

## Aspen

Coffee-table magazines might have you believe that a tollgate outside ASPEN only admits film stars and the super-rich. This elite ski resort, two hundred miles west of Denver via Leadville, is indeed home to the likes of Cher, Jack Nicholson and Goldie Hawn, but it can be an affordable and very appealing place for anyone visit in summer - unless you're on an absolute shoestring budget. Visiting in winter requires more cash, though you can save money by commuting to the slopes from Glenwood Springs, less than fifty miles away.

From inauspicious beginnings in 1879, this pristine mountain-locked town developed slowly, thanks to its remote location, to become one of the world's top silver producers. By the time the silver market crashed fourteen years later, it had acquired tasteful residential palaces, grand hotels and an opera house. In the 1930s, when the population slumped below seven hundred, it was, ironically, the anti-poverty WPA program that gave the struggling community the cash to build its first crude ski lift in 1936. Entrepreneurs seized the opportunity presented by the varied terrain and plentiful snow, and the first chairlift was dedicated on Aspen Mountain (now known as Ajax) in 1947. Skiing has since spread to three more mountains - Aspen Highlands, Snowmass and Buttermilk Mountain, and the jet set arrived in force during the 1960s. Development is a burning political issue: tight architectural constraints have been placed on businesses (McDonald's is forbidden to have a neon sign), but the last decade has seen yet more Scandinavian-style lodges, condo blocks and giant houses that remain empty for most of the year.

**THE TOWN AND THE MOUNTAINS** Despite the virtually limitless recreation opportunities in the surrounding mountains, there's not all that much to do in Aspen itself. Even so, sitting around the town's leafy pedestrianized streets, watching the world go by, or browsing in the chichi stores and galleries is a pleasant way to spend a couple of hours. In summer, the Aspen Historical Society Museum, 620 W Bleeker St (tel 970/925-3721), offers walking tours of Aspen and nearby ghost towns. The Aspen Art Museum at 590 N Mill St (tel 970/925-8050) holds changing exhibits, lectures and special events; Aspen Center for Environmental Studies, 100 S Puppy Smith St (tel 970/925-5756), is a wildlife sanctuary, which gives guided nature tours of some of the taller peaks in the Elk Mountain Range.

Aspen's four mountains are run by the Aspen Ski Co (tel 970/925-1220 or 1-800/525-6200, ); call 1/888-ASPENSNO for conditions. The mogul-packed monster of Aspen Mountain, looming over downtown, is for experienced skiers only; Buttermilk is great for beginners, with an excellent ski school that offers a three-day guaranteed "Learn to Snowboard" program; the wide-open runs of Snowmass, though mostly for intermediate skiers, feature some testing routes. Aspen Highlands has some new high-speed lifts and offers excellent extreme skiing terrain. Daily lift tickets for all mountains cost \$45 (up to 27 years) or \$65 (27 years and older). Rental of skis, boots and poles usually costs around \$18 a day - you can also rent snowshoes in which to trek up and down the mountains. However, the town's best value has to be its fifty miles of groomed Nordic ski trails - one of the most extensive free cross-country trail networks in the US.

Cycling is the main summer pursuit; The Hub, 315 E Hyman Ave (tel 970/925-7970), has a wide range of bikes, while Timberline, 204 S Galena St (tel 970/925-9237), is the cheapest for mountain bikes, and also organizes tours. The Roaring Fork River, surging out of the Sawatch range, is excellent for kayaking and rafting, but sections can be dangerous and every summer sees a few fatalities. Blazing Paddles (\$55 for a half-day float trip; tel 970/925-5651) is not the lowest-priced company, but it does have a good safety record.

If you fancy walking in the mountains, the Silver Queen gondola climbs from 601 Dean St to the summit of Ajax (daily 10am-4pm; \$18), where guided nature walks set off on the hour from 11am to 3pm. Occasional free lunchtime concerts and talks are held up here, and there's a good restaurant. Even more alluring is the landscape around the twin purple-gray peaks of the Maroon Bells, fifteen miles southwest, soaring above the dark-blue Maroon Lake. The road is closed between 8.30am and 5pm, except for overnight campers with permits, travelers with disabilities and RFTA buses, which leave daily from the Rubey Park transit center (every 30min 9am-4.30pm; \$5 round-trip, or \$19 combination ticket with gondola ride). Details on hiking are available from the ranger station .

