

If you go ...

Published: Jun 07, 2009

A two-hour drive from Denver, Colorado, Vail consistently hits the lists for best ski area while at the same time taking hits for being too pricey and overhyped.

But we can't help but be smitten with Vail's charms, and here are but a few of them.

■ Something for everyone

Vail is 11km wide with more than 2 100ha of terrain, three terrain parks and trails dedicated to all levels of proficiency. People have been known to spend weeks trying to cover it all and only manage to hit just, say, Blue Sky Basin.

■ GLORIOUS FOOD

Vail Valley has so many good restaurants, it's hard to choose 10 favourites, let alone one. But Terra Bistro in the Vail Mountain Lodge & Spa has been on its game for so long, it's worthy of the spotlight. The chic, big-city-style dining room and slick service give it a grown-up, un-resort-like feel, and the wine list is filled with winners.

■ Touch me, Babe

It's a toss-up, really, which pampering getaway is more luxurious: the RockResorts Spa at The Lodge at Vail or the one at its sister lodging, The Arrabelle at Vail Square. Both feature steam and sauna rooms, fitness centres, yoga classes, treatments and gracious staff.

■ History buffs

You have to love a town that appreciates its past. Unlike some places that are all show and no substance, Vail pays tribute to the 10th Mountain Division, ski fashions that once cost less than a car and other remnants of skiing's past at the Colorado Ski Museum/Ski Hall of Fame. Admission is free.

■ Oh, won't you stay?

In a town that tries so hard to look Bavarian, the Sonnenalp Resort is such a prize because it actually is Bavarian, or at least owned by Bavarians, the Faessler family from Ofterschwang, who opened this hotel in 1979. Rooms range from tiny to spacious but they're all comfortable and a breakfast at Ludwig's Restaurant is included.

■ Drink up

Après ski or not to après ski, that is not the question — the question is where to go. A good answer: the Tap Room, which has the prime people-watching location on the second floor, with a fireplace for warming up after you step out onto the porch. The re's a menu of burgers and

White noise: Vail, Colorado, is famous for having the second-largest single ski mountain in North America

On the run: Vail's slopes are so numerous it would take weeks to cover them all

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snacks to go with the top-notch cocktails and beers.

■ Go Western

If shopping is why you visit a ski area, then Vail is a smorgasbord. One of our top places is KemoSabe, hung with cowboy hats, lined with boots, offers other terrific, well-crafted leather goods and turquoise jewellery. KemoSabe also features a group of personal shoppers who will track down whatever you're looking for.

■ Back to school

Vail Snowsports School is well organised, with hundreds of instructors with an amazing variety of backgrounds, skill levels and interests.

■ ICe, Ice, baby

Dobson Ice Arena is a huge ice rink with public skate times, which also offers group and private lessons. Good family activity on those off days when you need a break from the slopes. —

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