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## YOUR VERY OWN BACKCOUNTRY PLAYGROUND

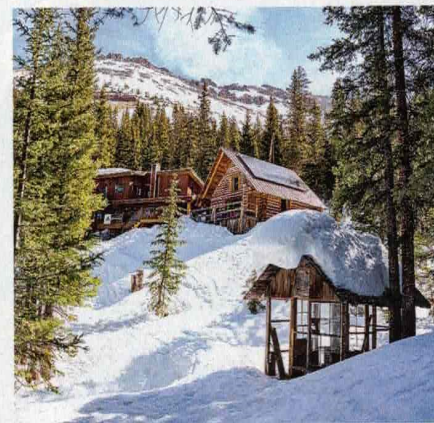
Europe has always had something America doesn't: an Alpine ski route connecting a network of full-service, premium lodges. That's about to change, as San Juan Mountain Guides in Ouray, Colorado, launches the ultimate hut-to-hut tour in a stunning setting. We sent **Devon O'Neil** to check it out.

**PERCHED ON SKIS** at the top of Bullion King Basin, I admired a wide barrel of spring corn glistening below me. I'd been waiting for this moment. It was my reward for suffering through a five-hour traverse between two backcountry cabins in southwest Colorado's San Juan Mountains. We started that morning at the OPUS Hut near Ophir Pass, just west of Silverton, which we'd skinned up to the previous afternoon. Now we prepared to descend to Highway 550 on Red Mountain Pass, the second day of a new five-day, 27-mile adventure between three luxurious huts in the range.

As I pushed off the ridge and embraced the lightness of gliding down perfectly softened corn, my worries dissolved. No longer was I feeling the burn of a newly formed ankle blister or the hunger pangs brought on by my failure to pack enough snacks. I tucked into my turns with little effort, arcing down one of America's most spectacular backcountry skiing playgrounds, knowing that a hot meal and a shower awaited that night.

Multiday ski tours between full-service cabins, which allow guests to travel light and fast and sample big-mountain turns along the way, have existed in Europe, Canada, and other great ranges around the world for years—most notably, the Haute Route between Chamonix, in France, and Zermatt, in Switzerland. But in the U.S., hut-to-hut skiing has mainly been a DIY endeavor. You had to bring your own food, prepare your own meals, and be strong enough to skin long stretches under the weight of a 40-to-50-pound pack. As outdoor enthusiasts in greater numbers discover the magic of backcountry skiing, and demand grows for well-stocked refuges, that's starting to change, especially in the San Juans.

Fourteen of Colorado's 56 peaks above 14,000 feet are located in the San Juans, with a seemingly infinite menu of their jagged, lower-elevation cousins to choose from. The range, much of it protected wilderness, encompasses thousands of square



**Clockwise from top left:** Red Mountain Pass, Red Mountain Alpine Lodge; peaks in the San Juans; birding at Alta, Utah; Mount Hayden Backcountry Lodge; the lodge's wood-fired hot tub



### RESORT BRIEF

#### Birding on Skis

In the early months of the pandemic, Americans took up bird-watching like depraved raptors. It is a surprisingly delightful passion that also happens to pair well with skiing. Sign up for **Alta's** Birding on Skis tour and you'll head out on a half-day adventure into Utah's Little Cottonwood Canyon to look for resident populations of rosy finches, mountain chickadees, and, if you're lucky, perhaps a pair of the mating golden eagles that frequent the area below 10,920-foot Devil's Castle. Tours start with a 9 A.M. ride up Alta's Collins Lift over epic black-diamond terrain and end at noon at the Albion base area. A conservation ecologist from Salt Lake's Tracy Aviary will be along to help distinguish nuthatches from creepers. Because you'll be contributing to a bird survey of the area, the tour is free and includes a half-day ski pass. Participants need only be at least 12 years old and able to ski a groomed blue run. —**Tim Neville**

