



PHOTOGRAPHY BY AVDI, COURTESY OF ELK MOUNTAIN EXPEDITION

# FOLLOW THE DOPAMINE

Far from frivolous, fun represents a wide spectrum of activities crucial to our life satisfaction and long-term fulfillment. So what is fun for you?

By Stephanie Wilson with Sahale Greenwood

# Are we having fun yet?

It's a simple question with a not-so-simple answer. To find out what fun truly means, my colleague Sahale and I embarked on a trip to Aspen and the Roaring Fork Valley—all in the name of research, of course. (Yes, our jobs are fun.) We dined, splashed, squealed, and played our way through four days of adventure to answer the age-old question: what is fun anyway?

As it turns out, fun is totally subjective, and your perception of it is always evolving. Regardless of your current definition, having it is not just about enjoyment; it's about enhancing our mental and physical well-being. Fun activities reduce stress, enhance creativity, and foster social connections. Whether it's the immediate thrill of a new experience or the lasting satisfaction of a challenging activity, fun plays a crucial role in maintaining a balanced and fulfilling life.

In the *Journal of Play in Adulthood*, University of Colorado Denver's Lisa Kosena Forbes and Carissa Craven note that fun, like play, is “an essential element of life with profound benefits for humans of all ages ... increasing one's mood, serving as an antidote to stress, anxiety, and depression. Play provides temporary reprieve from expectations associated with serious adult life, helping one evade burnout or a mundane existence.”

Yet fun and play are often dismissed as child's play. Kosena and Craven's research finds that adults often reduce their playtime when under stress, leaving little to no time in their days to just have some fun. The authors hypothesize one reason play is separated from adult life may be that it is often viewed as a frivolous activity: “Living within a culture with insurmountable stressors and a narrative that devalues play can make it impossible or even seem irresponsible to reserve time for leisure, relaxation, and fun.”

This all may sound like coastal-city problems—Colorado's mountains are a vast playground, and Coloradans make the most of them. Here, a work-life balance is the norm, not the exception. A recent WalletHub report ranks Colorado sixth among “The Most Fun States in America,” based on factors like attractions, golf courses, and access to national parks. Another WalletHub study places Denver

12th on the “Most Fun Cities in America” list.

But, as the authors of the report note, “Everyone's brand of fun is different.”

## PLAY, CONNECT, FLOW

To deepen our understanding of what makes fun feel fun, we spoke with University of Denver's professor of fun, David Thomas, PhD, an expert on the architecture of fun and a student of fun in general, and Aleya Littleton, an adventure and somatic therapist with Wild and Wonderful Life in Golden.

Thomas' research centers around fun, fun design, and the meaning of play. For him, he says, fun is “a way of being in the world. And that way of being brings you joy and delight by asking you to make meaning about what's happening.”

Littleton, who integrates outdoor adventure into her therapy practice, emphasizes how having some fun makes you feel. “My experience of fun is somatic. It's body-based. I know that I'm having fun when I feel a certain way. I'm relaxed, I'm engaged, I'm caught up in the moment.”

But, she says, some types of fun are more rewarding than others. The “Fun Scale,” a concept popularized by mountaineer Rainer Newberry in 1985 that's trickled into the modern lexicon with help from social media, helps us understand the different types.

Type I fun is the easy, enjoyable kind: uncomplicated fun in the moment: the thrill of a roller coaster, the collective effervescence of a concert, or the pleasure of dining out. “Type I fun is fun you're having in the moment—you know you're having it, you just don't want it to end. It's completely enjoyable,” says Littleton.

Type II fun is more complex. “Type II is observed in retrospect. In the moment while it's happening, it isn't fun, but it's brewing a good story,” Littleton explains. Think: hiking a 14er, pushing your limits in a cycling class, or getting lost in a complicated project. The challenges and discomfort innate in the Type II experience lead to a sense of accomplishment for you and some great stories to share with your friends later while also building character and resilience.

The third fun type, however, is a misnomer. “Type III fun is fun that's not fun at all,” says Littleton. “It's when you're thinking, ‘I don't want to do this, I will never do this again, I regret all of my life choices that brought me

to this moment.’ The only thing fun about it is that you survived.”

The happiest people fill their lives with a blend of Type I and Type II. “It's very rare for you to look at somebody and say, ‘This is fun,’” says Thomas. “Because when you're having fun, you're just having it, you're in it. You're excited by it. Your mind is buzzing, you're joyful, you're fulfilled, and you're deciding what it means to you.”

