

The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD

SUMMER ACTIVITIES ON SKI MOUNTAIN

BY JON MARCUS | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

ASPEN, Colo. — Gondolas glide up and down the mountain as visitors sip espressos and browse through galleries and shops. But the town is unhurried and uncrowded, and there's the sound of songbirds and the smell of lilacs.

This is Aspen's "secret season," after the snow melts and the skiers have gone home. And, like other ski resorts, the town is trying to make the most of it.

There's a new summer theater festival, joining the revered 66-year-old Aspen Music Festival, which features 400 summertime performances by classical musicians. The art museum has a new home designed by Pritzker Award-winning architect Shigeru Ban. There's white-water rafting, fishing, clay-shooting, kayaking, rock-climbing, mountain-biking, paragliding, and hiking.

"We understand the skiing is world class, but our summer offerings are just as magnificent," said Debbie Braun, president and CEO of the Aspen Chamber Resort Association.

Ski area travelers accustomed to seeing mountains covered with snow are branching into summer and fall, pushed by the popularity of mountain biking and other adventure sports, and the ski areas by the need to keep the money coming in as winter weather grows increasingly unpredictable.

"There's an incredible amount of infrastructure at a ski area, and for it to be dormant in the summer is not a strategy that in this market is sustainable," said Michael Berry, president of the National Ski Areas Association, or NSAA, who started his career with a job at Loon Mountain in New Hampshire. "The actual creation of the ski resort itself as a summer destination has really picked up significant momentum."

New England ski resorts in particular have been on a building spree this year. In Vermont alone, Killington is investing \$3.5 million in new amenities, including a 4,800-foot mountain coaster, a four-story ropes course, a 5,000-square-foot maze, and a zip line. Stowe is launching the multimillion-dollar SummerStowe, featuring a 60-mile-an-hour zip line down Mount Mansfield, a ropes course at the mountain's base (pictured at right), and a children's summer adventure camp. Okemo is adding lift-served mountain biking. Smugglers' Notch, life-sized foosball and flyboarding.

"Our business during the wintertime historically has been really positive, but we definitely are trying to spread that out and bring a little parity to all four seasons," said Killington spokesman Michael Joseph. "We're looking for crossover from our skiers and riders to become bikers and hikers."

Eighty-four percent of ski areas now operate in the summer, up nearly 40 percent in the last five years. Summer business has grown to contribute 11 percent of their revenues, on average, an increase from 9 percent in 2009.



Ski areas are being pushed to do business in the warmer seasons for largely existential reasons. The \$3 billion-a-year industry is hobbled by a slow annual growth rate of about 2 percent, according to industry analysts IBISWorld, and the fast pace of consolidation has left smaller independent resorts particularly vulnerable; more than half of the market is now controlled by just four companies. With winters warming, they've had to invest in more snowmaking equipment, even as the seasons have shrunk.

"Ski season used to start around Thanksgiving here and it would go until after Easter," said Braun, in Aspen. "Now it's hitting around Christmastime, and the community is talking about, how do we prepare for the future?"

The boom in summertime activities is being propelled by the fortuitous popularity of sports including mountain biking, which has seen its number of regular participants grow from 7 million to more than 8 million in the last three years, according to the Outdoor Foundation. Mountain and BMX biking combined are now the second-most popular outdoor activities, after running, with 1.2 billion total annual outings. Outdoor climbing is also up 16 percent, and trail-running more than 10 percent.

Ski resorts are hoping to cash in on this.

"It helps us with our bottom line, but it also helps the restaurants and inns in the whole region," Joseph said.

What's been hard is letting people know about it.

The average ski resort attracts just 50,000 visitors per summer, a fraction of its winter traffic, a study by the NSAA found. Nearly 40 percent of travelers say it never occurred to them to visit a ski area in the off season.

Bad for them; good for you. To attract business, ski areas that typically don't have to offer discounts in the winter lavish them on summer guests. Visiting a ski resort in the summer costs about \$76 per day, compared with \$102 per day in the winter, not including lodging and transportation, the NSAA says. (It's also cooler than in the lower elevations.)

At Stratton, summer visitors can buy a package that includes lodging, fitness, and yoga classes, and a credit toward a kayak tour or round of golf, starting at \$74 per person, per night. Jay Peak offers a \$217-per-night deal on lodging and its indoor water park.

Mount Snow offers 18 holes of golf with a cart for just \$29 per person, and one night free when guests book two nights in a Mount Snow resort condo. It also boasts what it says is the longest introductory downhill mountain bike trail in the East, and offers lessons and a lift and trail pass for \$109 per person.

Smuggler's Notch has a treetop obstacle course and zip line. Mount Sunapee in New Hampshire has added downhill mountain biking down a mile-long banked trail, with three more trails planned, and bike rentals and lessons are available; it also has a golf course, zip line, and climbing tower. Killington has begun to keep its Peak Lodge open in the summers to serve hikers and mountain bikers. And several ski mountains give off-season gondola and lift rides.

Some summer events at ski areas are downright free — designed to lure customers who may dine, drink or stay — including Okemo's Jackson Gore Summer Music and Killington's Cooler in the Mountains series, plus craft and antiques shows and farmers' markets. There are also trail and obstacle runs.