12.21



Clockwise from top left: The group getting shuttled out of the backcountry; Nate Disser; Mount Hayden Backcountry Lodge; new terrain at Sun Valley, Idaho; heading to the pickup point



**RESORT BRIEF**  
**There's More Ground to Cover**

Ski resorts spend years—decades even—building out their terrain. The wait is generally worth it, with new glades, bowls, and buttery runs to christen. This season in Colorado, **Telluride** is getting 40 new acres of beginner and intermediate terrain, including the Grouse Glades, while **Beaver Creek** will open 250 acres of easy skiing, with two quads and 17 new trails in the bowlish McCoy Park. Last February, Idaho's **Sun Valley** pulled the curtain back on 380 acres, but due to COVID-19 restrictions, many weren't able to ski it. This is your year.

The biggest expansion is at **Bluebird Backcountry**, located near Steamboat Springs, Colorado, and the only no-lift, all-backcountry ski area in the U.S. It will open 12 new runs, for a total of 25. This includes four gullies that are patrolled and controlled for slides, with steep pitches that tilt to a puckering 45 degrees, which increases its avalanche-managed acreage to 1,200. If that sounds intimidating, sign up for the Bluebird+ membership for access to backcountry lessons, seminars, and as many half-day clinics as you want all season long (from \$250). —T.N.

miles and has been a proving ground for adventurers for decades. This is especially true for skiers, but because of the San Juans' complexity and scale—sharp and convoluted, with enormous relief and avalanche-prone angles—the mountains are challenging to navigate safely before spring. Once the snowpack stabilizes, many of the more inaccessible zones become connectable via high-alpine traverses across a series of planar slopes. Even better, they're in close proximity to 11,018-foot Red Mountain Pass, a ski-touring epicenter that divides the Uncompahgre and San Juan National Forests.

Last April, I joined a test trip of sorts for a new guided expedition being offered by San Juan Mountain Guides (SJMG), one of a handful of outfitters taking advantage of the amenities between Silverton and Ouray. The tour starts with one night at OPUS Hut (short for Ophir Pass Ultimate Ski), proceeds

nine miles to Red Mountain Alpine Lodge for two nights, then climbs over a rarely traveled hump of the San Juans for six miles to reach the newest attraction in the lot, Mount Hayden Backcountry Lodge, for a final night.

"You just can't do this kind of trip any other place in the U.S., not with such premium skiing and service," says SJMG's Nate Disser, who is certified by the International Federation of Mountain Guide Associations. He moved to Ouray—the ice-climbing capital of America—in 2012, after starting his Colorado guiding career in Durango. "I can distinctly remember, as a young man driving into this range, just being like, Holy shit. This is it. Whatever I'm going to do in the mountains, I'm going to do it here," he says.

Disser, 43, bought SJMG nine years ago, when it had a half dozen guides working year-round. Most of their winter gigs at the time were in ice climbing. Since then, following

12.21



Clockwise: The San Juan backcountry; Pagosa Springs, Colorado; San Juan National Forest



the boom in backcountry skiing, the winter guiding percentage has shifted to a ratio of 60/40 snow to ice, Disser says.

The San Juans' mining history has always been a boon to hut-tripping skiers. In the 1880s, Highway 550, a.k.a. the Million Dollar Highway (reportedly, it cost a million bucks per mile to build), connected a number of thriving silver mines and settlements between Silverton and Ouray. As that industry dried up and the once buzzing hubs became ghost towns, the communities that supported them struggled to fill the economic void. Hundreds of prospecting claims along Red Mountain Pass sat vacant, their value waning by the year. Starting in the mid-1970s, however, intrepid adventurers began to see opportunity in those vacant claims. The St. Paul Lodge, on the east side of the pass, was built by a British mountaineer named Chris George and opened in 1978 to cater to backcountry travelers. A live-in

hutkeeper (usually George) prepared meals. In the past decade, at least four other huts have opened along the highway, which runs north-south for about 25 miles through some of the most scenic and precipitous roadside terrain in the United States.