Regardless of type or takeaway, the science says that fun is good for you. The hedonic engagement of immersing yourself in an activity for pure enjoyment often comes with a sense of liberation, temporarily freeing yourself from concerns like work stress or parenting problems. Research from Harvard University show that play and its social nature improves our whole-body health and boosts our happiness across our lifespans.

The art of having fun, Thomas says, is finding places that challenge you to make meaning, but not so much discomfort that you've feel as if you've been “dropped naked into the wild.” The most rewarding fun often lies in the Type II sweet spot—activities that challenge you without putting you in danger, uncomfortable yet exhilarating.

Littleton agrees that a little discomfort is key. “When you rise to face a challenge, that fun activity becomes a rewarding experience with lasting benefits,” she says. “It has to do with the effort-to-value ratio that dominates our minds as humans. The effort paradox posits that effort adds value to the product of that effort. If something challenges us, we assign more value to it. Type I fun is minimal effort and high, obvious reward. The effort we put into Type II activities makes us perceive the experience to be rewarding.”

In other words, what you put in is what you get out of the experience. To have more fun in your life, Thomas suggests, “Put yourself into positions and situations where there's a little bit of uncertainty, with the opportunity for you to resolve that uncertainty under your own power. This is why people travel: it's fun to make sense of it all.”

These perspectives framed our itinerary of indoor and outdoor adventures in the Roaring Fork Valley, emphasizing that fun often requires stepping out of our comfort zones. Over four days, we explored activities that highlight the multifaceted nature of fun, which grows wild across Colorado.

# THE ASPEN ADVENTURE: A CASE STUDY IN FUN TYPES

Over the course of four days in the Roaring Fork Valley this spring, we explored activities that delivered both the immediate joy and the lingering satisfaction of experiences that highlight the multifaceted nature of fun. What we discovered is that while fun is subjective and one person's thrill can be another's terror, and vice versa, fun can be found around every corner and river bend in Colorado—if you're willing to go find it.

For the first dose of fun, we stopped at **Hanging Lake Adventure Co.** in the heart of Glenwood Springs. The outfitter offers a fleet of RAD Mission E-Bikes, and its location provides the best access to the area's best bike trails. We opted to ride from Glenwood Springs to Carbondale along the Rio Grande, a rails-to-trails paved path that follows the Roaring Fork River to Aspen. The trail gains roughly 2,100 feet over 42 miles, a gentle incline that makes for a pleasant ride, completely protected from vehicular traffic. The pedal-assisted electric bikes proved to be a faster and more fun way to hit the trail, get some fresh air, stretch our legs, and take in the unmatched views of Mt. Sopris without car windows in the way—all while raising our breath and heart rates enough to get a meaningful workout. Recent research suggests e-bikes can also provide a psychological boost, helping riders feel more capable of tackling hills they might otherwise avoid—putting more fun within your reach. To crank the fun up to Type II levels, nearby Snowmass is a mountain biking mecca with 25 miles of purpose-built trails in its bike park, which extends almost 3,000 vertical feet from the top of the Elk Camp Chairlift down to Snowmass Base Village. [hanginglake.com](http://hanginglake.com)



Celebrating 25 years of action, **Glenwood Caverns Adventure Park**—the country's only mountaintop theme park—offers heart-pounding attractions like the country's highest-elevation full-sized roller coaster and the steepest free-fall in the West. But the real adrenaline junkie's dream? The Giant Canyon Swing. Ranked by *USA Today* as one of the most extreme rides, this beast launches four brave souls nearly vertical at 50 mph, offering breathtaking views of the Colorado River 1,300 feet below. Our brains love a good scare when it's safe, triggering a euphoric rush. As we step off, laughter echoes—the thrill ride's perfect payoff. This is fear, fun, and euphoria, all in one wild swing. For me, it's pure Type I adrenaline-pumping fun; for Sahale, the experience was more Type II, the thrill coming from having survived. [glenwoodcaverns.com](http://glenwoodcaverns.com)



The pergola-covered pools in WorldSprings—a new, adults-only section at **Iron Mountain Hot Springs** in Glenwood Springs—is Type I fun at its finest: relaxing, rejuvenating, and awaash with therapeutic benefits. Set on the serene banks of the Colorado River, this hot spring's 11 pools mimic the mineral-rich waters of the world's top geothermal spots, including the Blue Lagoon of Iceland, plus a pool with the signature salinity of the Dead Sea. [ironmountainhotsprings.com](http://ironmountainhotsprings.com)



