

Where moguls dare

VAIL IS POWDER-PERFECT AND LUXURY-PACKED. RACHEL SHARP FALLS IN LOVE WITH THE "UNDERCOVER ASPEN"

I adore Aspen, in all its sparkly, celebrity-studded, powder-sloped glory, but I was recently let in on a little secret: its limelight-shy next-door-neighbour Vail has the same idyllic snow and picturesque villages, minus all of the paparazzi-luring drama.

In fact, folks in Colorado have a saying: "Movie stars may ski Aspen, but studio owners ski Vail." Both have perfected luxe living, but Vail does it without any extra fuss (although it *is* the only place I've ever been offered free hot cookies at the bottom of a ski run).

Little wonder it's the low-key snow destination of choice for superstars (think Cameron Diaz, Justin Timberlake, James Blunt and Delta Goodrem), politicians (Bill Clinton, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Al Gore et al) and the *Fortune* 500 mega-rich. And it's massive. Vail is bigger than all the resorts in New South Wales combined, and is the largest single ski area in North America. It's made up

of four connected resorts where the one lift ticket is valid for all: Vail, Keystone, Breckenridge and Beaver Creek. The huge snowboarding park at "Breck" (as it's known to the initiated), hosts the X-Games every year and fosters a super-cool boarding culture. So if, like me, you're a snowboarder who loves blue-sky conditions interspersed with a healthy mix of black-diamond adrenaline and soothing tree-lined powder runs, this place is paradise.

"I love Vail resort. It's so big, it takes four or five days, but all of the areas are connected, whereas in Aspen, you have to catch a bus to cover all the mountains," says LA-based actor Justin Melvey, who was a member of the Australian Freestyle Ski Team long before his *Home and Away* days, and is so sold on the place, they've made him an official Vail Resorts Ambassador. And he's not alone. This big-snow-little-fuss vibe is making Vail and its four-part conglomerate of very

different resorts an increasingly hot favourite with Australian visitors. "Three hundred [average] days of sunshine and almost nine metres of snowfall a year at Vail definitely keep Australians coming back for more — call it a love affair with good weather and great fun," says international PR manager May Lilly, who moved here from Australia 10 years ago to be a ski instructor. "And there are some incredible deals for Aussies through our affiliated tour operators, so it's a luxurious experience at an affordable price."

So, in the spirit of intensive journalistic research, I spent five days trying to cram in as much five-star fun as possible.

DAY 1 — TOUCHDOWN

My on-snow hotel, The Lodge at Vail, has been a celebrity hot spot ever since President Gerald Ford stayed here in 1974, and is one of only two five-star hotels in the busy little gingerbread-style Vail Village. While it now has modern

fittings, it hasn't lost any of its traditional charm and the enormous beds are indescribably comfortable, especially after a 14-hour Sydney to LA flight, two-hour transfer to Denver, then two-and-a-half-hour shuttle into the mountains. Walking to my room through the fire-lit bar after an in-house dinner at Cucina Rustica, there's an American musical theatre star surrounded by other guests, belting out a nightcap-inspired impromptu performance at the grand piano. Cosy! www.lodgeatvail.rockresorts.com

DAY 2 — FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Every good day on the snow should start with a hotel buffet breakfast like this. (Carb-loading is a great excuse for my second helping of home-made banana bread.) Blue sky outside and overnight powders promise perfect ski conditions.

I'm told the Kennedys have holidayed here for decades, but pre-millennium visitors wouldn't recognise the resort now — seven giant new back bowl areas have been opened in the past decade, including the now famous Blue Sky

Basin, which tripled the skiable terrain. The longest run here is a thigh-melting 6.4km so, exhausted by 4pm, after a mountain-top barbecue lunch in the sunshine and a full afternoon following speed demon Melvey around the mountains, I head to the Arrabelle hotel's

ice-cream) and wrap up in complimentary cashmere blankets before catching an eight-person gondola back up the mountain to the ultra-exclusive Game Creek Club. At lunch, when only members and their guests are allowed, it's full of high-powered New Yorkers with their ski

“[The club] is full of high-powered New Yorkers with their ski instructors ... it's like The Hamptons on ice.”

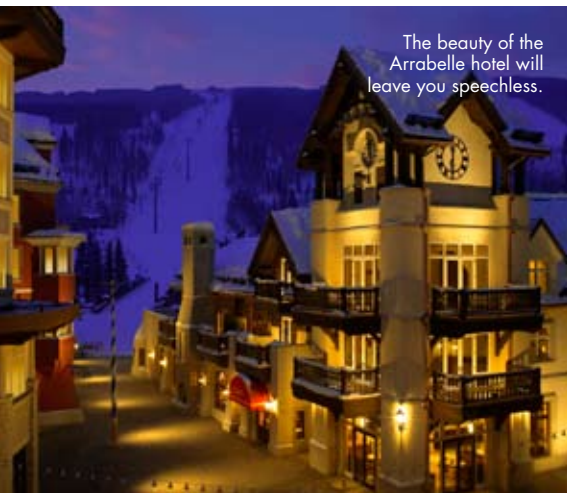
RockResorts Spa for a massage to iron out the kinks. The spa specialises in alpine treatments with local aromas. Pure bliss. No wonder Lindsey Vonn, the Olympic superstar who grew up in Vail, has a permanent apartment at the Arrabelle. If you could, you would.