Our first stop, OPUS, built by a hardy backcountry skier named Bob Kingsley, opened in 2010 and sleeps 20 guests. It has world-class (albeit often avalanche-raked) ski slopes in every direction, solar-powered radiant heat, and a sign reminding visitors to turn off their cell phones, lest anyone forget why they came. We accessed it via a 3.5-mile trek up Ophir Pass Road.

The next morning, our group of two guides and eight skiers set out on skins under a bluebird sky with packs as small as 32 liters—about half the volume of my normal hut-trip haul. Soon we'd affixed crampons and booted up a col to the top of Paradise Basin, a towering amphitheater. We then descended north

RESORT BRIEF

Lift Off

This winter will see the unveiling of arguably the most technologically advanced butt hauler on this side of the Atlantic. Introducing the Kancamagus 8, a.k.a. Kanc 8, at New Hampshire's **Loon Mountain Resort**, the first eight-pack in the East and one of only a few such behemoths in the country. This particular beast features heated ergonomic seats that look like something out of a SpaceX rocket, a locking safety bar, individual footrests, and, of course, a tinted bubble to stave off that icy New England wind. The extra-wide chairs can be spun up to 12.5 miles per hour—making the Kanc 8 the fastest lift of its size in the U.S.—and can haul 3,500 skiers per hour to a mid-mountain station in 4.5-minute increments, which is barely enough time to cool your quads. It's likely the kickoff of a national overhaul to lift technology. Next up is Montana's **Big Sky Resort**, which will launch the Swift Current 6, a blazingly fast (read: 13.6 miles per hour), heated six-pack that will increase uphill capacity by 50 percent. —T.N.

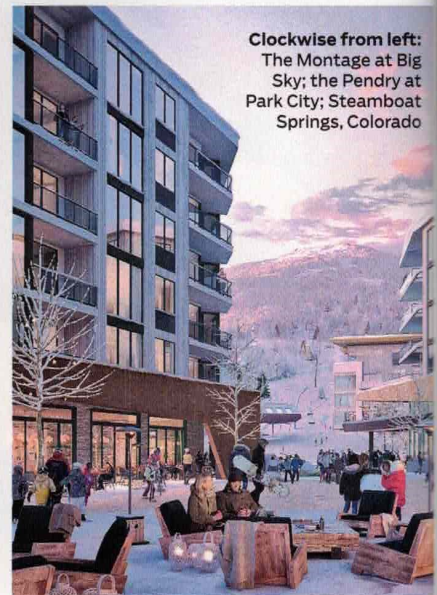
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**RESORT BRIEF**  
**Lodging Gets an Upgrade**

Most destination ski resorts need a robust real estate scene and high occupancy rates to help fund all the improvements that keep us coming back. This winter brings a slew of new places to snooze at some of the country's most iconic resorts.

**Aspen Snowmass** will see the opening of Viewline, a mid-mountain luxury complex that includes an Ayurvedic spa, 254 rooms, and 20 suites featuring sheepskin throws and awesome ski-in, ski-out access (from \$329). Meanwhile, in **Park City, Utah**, the Pendry (from

\$1,500) opens in Canyons Village with 152 rooms and the city's only rooftop pool. The project making the biggest splash is one of the largest of its kind ever to land in Montana: the Montage at **Big Sky** (from \$1,395). Clocking in at a whopping half-million square feet in the heart of the mountain village, the 139-room, 39-residence stunner looks out over the 8,400-foot Spanish Peaks and has six restaurants, an indoor lap pool, a 10,000-square-foot spa, and, just out the door, a 450-foot tubing park for kids. Of course, the 5,800 skiable acres just beyond your black-marble bathroom are the real attraction. —T.N.



