

Snowmass, snow blast

With a \$1 billion spruce-up, the resort rips out of Aspen's shadow to build its own scene

By Kyle Wagner / Denver Post Travel Editor

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Snowmass was on G.R. Fielding's short list when he was looking to move from upstate New York to anywhere in the United States eight years ago.

Biege Jones, Aspen Skiing Co.



A skier soars above some of Snowmass' 4,406 vertical feet of terrain that's famed for gladed black diamond runs and blue cruisers. Less well-known: top-notch nordic trails.

The former ski racer wound up in Boulder working for CDOT for six years before getting his dream life a little less than two years ago — a job as Pitkin County

engineer, a place to call home in Snowmass Village and as many days on the slopes as he could handle.

"Last year I skied 75 days," the 30-year-old says. "Not bad for someone with a 9-to-5 day job."

The superb skiing is what had gotten his attention, something he's been doing since he was 2 years old. "My father visited Aspen in 1964 with a couple of buddies," Fielding says. "The buddies stayed, he moved back to New York. But when I moved to Colorado, he came out and visited, and we spent a lot of time in the Roaring Fork Valley. It's just so beautiful, and I knew I had to live here someday."

In the time he's been in Snowmass, though, the area has undergone some major changes — changes he believes are for the better. "People always have a huge attachment to the past, but change is going to happen anyway," Fielding says. "It's awesome to see Snowmass redefining itself in a good way."

Special to The Denver Post, Aspen Skiing Co.



The new Treehouse Kids' Adventure Center, where parents can drop kids for some alone time on the slopes, has themed rooms and interactive activities for every age level.

More than \$1 billion in redefinition began last November with the opening of The Treehouse Kids' Adventure Center, part of the ongoing new base village project

that will bring 600 new condos, as well as arts and events facilities, shops, restaurants and bars.

More than 90 ski-in, ski-out condos already are open and available for sale or rent in Capitol Peak Lodge and Hayden Lodge at the heart of the new base. And for those with some money still left in their portfolios: the 260-unit Viceroy Resort & Residences at Snowmass, a condo hotel whose units range from \$570,000 to \$4 million; and the Little Nell Snowmass Residences, 30 condos that start at \$3.1 million.

The development, by Related WestPac, which bought the village project in 2007 from resort operator Aspen Skiing Co. and Intrawest, is scheduled to be completed in 2011. Related WestPac president Pat Smith, while battling locals over the usual development issues, has received kudos for his commitment to sustainable, green construction practices.

Hal Williams, Aspen Skiing Co.



Fun with Snowball at Snowmass Village.

"You can't make everyone happy all of the time," Smith says. "What we're trying to do is be creative, meet the needs of the community and make this a place where people want to come. And we want to do it in a way that raises the bar on green development, and is exciting and fresh and new."

"I'm kind of excited for the new stuff," says Fielding. "I'm really excited to be able to have a whole bunch of different options to eat at. It's not going to be the same two places anymore, and people having more places to stay means everyone isn't on top of each other."

That's Littleton resident Trini Jacobsen's sentiment. Two of Jacobsen's cousins own condos in Snowmass, and the 22-year-old snowboarder has been visiting the ski area with family since she was 5.

"There's always been one or two really good places to eat, but if you wanted more of a selection, you had to hoof it over to Aspen," she says. "I can't wait to just hang out at the base and have somewhere to do the après thing right there, like at other resorts."

Fielding says his favorite place to eat now is Artisan in the Stonebridge Inn, "consistently good," he says, "and casual, but still feels like you're out somewhere."

Jacobsen's is the Stew Pot, because of the value. "I don't have Mom and Dad to pay anymore," she says, laughing. "So a bunch of us come up, and we share a big chili; it's awesome, and a little spicy, and then we get their killer bread, homemade, and a couple of salads and share. It'll fill you up and send you out for the rest of the day."

Bringing more to the menu

But both say places such as Liquid Sky, the lounge opening at Christmas at the base village, and Sam's Smokehouse, a 7,800-square-foot barbecue-oriented eatery that will be open at the top of the Village Express six-pack, are just what Snowmass needed.

"I'm really psyched about the smokehouse," Fielding says. "We needed something on the mountain badly, and it sounds like that's going to be big and the right kind of food, casual and not too expensive."

Last season, Aspen Skiing Co. made good on its promise to add improvements on the mountain, putting in Elk Camp Gondola, which takes beginners and instructors to the Elk Camp Meadows Learning Area, which also opened last season at midmountain. The 4-acre enclosed area features a "magic carpet" and an easy-to-navigate lift that helps snowboarders and skiers transition.

This season, the resort has added the Sheer Bliss chair, a new detachable quad chairlift that takes riders and skiers to the Big Burn area and lets them off into 700 acres of gladed, black-diamond runs and blue cruisers. The lift, clocking in at nine minutes, can carry 2,000 people per hour.

"The Big Burn is where I always start out at the beginning of the season," Jacobsen says. "The great thing there is that the trees are so spread out, you can warm up and carve around the trees, get your winter legs back. And then it's time for High Alpine, and especially on a powder day, The Cirque."

Fielding likes to hit Gowdy's first thing in the morning, a double-black diamond run off the Big Burn — it's the steepest run, with a 52-degree pitch — that offers multiple options afterward. Hook up with Rock Island? Sun Spot? Run some tight, tight trees? "I'm a big-mountain guy," Fielding says. "That's what Snowmass has in a big way, so there are always choices."

Another tip from Fielding: "Everyone skis down Possible. It gets really tracked out real fast, but the thing to know is that there are a couple of alternative lines once

you get through the chute that will hold snow for a few days. So while the drop-in point won't look great, you just have to get past there to find the lines."

And both Fielder and Jacobsen point out that while Snowmass is famous for its 4,406 feet of vertical — the most of any Colorado ski area — and wide-open cruiser runs, the backcountry is not to be missed by advanced skiers and riders.

"It's about a 15-minute hike out there," Fielder says. "No people, plenty of powder. Truly stunning stuff."