As the sun set, we walked back through the pedestrian-only Vail Village, complete with central courtyard skating rink and gelateria (because even in the freezing cold, there's always time for good

instructors, focused more on networking than après-ski. It's like The Hamptons on ice — initial membership costs \$54,000, and is capped at 395 members. Not surprisingly, the food is fabulous. www.gamecreekclub.com; www.vail.com; www.arrabelle.rockresorts.com

DAY 3 — LEAVE (IT) TO BEAVER

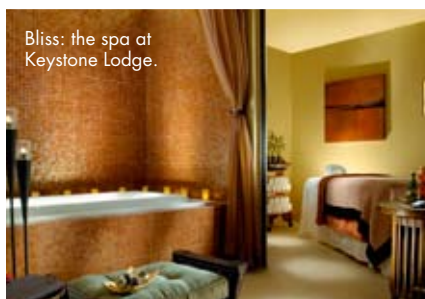
We bid adieu to The Lodge in the early morning, and drive 20 minutes west of Vail to our next resort, Beaver Creek. ►



The beauty of the Arrabelle hotel will leave you speechless.



Downtown Breckenridge buzzes with cafes and bars.



Bliss: the spa at Keystone Lodge.



The author in snowboard heaven.

If Vail is all about the mammoth back bowls and vast expanses, then Beaver is about its tree-lined glades. Everything feels just that little bit more luxe — here's where they hand out those famous free hot cookies, and there are escalators everywhere replacing steps, making light of leaden ski boots. It's also one of the few resorts in the world with 24-hour grooming (until this trip, I didn't realise any resorts boasted this attention to all-day detail). But it's not all easy sailing. There's plenty of extreme terrain for thrillseekers, with the upper mountain serving up some terrifying double black-diamond runs and chutes. The Birds of Prey run, which is a World Cup course, guarantees an adrenaline rush. (For the record, it's Melvey's favourite run of all the resorts.)

We lunched at the sophisticated on-snow Osprey hotel, which opened in late 2008. Its tapas restaurant is famous, and rather randomly boasts a deep-fried Snickers bar as its signature dessert. The beautiful Ritz-Carlton, which is officially the largest log cabin in the US, has live musicians in the courtyard in good weather, and you can toast marshmallows over an open fire, après-drink in hand, while watching skiers fly down the mountain right in front of you. Late that afternoon, we drive 40 minutes to resort number

three, Keystone, which may be famous for its funky cafes, buzzing village and "yo bro!" cool snowboarding culture, but it holds its own in the fine dining stakes, too. Dinner is at the AAA Four-Diamond-awarded Alpenglow Stube, after a sunset gondola ride across a serene valley (the ultimate proposal spot for snow-obsessed lovers). They have complimentary sheepskin slippers (leave your snow-proof boots at the coat check) and absolutely more-ish apple martinis. Does luxury dining come any finer than this?

www.ospreyatbeavercreek.rockresorts.com;
www.ritzcarlton.com; www.beavercreek.com

DAY 4 — THE BRECK BUZZ

I wake up in my River Run Condominium excited. I feel like a snowboarder in a candy shop today. Breck is one of Colorado's oldest mining towns, but has the heart of a teenager. While there are plenty of ski-friendly runs, it has won award after award for its three enormous terrain parks, filled with half pipes and heart-stopping jumps. Before the Olympics, or even cooler annual X-Games, the parks here are packed with the world's best riders practising their acrobatics. Flame-haired megastar Shaun White, who rewrote the snowboarding trick book at the recent winter Olympics, likes it so much he bought a condo right

on the snow. I stretched my weary legs at the end of the day at the nearby Silverthorne outlet stores, stocking up on plenty of well-priced basics, from stores such as Calvin Klein, Coach, Polo Ralph Lauren and Nike.
www.breckenridge.com

DAY 5 — EXTREME KEYSTONE

Waking up knowing we've saved the best for last helps me shake off the descending final-day blues. Keystone is a great, family-friendly resort, an unsung hero in the Vail quartet — it's so low key it's often overlooked. It has plenty of long, groomed, pretty runs for chilled riding, but today, we're psyched for a huge challenge — powder bowl riding in terrain so remote it can only be accessed by a snow-cat ride. This is the kind of idyllic, neck-deep powder experience you see in extreme videos. I've been snowboarding for 15 years, but I've never tried anything nearly so hardcore; we're each given a safety briefing and have transmitters strapped to us in case of avalanche. After this adventure, and true to Vail luxury form, our 10-person lunch is cooked up by Alpenglow chefs and served to us in a mountain-top yurt by the multi-skilled ski patrol (they save lives and serve a mean cheesecake as well).

Keystone has night skiing, but the lure of indulgence was stronger, so we spent our final night feasting (again) at the highlight of the Keystone Culinary Festival — a seven-course degustation dinner at the Ski Tip Lodge (Colorado's first ski lodge, debuting in the 1860s as a stagecoach stop), where sommelier Megan Morgan helped us wine and dine our way through the seven continents of the world. The Hou Hou Shu Sparkling Sake from Japan's Marumoto Brewery before dinner convinced me for the first time there may actually be bubbles better than champagne. Leaving the next day was torturous for a thousand reasons.
www.keystoneressort.com

For more information on Vail visit www.snowusa.com. A seven-day New Epic 7-Pack lift pass covering all Vail resorts costs \$490.