**ARRIVAL AND INFORMATION** In winter, Independence Pass on Hwy-82 from Leadville, which provides the quickest access to Aspen, is closed, and the detour through Glenwood Springs adds an extra seventy miles to the trip from Denver. The airport is four miles north of town on Hwy-82, served by local buses; if you fly into Denver, connecting flights bought in advance only cost another \$60 or so. Or you can take a door-to-door shuttle from the airport (be sure to book in advance); companies include Supershuttle (tel 1-800/258-3826) and Colorado Mountain Express (tel 1-800/222-2112). Numerous airlines fly into Eagle County Airport near Vail, eighty minutes from Aspen by car or by Colorado Mountain Express.

Once in Aspen, there's no problem getting around: the Roaring Fork Transit Agency (tel 970/925-8484) runs a free skiers' shuttle between the four mountains and serves the airport and outlying areas. The main Rubey Park transit center terminal is in the center of town on Durant Avenue.

Aspen's visitor center is at 425 Rio Grande Place (Mon-Fri 9am-5pm; tel 970/925-1940 or 1-800/290-1324). The free Aspen Daily News ("If you don't want it printed, don't let it happen") is an excellent source of local gossip,

news, and food and drink offers.

**EATING AND DRINKING** Many of Aspen's classy cafés and restaurants charge over \$25 for a main course, but good budget places exist and competition is keen. New restaurants open and close with alarming regularity; the list below consists of tried and trusted favorites. Note, too, that many of Aspen's bars serve good, reasonably priced food.

**Boogie's Diner** 534 E Cooper Ave (tel 970/925-6610). Airy second-floor atrium lined with vinyl and chrome for an inexpensive 50s-style diner experience; great meatloaf and killer shakes, but also few imaginative tofu-rich veggie options too.

**Explore Booksellers and Bistro** 221 E Main St (tel 970/925-5336). Great bookstore with high-quality creative vegetarian food, good espresso and pastries, and a shady roof terrace.

**Little Annie's** 517 E Hyman Ave (tel 970/925-1098). Lively, popular and unpretentious saloon-style restaurant. Potato pancakes and hearty stews for lunch, with huge trout, chicken, beef or rib dinner platters for around \$15.

**Main Street Bakery Café** 201 E Main St (tel 970/925-6446). Scrumptious, inventive New American cuisine, and an excellent wine list in a casual, chatty setting. Always busy in the morning for massive, fresh fruit-packed breakfasts.

**Mezzaluna** 624 E Cooper Ave (tel 970/925-5882) Mid-priced Northern Italian dishes for lunch or dinner, including wood-fired pizzas.

**Poppycocks** 609 E Cooper Ave (tel 970/925-1245). Open from 7am until 2pm, serving tasty crepes and smoothies.

**Takah Sushi** 420 E Hyman Ave (tel 970/925-8588). Phenomenonally good sushi and pan-Asian cuisine, in a buzzing, cheerful atmosphere. Highly recommended yet quite expensive.

**Wienerstube** 633 E Hyman Ave (tel 970/925-3357). The best breakfast in Aspen: eggs Benedict, Austrian sausage and Viennese pastries among other things. A great value. Tues-Sun 6.30am-2.30pm.

**ENTERTAINMENT AND NIGHTLIFE** Going out in Aspen, the capital of après-ski, is fun year-round and need not be expensive. Check the free papers for special offers. In summer, downtown hosts several top-notch festivals. The flagship event is the nine-week-long Aspen Music Festival, between late June and late August, when orchestras and operas feature well-known international performers, as well as promising students who come to learn from musical masters (tel 970/925-9042); July and early August see the DanceAspen festival (tel 970/925-7718), which showcases reliably good contemporary shows.

**Double Diamond** 450 S Galena St tel 970/920-6905. Aspen's top live rock music venue, occasionally featuring nationally known acts. Usually free before 10pm and the drink prices are reasonable.

**J-Bar** 330 E Main St, in the Hotel Jerome tel 970/920-1000. This grand bar is a good place to soak in the hotel's atmosphere and rub elbows with well-heeled hotel guests.

**Red Onion** Cooper St Mall tel 970/925-9043. Aspen's oldest bar, serving big portions of Mexican food and good burgers. A popular après-ski spot, especially for its lethal line in jello shots.

**Shooters** 220 S Galena St tel 970/925-4567. Swinging Country and Western bar that also holds a popular Tuesday night non-Country disco.

**Woody Creek Tavern** Upper River Rd, Woody Creek tel 970/923-4585. Unpretentious local bar, where ranch hands and rock stars shoot pool, guzzle fresh lime-juice margaritas and eat good Tex-Mex. The bar is in tiny Woody Creek - seven miles north of Aspen along Hwy-82, right on River Road, and then first left.