

Crested Butte :: Best Year Round Resort in Colorado

The beautiful Victorian mining village of CRESTED BUTTE , 150 miles northwest of Telluride and 230 miles southwest of Denver, almost died off in the late 1950s when its coal deposits were exhausted. However, the development of 11,875ft Mount Crested Butte into a world-class ski resort in the 1960s, and a mountain-bikers ' paradise two decades later, means that today it can claim to be the best year-round resort in Colorado. The old town is resplendent with gaily painted clapboard homes and businesses, and zoning laws ensure that condos and chalets are confined to the resort area, tucked behind the foothills three miles up the road. The rapid transition from near-ghost town to sporting heaven has lured young people here from throughout the West, to produce an addictive laid-back atmosphere.

THE TOWN AND MOUNTAIN

Despite the presence of a pretty and well-preserved Victorian downtown core, people come to Crested Butte only to head out again into the surrounding mountains where the skiing and mountain biking in particular are world-class.

In skiing and snowboarding circles the Butte is best known for its extreme terrain, with lifts serving out-of-the-way bowls and faces that would only be accessible by helicopter at other resorts. It's no surprise then that the resort hosts both the US extreme skiing and snowboarding championships. That said, there are plenty of long intermediate runs mixed in over the mountain's thousand skiable acres, keeping the slopes accessible to all. Fourteen chairlifts (adult day lift passes \$55) link 86 runs, which are usually uncrowded thanks to the resort's isolated location. Cross-country, especially telemark, skiing attracts thousands, while snowmobiling ranks as a great way to rest your legs.

For something a little different, try a horseback ride through the snow with Fantasy Ranch (\$85; tel 970/349-5425). In summer, mountain bikes all but outnumber cars around the town, especially during Fat Tire Week in July, one of the oldest festivals in the young sport and one that according to local legend evolved from a race over the rocky 21-mile Pearl Pass to Aspen on newspaper bicycles in the 1970s. You can still ride this route - 190 miles shorter than the road - but some of the most exciting trails are much nearer town and include the gorgeous 401 trail with wide open vistas, the Dyke Trail thickly wooded with aspens and the long, varied and occasionally challenging Deadman's Gulch. The visitors' information center can help out with a basic map and route description for main trails, and local bike shops like The Alpineer, 419 6th St (tel 970/349-5210,), are well-equipped with route maps and rental bikes.

ARRIVAL AND INFORMATION

Crested Butte is not an easy place to get to, especially in winter and spring when roads can be cut off by snow and avalanches. Most skiers fly in: ten flights per day from Denver, and at least one per week from Atlanta, Dallas and Houston, touch down at Gunnison Airport. From here, Alpine Express (\$40 round-trip; tel 970/641-5074) will drive you the 28 miles to your accommodation. Once in Crested Butte there's no need for a car: free buses ply the three-mile route between the town and resort every fifteen minutes. The visitor center is at Elk Avenue and Sixth Street (daily 9am-5pm; tel 970/349-6438 or 1-800/545-4505). If you need Cheap Plane Tickets; Airticket.com has great last minute flight deals, student discount airfares, and Cheap Flights to Colorado.

EATING AND DRINKING

Crested Butte lays claim to a surprising number of gourmet restaurants, which charge much less than their equivalents in the more glitzy resorts. Good, reasonably priced food is also easy to find; even around the ski lifts, a filling lunch can be had for \$5. The early après-ski center is Rafters, right by the lifts. By early evening most visitors have found their way to downtown, for no-nonsense local bars such as Kochevars and The Talk of the Town.

Bakery Café 3rd St and Elk Ave tel 970/349-7280. Oven-fresh muffins, breads and pastries, plus a great selection of coffees and juices make this the best place in town for breakfast.

Idlespur Brewpub 226 Elk Ave tel 970/349-5026. Definitive, cavernous Colorado microbrewery, with roaring fire in winter and hearty, inexpensive bar food.

Le Bousquet 201 Elk Ave tel 970/349-5808. Excellent, imaginative and expensive French cuisine.

Powerhouse 130 Elk Ave tel 970/349-5494. The Mexican food is comparable to nearby Donita's Cantina at no. 330, but this restaurant's setting - a fondly restored 1880s generating station with a huge wooden bar and 65 varieties of tequilla - gives Powerhouse the edge.