Clockwise from left: The Montage at Big Sky; the Pendry at Park City; Steamboat Springs, Colorado

to Columbine Lake—the second of five basins we would travel through en route to Red Mountain Pass. We skied across long shelves ringed by giant cliffs, all the while gazing at the rugged ridgelines above us. In my notebook, so as not to forget, I jotted, “Enormity of landscape!”

Our descent of Bullion King ejected us onto Highway 550, not far from Red Mountain Alpine Lodge, a luxury chalet at 11,000 feet that opened in 2018. The timber-frame cabin sleeps 22 and is equipped with Wi-Fi and three bathrooms. But the surroundings are why we spent two nights here. There is no better place from which to launch an attempt of Red Mountain Number 3, one of the most popular summits in the south San Juans, with spectacular skiing off every side. We spent the next day hunting corn atop a stable spring snowpack until our legs felt mushy.

After rising on day four, sore and sunbaked, we embarked on our last big tour, heading up Senator Beck Basin toward cliff-ringed Savage Basin, which stares down into Telluride. A dozen fourteeners filled the skyline, and Utah's La Sal Mountains were faintly visible to the west. The wind howled as we removed our skins on an exposed

**RESORT BRIEF**  
**An Innovative Ski-Town Fix**

The mountain-town housing shortage intensified after a pandemic-fueled real estate boom drove out longtime residents and decimated the local workforce. Summer visitors to these locales report long waits and fewer services due to staffing shortages. Where does that leave us this ski season?

Resorts planned ahead. Starting this winter, **Aspen, Solitude, Sugarbush, Vail**, and others will pay non-tipped employees at least \$15 an hour, more than twice the federal minimum wage. **Mount Bohemia**, in Michigan, will trump them all by paying \$20 an hour. But finding an affordable place to live is as tricky as ever, especially if you want to settle down.

Enter the **Big Sky** Community Housing Trust, a newly formed nonprofit that makes the Montana haven of 3,000 full-time residents and some 4,000 vacation homes one of the most promising ski towns to live and work.

The trust, which is partially funded by a resort tax, builds on an idea



unfolding in **Vail**, where the town pays homeowners a percentage of their property value in exchange for saddling the property with a restricted deed that slows appreciation, lowers the sale price, and helps bolster a more affordable housing pool.

The Big Sky version uses grants and money from the resort tax to give the owners of second, third, and even fourth homes subsidies to rent their pads to local workers at reduced rates instead of going the Airbnb or Vrbo

route. The trust is also a key player in the construction of 52 gorgeous condos with restricted deeds that will sell for half their market value, with a hard 2 percent cap on annual appreciation.

That's a big difference in a place where the average condo now goes for \$1 million and a single-family home will set you back a cool \$2.2 million. “A regular working Joe just can't do that,” says Laura Seyfang, the trust's director. “We're trying to create a little balance here.” —T.N.

12.21

RESORT BRIEF

The Other End of the Rockies

There's so much in Colorado and Utah to be excited about this winter, with new lifts at **Breckenridge**, **Keystone**, and **Snow-basin**—to name a few—and a cat-skiing operation opening in **Loveland Ski Area's** Dry Gulch. But if you have the time and means for only one trip, make it count by going to **Taos Ski Valley**. The New Mexico resort, perhaps the least corporate of the major resorts in the Rockies, averages 300 inches of snow per year and has a smattering of new offerings this season. For starters, you can sign up for an exclusive three-day learning session with Olympian Deb Armstrong (gold, giant slalom, Sarajevo '84), who will personally coach you out of your poor angulation or whatever it is that ails you. She's in high demand, though, so for the rest of us, there's Taos's new pro-guided experience, where a local ripper will show you secret stashes and the best way to get your tails into the fall line on the double blacks off West Basin Ridge. Back down in the village, you'll find new attractions like an ice rink, dinner sleigh rides, and a skier-services building. —T.N.

