



BY JACOB HARKINS

VISTA VERDE

DUDE RANCHING IN SNOW



WHEN I WAS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, I vividly remember the feeling of going to bed, knowing snow was on the way. I'd wake up and rush to the radio, listening for the magic words: "...West Hartford Public Schools, canceled..." Snow Day!

My friends and I would then gather in our cul-de-sac, with sleds, mittens, shovels and all sorts of other winter gear and play all day long building forts, sledding and hitting each other with snowballs. Our mothers had hot chocolate waiting for us upon our return. Those are some of my favorite childhood memories—experiences that had drifted deep into the memory bank. That is until my girlfriend, Sophia, and I stumbled onto Vista Verde, one of the many dude ranches in Colorado, but among a minority that offers winter stays and activities.

Our quick weekend at the ranch, that sits on 600-plus acres about 25 miles north of Steamboat Springs, was similar to those childhood snow days, except the hot chocolate was replaced by gourmet meals, and a four-stroke Artic Cat was there to carry us to the top of the sled hill.

Vista Verde is a five-star luxury resort, although Dace, one of the managers there, told us it could be a struggle to reach such a rating from agencies such as AAA. The gorgeous cabins don't come equipped with telephones and flat screen TVs—on purpose. Yet those are critical criteria in the luxury ratings.

If you really need to check email or watch some TV, you have to amble over to a common building. Why would you ruin a pristine getaway with technology?

This is not to say the cabins are rustic.

Our recently remodeled three-bedroom, three-bath home included plush couches, a cast iron wood-burning stove (that was restocked with wood daily), hand-crafted wood furniture, amazingly warm comforters and a private hot tub. The place also offers some pretty nice views.

But by the time we returned to our cabin each day, we had little energy to do anything but soak in the hot tub, stoke the fire and slide off to sleep.

After arriving late on a Friday evening, we enjoyed the last half-hour of live music provided in the main lodge by two Steamboat-area performers, a beer and some leftovers from the earlier dinner service.

We turned in, exhausted from the four-hour, snow filled drive from Denver.

The next morning we awoke to an absolute winter paradise—more than 300 inches of snow had already fallen on the ranch by late January, leaving the cabins buried and walkways resembling tunnels with shoulder-high snow banks. Beyond the ranch's boundaries, all we could see was the wilderness of Vista's backyard: two million acres of Routt National Forest land.

Over breakfast, we arranged for a morning of back-country skiing. We dressed warm and met with guide

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RELAX WITH SOME COCOA IN COMFORT. Neve sweater zip (\$148), Burton Padding scarf (\$40) and Marker Low Rise pant (\$199) available at Christy Sports.

Mary for a Nordic Skiing 101 primer. What Nordic lacks in excitement it makes up for in peace, tranquility and a killer buttocks workout. Though technically a guide, Mary made the experience feel like it was simply three friends out for an enjoyable day in the backcountry. Later in the trip, two guides—Cullen and Mary—used a snowmobile to bring us deep into Routt National Forest for a more secluded ski tour adventure. They catered to our specific needs.

Basically, each time we sat down for a meal, a Vista guide asked us what we wanted to do next. We found they could meet almost any request. We took a two-hour horseback ride, a trip perfect for a novice or an accomplished equestrian. Dana, another guide, led us on a quick snowshoe trip, just for fun.

And of course, there was sledding. Dana and Cullen took turns shuttling us to the top of a killer sledding hill, giving us access to a few hundred yards of powder tubing.

In case you hadn't noticed, we were on a first-name basis with everyone there, which added to the ranch's charm—and is part of the reason we've been glowing about our weekend getaway ever since.

More info at www.vistaverde.com

TAOS *cont. from page 31*

Taos checklist to waste time drinking and soaking in the warm afternoon sun.

And that is really the only complaint we had on our trip. Because of busy work schedules, we had only 48 hours to spare for the weekend jaunt. That wasn't nearly enough for two, first-time visitors.

Beyond the skiing, we wanted to soak in the culture that permeates the region. We also wanted to enjoy the natural desert beauty of the area, a stark contrast to the Front Range foothills.

We crammed in nightlife at the historic Adobe Bar of the Taos Inn (where we stayed); ate ox tail at Joseph's Table—a tasty, albeit overpriced, fine dining restaurant; found great deals on haute art; and enjoyed one of the premier ski areas in the United States (a feeling shared with many avid skiers).

Still, we wanted more.

When I told a friend we were heading to Taos, the former resident of the New Mexico town gave me two pieces of advice: Check the hot springs at the bottom of Taos Gorge and hike up from the top lift and hit some of the chutes and powder.

I'll add this to his list: If you're visiting for the first time, take at least three days so you can enjoy it all.

More info at www.skitaos.org

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