A whiskey tasting at the new luxe, laidback **Stranahan's Aspen Whiskey Lodge** in the center of Aspen is a whole lot of easy, breezy fun. Superb mountain views, alpine-inspired bites, and pours from rare Lodge-only bottles like the Calvados Cask, await at the brand's first outpost beyond its Denver distillery and tasting room. [stranahans.com](http://stranahans.com)

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: IMAGES COURTESY GLENWOOD CAVERNS ADVENTURE PARK; IRON MOUNTAIN HOT SPRINGS; STRANAHAN'S IMAGE BY CONNOR STEHR



One of our most memorable Type II fun experiences was a half-day wade fly-fishing trip with **Elk Mountain Expeditions**. While the process was challenging—mastering the technique, enduring the cold morning, and maintaining patience—the sense of accomplishment and the meditative nature of the activity made it as rewarding in hindsight as it was in the moment. The art of having fun is finding places that give you enough discomfort that you are challenged to make meaning. That meaning is apparent everywhere you look when immersed in the serene beauty of the Roaring Fork River, which our guide calls “the heartbeat of the valley, especially during the summer months.” This was our Type II sweet spot—immediate enjoyment coupled with the satisfaction of mastering a new skill. Sahale’s first-time excitement and my own meditative immersion in the activity highlighted the diverse ways fun can manifest.

That afternoon, Elk Mountain Expeditions took us out rafting the Roaring Fork River. Anticipated as a white-water adventure, it turned into a calm float trip due to the gentle conditions. Yet, the collective experience of floating, chatting, and laughing made it a memorable journey. And, let’s be honest, an afternoon on the water in the sun is > anything else. [elkmtnaspen.com](http://elkmtnaspen.com)



Fun in the Roaring Fork Valley extends beyond outdoor adventures. In Carbondale, discover the joy of connecting with your body, breath, and self at **True Nature Healing Arts**, the nurturing heart of the local community. A haven at Mount Sopris’ base, True Nature is a spiritual playground for chakra-aligning experiences, with daily classes in yoga, movement, and meditation; a luxury spa and boutique; and an Ayurvedic-inspired cafe, all complemented by the restorative and therapeutic Peace Garden, where healing modalities include a sandstone labyrinth, reflexology path, and wishing tree.

[truenaturehealingarts.com](http://truenaturehealingarts.com)

We dipped into **Base State Longevity**, a new wellness studio in the heart of Aspen specializing in private infrared sauna and cold plunge suites. While it’s easy to love a sauna session, ice baths sound like pure Type III fun to the uninitiated, Type II fun-in-retrospect for the optimistic. But once you take the plunge, you’ll understand why humans have chased the ice bath buzz since ancient times. Immersing in near-freezing water triggers the release of feel-good neurotransmitters like noradrenaline and dopamine, which flood the body with a host of benefits that leave you feeling alert, invigorated, accomplished, and pretty damn euphoric for hours after you emerge. [basestatelongevity.com](http://basestatelongevity.com)

## Find Your Fun

Understanding your fun type can enhance your appreciation of different activities and encourage you to seek out new experiences. Fun is subjective, and what matters most is how you perceive and engage with it. Or, as Dr. Seuss put it in *The Cat in the Hat*, “It’s fun to have fun, but you have to know how.” Here are some tips to help you embrace and enhance your fun:

**Give Yourself Permission to Play:** As Thomas suggests, “We all inherently have a sense of play. To have more fun, you have to give yourself permission to play.”

**Step Out of Your Comfort Zone:** Trying new activities, even those that seem daunting, can lead to Type II fun and personal growth. Littleton advises, “Take something that typically makes you think, ‘This isn’t for me,’ and just give it a try.”

**Mix Fun Types:** Balance your activities between immediate, easy fun and those that challenge you and offer long-term rewards. This variety can enrich your life and provide a deeper sense of fulfillment.

**Reflect on Your Experiences:** Often, the most significant enjoyment comes from reflecting on your adventures. Sharing stories and memories can amplify the fun and create lasting connections with others.

# WHERE TO STAY



## The W Aspen: Pure Type I Fun

Tucked at the end of Durant Ave, where Aspen's notorious red-light district once thrived, the W Aspen is the epitome of the easy type of fun—a high-altitude pleasure palace set at the base of Aspen Mountain. As the first new hotel in Aspen in over 25 years when it opened in 2019, it's not just a place to stay—it's an experience.

The Living Room serves as the pulse of the W Aspen experience. Its grid-pattern bar, nodding to Aspen's mining history, and the brass-and-velvet seating channel the bohemian vibe of the 1970s. A suspended DJ booth pays homage to the largest silver nugget ever found in Aspen, ready to drop beats as the fire pit outside signals the start of après revelry no matter the season.

