *POWDER* correspondent and a columnist for the *Telluride Daily Planet*. In 1992 he penned a short story that became

"Scrapple," a cult film about ski bumming and drug-running in Telluride. He showed up in town in the 1980s with \$40 in food stamps and moved into a four-bedroom Victorian with friends for \$245 a month (total). "Everyone was broke and had nothing, and you could do that then," he recalls.

McNamara pours a cup of black tea and his wife, Rhonda, makes toast with Bahamian guava jam as we chat. (She was born in the Bahamas...they met when Sean sailed by on a boat and Rhonda was the dock master...go figure.) Telluride lost one of its sons a week prior—Kevin Green, who skied into a closure rope at high speed in Prospect Bowl. McNamara tells me about the Glade Brothers crew Kevin used to ski with...then Tim Altic who inspired tele skiers to mount three-pins on alpine boards in the early-1980s...then the "Stuntman's" birthday parties, Fun Boy Three House and "bumpadelicizing" under Lift 6. He looks wild-eyed, transcended, as he recalls practically every run he ever skied, the friend he was with, the angle of the sunlight and snow conditions—then points to so many ski runs that lead directly to his backdoor, I can't keep track of them.

Three hours later, I'm late to meet Brett for a backcountry tour up

Jane's. The trailhead is a short walk from McNamara's and he puts on a pair of snowshoes and shows me the way. I skin alongside him up a well-worn track, huffing and sweating while he spins more yarns. At a stand of pines near a small stream, he points to a skin track and says, "That way."

I bid farewell and follow the track. It's so steep I have to grab an aspen tree every now and then to pull myself up. (McNamara: "It's an elevator shaft!") With no one to talk to for an hour and a half, my mind races: Plane schedules, relationships, money...then, the point, perhaps the whole point of why I ski: *Who cares?!*

Near the top, the track borders a thin, steep ridge and the wind picks up. I peer over the edge and see a massive alpine bowl leading to town and make out McNamara's house. I've walked through the wardrobe and am in the kingdom now. The chiseled couloirs all around look like something out of Alaska and the peaks, pure Colorado 14ers.

I peel my skins off and dive into a steep glade filled with what feels like two feet of fresh snow. I can see what I think are Brett's tracks for a moment, then they're gone. I focus on the space between the trees and make wide, fast turns around every fourth trunk. The snow is con-

solidated enough to control my speed and the forest seems to open up after a half dozen turns. The run follows a steep ridgeline then jogs right to a series of open benches. It's hero skiing there, European skiing, and I look around at the scenery as I go.

At the bottom, an out-of-control-snowplow-luge leads back to Ophir. I follow it for 10 minutes then make a wrong turn at the bottom. Out of nowhere, 100 feet from the trail, a border collie trots up and drops a Frisbee at my feet. I pick it up and step a few more feet into a clearing. There, hidden by the pines, is a derelict mining shack.

I skin closer and see it's about 200 square feet, with a black stovepipe and plastic stapled over the windows. A thin curl of smoke lifts from the top of the pipe. In the yard, there are bird feeders in the trees and three solar panels at the edge of the woods.

I desperately want to look in, to interview what may well be Telluride's last hippie. After a week in Mountain Village, listening to Mountain Lifers talk about real estate, the hut seems a precious artifact, a remnant of Telluride's past. Instead, I turn and head back to town, through the big pines and iced-over creeks, to the highway where I stick out my thumb and hope for a ride. ☺