

VAIL

A billion-dollar facelift promises to make this world-class ski town even better

BY TOM PASSAVANT



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If you stood at the corner of Willow Bridge Road and East Meadow Drive, in the heart of Vail, Colorado, this past summer, you probably didn't need to be told that enormous changes were taking place. Construction cranes and excavation sites were ubiquitous, as the village was in the middle of what was dubbed Vail's billion-dollar renewal.

Why the surge in upgrading one of the world's best ski resorts? Vail, 100 miles west of Denver on Interstate 70, is already the largest single ski mountain in North America, with over 5,000 acres of terrain. The Back Bowls, a.k.a. powder skier's heaven, are six miles wide. Its intermediate trails, which stairstep down the front side of the mountain, are as well groomed as the guests who circulate among the village's fine restaurants, art galleries and boutiques.

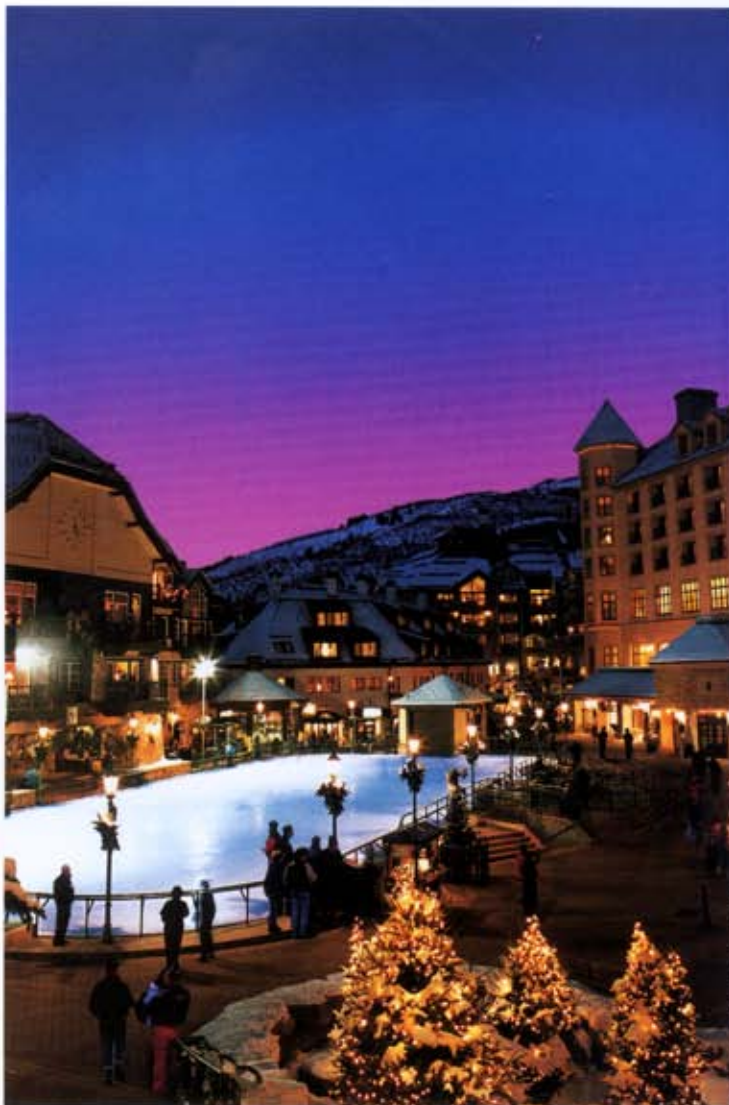
But four decades after it welcomed its first skiers, some parts of Vail were in need of a facelift. Over the past several years, Vail Resorts, the publicly held company that runs the mountain and owns key pieces of land at the base, has poured over \$125 million into on-mountain improvements, everything from better restaurants to upgraded lifts, trail maintenance and snowmaking.