Ski resorts' biggest summer activities remain such small-scale affairs as weddings, conferences, and family reunions. Alpine slides, zip lines, challenge courses, water parks, and mountain coasters are more profitable but less common because they're expensive to build.

But business pressures, and an easing of regulations beginning last year by the US Forest Service, which owns the land at many ski areas, are opening the way for more of those.

"We have all the amenities. To let it sit there all summer while the bills keep coming in is crazy," said Fred Baybutt, co-owner of Granite Gorge Ski Area in New Hampshire, which this summer is adding a disc golf course. "Your summer operations support your winter, to a large degree. You've got to have that cash flow to get everything rolling again. It gives us a real shot in the arm when we need it."

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PAUL SCHULENBURG

HERE

EXHIBITION CELEBRATES HOPPER'S FAR REACH

See works by contemporary artists who've been inspired by Edward Hopper in a new exhibition at the Cape Cod Museum of Art in Dennis called "After Hopper." Hopper summured in Truro for decades in a house overlooking Cape Cod Bay, and captured the stunning beauty of the region. The exhibition, created by Truro-based Helen Addison, owner of the Addison Art Gallery, runs Aug. 29 through Nov. 15, and celebrates the impact Hopper (1882-1967) has had on American art and his influence on contemporary artists. (Pictured above, Paul Schulenburg's oil "Inside Cafe Heaven.") The museum will host receptions, demon-

strations, artist panels, and talks by Hopper experts. Free admission. 508-385-4477, www.ccmoa.org

SLEEP AT A BREWERY ON MID-COAST MAINE

Stay at the Oxbow Brewing Co.'s farmhouse in Newcastle, Maine, and get a private tour of the brewery and property, and a \$25-per-night credit for the onsite tasting room. The open-concept home sits on 18 acres, and has three bedrooms, a full kitchen, Wi-Fi, and views of a pond, the woods, and the brewery. When you're not sampling the farmhouse ales, explore the gardens and the old logging roads that wind around the property. The farmhouse, new to the rental market, is located just 10 minutes from Damariscotta in mid-coast Maine,

and 30 minutes from Pemaquid Beach. Rates start at \$255 per night; book through Airbnb.com. 207-315-5962, oxbowbeer.com/farmhouse-rental

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AN APP TO GUIDE YOU THROUGH ORLANDO'S PARKS

Download the new Orlando Undercover Tourist app to help make the most of your time at the city's three major theme parks: Walt Disney World, Universal Orlando Resort, and SeaWorld Orlando. The app, available free to Apple users, gives you info on wait times at attractions, show times, and character greetings. It also helps you create a detailed plan for your trip: Select a preset touring plan or tweak a plan to suit your own interests and preferences. If you like to sleep in, for instance, you can create a custom itinerary that tells you the best time for late risers to visit rides, shows, and character. Then view, save, and check off activities for the one- and two-day plans, or customize an itinerary with your FastPass reservations, top picks, and other notes. www.undercvertourist.com/apps

DOLLY PARTON UNVEILS HER FIRST RESORT

Visit Dollywood in the Great Smoky Mountains and you can stay at Dolly Parton's first-ever resort property. Dollywood's DreamMore Resort just opened

at Parton's legendary theme park in Pigeon Forge, Tenn., offering 300 rooms and one suite. Enjoy stunning views of the mountains from the lobby, live entertainment onsite, and meals with a Southern twist at the resort's farmhouse-inspired restaurant Song & Hearth. Or just kick back in a rocking chair on the front porch. The family-friendly spot also has kids' play areas, storytelling spots, indoor and outdoor pools, and a spa. Guests get free transportation to Dollywood and Dollywood's Splash Country, a free TimeSaver pass for each person, early entry for guests at Dollywood on Saturdays, and other perks. Rates start at \$179. 800-365-5996, www.dollywoodsdreammore.com

EVERYWHERE

A CASUAL SHOE FOR ACTIVE TRAVELERS

Keen's Uneek sandals stand their ground as the perfect travel shoe: They're easy to slip off at airport security, at the beach, or before stepping into your Japanese lodge, for in-



stance, yet they provide plenty of cushioned support to be on your feet all day, whether you're exploring city streets or nature trails. The comfy sandals (pictured above) have Keen's traditional form-fitting footbed with great arch support, and a flexible yet supportive upper made of braided cord. They have bungee laces and non-marking soles, and they dry quickly after getting wet. \$99.95. www.keenfootwear.com

SHARE MOVIES AND MORE WITH MINI PROJECTOR

Xsories makes several palm-sized projectors (pictured below) for those on the go, but the latest X-Project Wi-Fi device

adds top features in a super-portable package. The 10-ounce Pico

projector lets you connect wirelessly with other devices on the same Wi-Fi network, or share photos and videos by secure digital card or USB sticks. Its 100-lumen LED screen projects brilliant colors and sharp images, so you can share high-quality vacation photos and summertime movies on the side of a house or camper, for instance, or work presentations on a screen while traveling. The simple device comes with a handy remote that's easy to use. \$499.99 at REI.com, or get a less fancy model without Wi-Fi for \$269.99-\$399.99. www.xsories.com

KARI BODNARCHUK