The crown atop five-story building is the Wet Deck, Aspen's only year-round, all-weather, public rooftop. It's the ultimate social nexus, complete with a heated pool, hot tub, cabanas, and a bar featuring upside-down mountain peak sculptures. Not to mention the best views around, stretching from Aspen Mountain to Independence Pass, with Red Mountain and downtown Aspen in between.

As for the guestrooms, Wow suites, and W-branded residences, the vibe is a modern take on Ute patterns and furniture inspired by the decadence of the 1970s ski culture heydays. The rooms all feature pit



and platform lounge seating and nods to the plasticity of mile-hike bohemia, while the psychedelic detailing in the Extreme Wow suite takes that vibe to, well, the extreme. The suite features a central fire pit surrounded by curved pit seating, a hot tub open to the living area, a crystal and glass barrier embracing a circular bed on a pivoting platform, and a DJ booth with a mini LP vinyl player and curated music library all lend a playful take on vintage luxury. [bio.site/waspen](https://www.waspen.com)

COURTESY THE W ASPEN

# & DINE



## Limelight Snowmass: Perfect for Type II Types

For adventure junkies who prefer their fun with a side of grit and sweat, the Limelight Hotel Snowmass is your go-to basecamp. This place is tailor-made for Type II fun seekers—those who get a thrill from the journey, not just the destination. Located in the heart of Snowmass Village, next to Snowmass Mountain's Elk Camp Gondola, the hotel underwent a six-month renovation in 2022,

infusing a fresh contemporary style and punching up its laidback vibe with a lively mix of color and texture through accents, lighting, and art. The flexible multi-use common space on the main floor is the pulse of the property, calling to locals and travelers



alike to gather day and night to dine, drink, lounge, and listen to live music from the stage. No one misses the complimentary breakfast buffet of granola, cereals, dried and fresh fruit, eggs, bacon, yogurt, baked goodies, and soul-stirring coffee.

A pool terrace, connected to the hotel's fitness center and Snowmass Mountain Club, features two spa pools adjacent to cabanas with fire pits and chaise seating. The most fun feature of all is the indoor five-story rock-realistic climbing wall mirroring some of the local area's featured climbs. If you want to try the real thing, the hotel's partnership with AspenX puts all the Roaring Fork Valley's summer adventures within easy reach.

After a hard day's play, Limelight's 99 guest rooms are designed to wrap you in comfort and help you recover. A partnership with Therabody gives guests access to top-notch wellness tech, including Theraguns and RecoveryAir Jet Boots, to use in the comfort of the room. Purpose-built with a ton of storage to accommodate all the gear that conquering the mountains requires, the room gets its pops of color in shades of coral and red that complement the otherwise neutral tones of the white-oak and walnut furniture. [limelighthotels.com](https://limelighthotels.com)

COURTESY LIMELIGHT

## White House Pizza

Right off the main strip in quaint Carbondale, this all-American eatery is the perfect place to fuel up in between your daytime adventures. Stop by and it's easy to see why it's a locals' favorite—rustic setting, fun patio, live music on Wednesday nights, superlative happy hour, and top-quality food. You can judge a place by its turkey club and this one is a winner. [whitehousepizza.com](https://whitehousepizza.com)



## Sway Aspen

Sway Aspen, the latest outpost of the acclaimed Thai restaurant in Austin, offers a blend of tradition and innovation in its design by renowned architect Michael Hsu. With an intimate dining room, bar seating, and a soon-to-open patio, Sway Aspen caters to local sensibilities while maintaining the exceptional dining experience it's known for. This collaboration between New Waterloo and Infinite Hospitality ensures a transportive culinary journey in an inviting ambiance. [aspen.swaythai.com](https://aspen.swaythai.com)

## Kenichi Snowmass

Blending the sleek sophistication of a nightclub with the culinary artistry of a top-tier sushi bar, Kenichi Snowmass dazzles with a vibrant blue glow from its illuminated wine display, setting a dynamic and edgy tone. With locations in Aspen, Snowmass, and Carbondale, each venue upholds the same high standards. Indulge in cooked starters like the miso black cod or the wagyu beef on a hot stone, then savor fresh sushi rolls like the Kenichi Special, which showcases simple ingredients with stellar style. With each location offering a unique twist, the fun lies in discovering the distinct vibe and menu highlights of each Kenichi spot. [kenichiaspen.com](https://kenichiaspen.com)