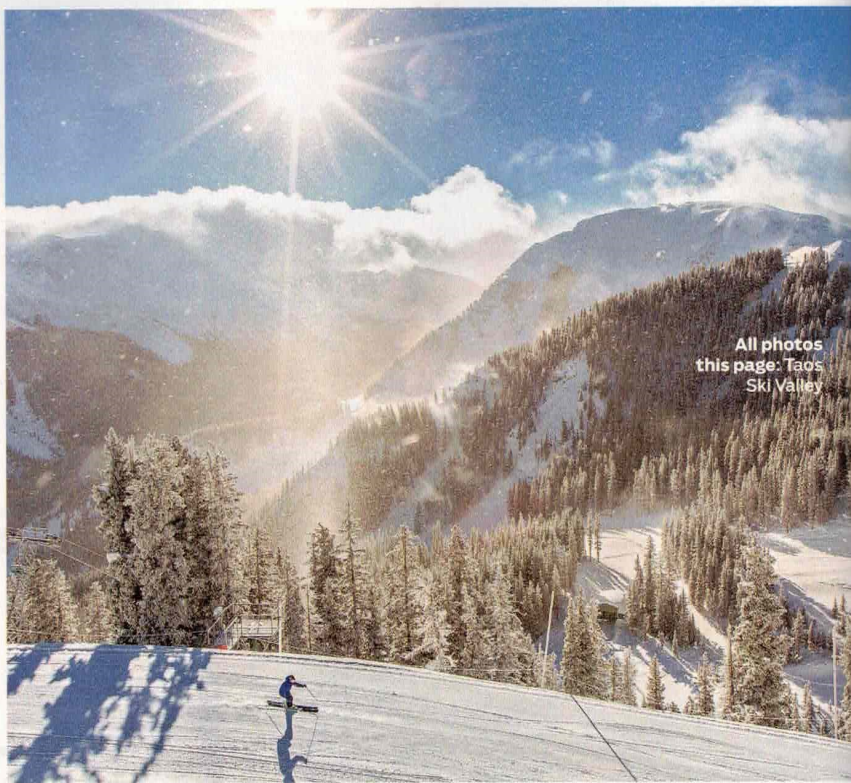
saddle at 13,300 feet. Disser then led us in the direction of Mount Hayden Backcountry Lodge, tucked away in the forest somewhere far below and out of sight.

Owner Eric Johnson greeted us upon arrival. A rock climber and former chef de cuisine at Flagstaff House Restaurant in Boulder, Johnson spent three years turning a decrepit 1980s cabin into a modern oasis before opening it for business in 2020. The 2,100-square-foot lodge, raised on a pair of mining claims just seven miles southwest of Ouray, sleeps 17; it runs on solar power and spring water that bubbles out of the mountain. A creek gurgles past the deck, not far from the wood-fired hot tub.

Some of our group headed out for an evening ski, flanked by the toothy summit of 13,036-foot United States Mountain and the Sneffels Range in the distance. Later, after a feast of lasagna, conversation turned to what the trip should be called—a debate that had been ongoing. Suggestions included the San Juan Haute Route, the San Juan Basin Bounce, and the Interconnect, but we eventually settled on the Million Dollar Traverse. "I just like the ring of it," Disser said.

DETAILS

*This all-inclusive, four-night trip costs \$1,999. Solid fitness and skiing ability are required.*



All photos this page: Taos Ski Valley



RESORT BRIEF

Power for the Powder

For all the fresh air, exercise, and soul resetting that sliding down snow-covered mountains offers, resort skiing can be pretty rough on Mother Nature. So it's worth mentioning that Alterra, Boyne, Powdr, and Vail—some of the biggest resort conglomerates in the game—banded together over the summer to fight climate change by signing an agreement aimed at reducing impact while lobbying for policy changes that make renewable energy the norm in the resort industry. This winter, **Park City** will take a big step toward fulfilling that goal by tapping into the Elektron Solar Project, an 80-megawatt solar farm southwest of Salt Lake City that will provide every last drop of electricity to the resort by 2023. —T.N.