As the mountain enhancements progressed, the

company announced a renewal effort called Vail's New Dawn. The centerpiece will be The Arrabelle at Vail Square, an old-world style mini-village of hotel rooms, condos, restaurants and shops at the center of LionsHead, the self-contained base area on the west side of town. The commitment to Arrabelle unleashed a flood of other redevelopment proposals. When the town of Vail stepped up to the plate with a major streetscape improvement plan, all the stars were in alignment. The bottom line: If you thought Vail evoked a pedestrian-oriented European ski village before, wait until you see what's ahead.

A good place to start checking out the changes is at One Willow Bridge Road, where 22 condominiums should be ready to receive guests this spring. And what condos they are: 2,000 square feet on average, with a perfect location in the heart of the village. Among the many distinctive amenities are artwork by Colorado artists, the high-tech electronic control panels in every room, and the fact that the property will be managed by the acclaimed Sonnenalp Resort, located virtually next door. Three-bedroom units are currently being offered for \$630,000 for a seven-week share.

The Sonnenalp itself is arguably Vail's very best hotel. This year there is more to enjoy in the form



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of 37 brand-new suites. The Sonnenalp's plush spa, fine food and exemplary service are among the lures.

Other top properties have undergone extensive renovations. The Vail Mountain Lodge & Spa, which houses the Vail Athletic Club and the popular Terra Bistro restaurant, has just emerged from a total update.

The Tivoli, one of Vail's original lodges, has been owned by Bob Lazier and his family since 1968. After knocking down the old lodge, they'll be welcoming their many repeat guests this winter to a totally rebuilt 65-room boutique hotel. In addition to some of the best views in Vail, The Tivoli will offer beautiful rooms starting at \$250, including breakfast, in high season. Two special notes: look for the Laziers' beloved Labrador, Indy, and check in the parking garage for a replica of the car that Bob's son, Buddy, drove when he won the Indianapolis 500 in 1996.

Several other high-profile developments won't be ready for occupancy for another year or two, but you can certainly buy (or at least reserve) a piece of the action right now. The aforementioned Arrabelle at Vail Square, due to open in the fall of 2007, is a six-story complex that includes a 39-room hotel operated by RockResorts (another part of Vail Resorts) and 67 whole-ownership condos. The condos sold out in a lottery, at \$750 to \$1,500 per square foot, but resales are a possibility.

Both Four Seasons and The Ritz-Carlton are getting into the game, too. A Ritz-Carlton Club, scheduled for completion in 2008, should begin offering whole ownership condominiums in LionsHead next to the Marriott this winter. Four Seasons is planning to open a combination hotel, fractional- and whole-ownership property in Vail Village by Christmas of 2007.

Another project on view from Willow Bridge Road and East Meadow Drive is the Vail Plaza Club. A 100-room hotel, 38 condos and two restaurants are at the heart of the development, due to debut in December 2006. One thing that sets the Vail Plaza Club apart is that specific fixed weeks are being offered for the condos, very appealing to those who have limited flexibility for their vacations. Two weeks' ownership starts at \$100,000.

But there's more to the Vail story than just resort redevelopment. The talk of the town for the past year has been Kelly Liken, a sophisticated dining room that wouldn't be out of place in any big city in America. The restaurant's namesake owner and chef uses local Colorado products to great advantage (the Meadow Mountain lamb is pure bliss), and hand-crafted cocktails like the tomato consommé martini will improve even the tallest of après-



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ski tales. Meanwhile, such favorites as Sweet Basil, La Tour and Larkspur keep delivering pleasure.

On the shopping front, old timers such as The Alaskan Shop, with first-rate Inuit soapstone carvings and artifacts, remains a favorite, as do the men's and women's fashions at Valbruna and Emata. And don't miss the new Axel's, where upscale Western wear is complemented by custom-made cowboy hats, hand-crafted by the remarkably knowledgeable Joshua Alis. The shop's belt buckle collection will also make you go weak in the knees: a copy of Roy Rogers' buckle, at \$2,750, brought visions of the ultimate birthday present. The Hopalong Cassidy model goes for a more modest \$1,500.

One final new addition to the Vail scene must be mentioned: that Vail police officer keeping tabs on speeders from his SUV on Interstate 70 is actually a dummy. Well, not always; real peace officers have been known to sit there as well. So make haste to see the new Vail this winter—but not too fast. ❄️



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