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JOURNEYS; Jackson Hole Grows Up

By CHRISTOPHER SOLOMON

THE Jackson Hole Mountain Resort in Wyoming long prided itself as the dominatrix of North America's ski areas. By day the resort in the shadow of the Grand Tetons thrilled and bruised its devotees with bucking bronco-rides down runs like the Paintbrush. It dared them to try the mine shaft drop into Corbet's Couloir and cajoled them to doing one more lap on the ski area's 4,139-foot vertical aerial tram.

And by night, barring a 12-mile drive to the town of Jackson, almost the sole outlet at the ski area for recuperation was a numbing margarita and a plate of nachos at a collegiate-level watering hole called the Mangy Moose.

No longer. This winter, intermediates and beginners can spend their days carving turns on coiffed runs, then entrust their snowboards to a valet at a mountainside spa and head for a soak beneath a heated waterfall or a dip in a heated outdoor pool with a view of the Tetons in the distance. After hydraulic kneading by a 36-nozzle Swiss shower, the next stop is dinner at the new, slope-side Four Seasons Resort -- none of whose courses, it's a fair bet, will be accompanied by a blob of sketchy guacamole.

Greetings from the new Jackson Hole. The resort that has long nurtured a rawhide mystique has now fully embraced its softer side. Developers and Kemmerer Resources, the ski area's owner, have spent \$300 million to \$400 million over the last seven years to remake the slightly scruffy Teton Village, as the base area is called, including \$60 million to upgrade or replace lifts and other slope amenities. Seven new high-end hotels, condominiums and town-house developments have opened, doubling the number of beds, to 3,200. By the time the Four Seasons opens for business next Thursday, two full-service spas and five new restaurants will have opened in the last seven years.

The goal: To broaden Jackson Hole's appeal beyond its traditional clientele of testosterone-rich but cash-poor, young men, and draw affluent intermediate-level skiers and families -- clientele that ski-area operators see as the future of skiing. The Jackson Hole ski village is only one of the latest, including Copper Mountain in Colorado to Squaw Valley in California, to have been recently transformed into an opulent all-season resort where skiing is just part of an experience that may also include everything from shopping to mountain biking.

"These resorts don't make a lot of money," said Jeff Harbaugh, a business consultant and a columnist for action-sports trade publications. "It's much easier from a cash-flow point of view to manage a resort business when there's money coming in year round." And to accomplish that, many resorts say that they need to offer something for everyone, not just the ski bum with patches of duct tape on his parka.

Jackson Hole has "always been hard-core and a little bit behind the curve from a development aspect, which gave it a really nice feel," said the ski-film star Rob DesLauriers, a co-owner of the new Teton Mountain Lodge, a 129-unit condominium hotel. "But the Wild, Wild West is going to go bankrupt in today's ski industry."

As die-hard skiers grow older -- and want to spend vacations with families and friends who have been reluctant to ski Jackson Hole because of its tough, no-frills reputation -- the area hopes a "Milder Wild West," will sell, Mr. DesLauriers said.

Not everyone thinks that bigger or cushier is better, however. Stories about growth in Jackson Hole and its effect on traffic, housing costs and wildlife have become regular fixtures in the local paper, The Jackson Hole News & Guide.

And while he says he wants the mountain to succeed, Franz Camenzind, executive director of the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance and a wildlife cinematographer, said that he worried that growth could change the character of the area. He said his central concerns included a proposal to build more than 300 more condominiums and homes as well as a golf course and shopping area on several hundred acres next to Teton Village.

Some locals and longtime Jackson Hole fans say they also worry that the drive to attract a big-spending set of less hard-core skiers will soon have the mountain chipping away at its challenging terrain by grading slopes and removing obstacles. (Jerry Blann, president of the Jackson Hole Mountain Resort, said that only some very minor contouring had been done.)

"A ski mountain is much more than a mountain. It's the way you feel about the town and the locals," said David Gonzales, a Jackson resident who wrote "Jackson Hole: On a Grand Scale" (Mountain Sports Press, 2001), a history of the ski area's development. "If everything at the base of the ski resort is totally foofoo, that is going to have an impact."

FOOFOO or not, anyone who hasn't visited Jackson Hole for a while should be prepared for a surprise. Gone is much of the Swiss chalet-style architecture at the base of 10,450-foot Rendezvous Mountain. In its place rise six-story piles of stone and heavy beams styled after classic National Park Service lodges.

But there is nothing rustic about these places. At the Four Seasons Resort, the first slope-side project for Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, guests can request in-room boot fittings or rent skis online so the equipment is ready when they arrive. A uniformed attendant will linger around the heated outdoor pool to hand warm robes to swimmers. Each of the rooms has a DVD player and high-speed Internet access, and when an owner of one of the 40 shared-ownership units in the residence club departs, staffers will photograph the rooms, pack up any personal property and replace the items before that owner returns.

One of the resort's most prominently advertised features is an 11,685-square-foot spa with 16 treatment rooms, including two private suites, each with a fireplace. Among the treatments offered are a hot-stone massage, clay body wraps and the "alpine berry body ritual," in which guests are rubbed down with a mixture of local berries, wild honey and peppermint.

The 130-room Snake River Lodge and Spa, bought by Vail Resorts two years ago and given a \$38 million renovation, has goose-down comforters on the beds and granite bathroom counters. It is best known, however, for the 17,000-square-foot Avanyu Spa, which pampers bruised skiers with river-rock massages, a heated waterfall that spills into an indoor-outdoor pool and hydrotherapy tubs of milk-whey baths like those Cleopatra supposedly swore by.

Even the once-unprepossessing Inn at Jackson Hole, a Best Western property, now boasts Vertical, a glossy bistro with a two-story wine tower at its center and a menu that features items like bruschetta with soft-smoked salmon pâté and artisanal cheeses from the Cowgirl Creamery in California.

As far back as 1965, the ski area's original founders, Paul McCollister and Alex Morley, had visions of a larger alpine village but never had the money or the land to create it. In 1992, Mr. McCollister, by then the full owner, sold the area to Kemmerer Resources, owned by the Kemmerer family, which dug a fortune from Wyoming's coal seams. Teton County officials feared an explosion of growth and declared a moratorium on building until a master plan for development was in place. That plan and an agreement with the United States Forest Service, which leases the mountain to the ski resort and must vet any on-slope changes, were approved in the mid-1990's. After that, Teton Village started to boom.

Indeed, in going upscale, Teton Village is only playing catch-up with the rest of the huge valley that is Jackson Hole. In 1998 Aman Resorts, the Singapore-based high-end resort company, opened the \$700-a-night Amangani hotel atop East Gros Ventre Butte, just outside the town of Jackson. From 1990 to 2000 the county's population grew more than 60 percent, to 18,251, according to census statistics. Among today's part-time residents: Vice President Dick Cheney; the World Bank president, James Wolfensohn; and a lot of "two-two-eight-ers" -- local slang for couples who spend two weeks a year in their 8,000-square-foot trophy homes.

The base village's spurs-to-spas transformation was created to appeal to this well-heeled demographic. But

with increased development and a rise in the number of part-time homeowners (drawn, at least in part, by the fact that there is no state income tax), have come increased tensions. The difficulties are nowhere so evident as in housing: from 1989 to 2000 the county's median household income grew 72 percent, to \$54,600. But the median home price jumped even more, by 174 percent, to \$365,000, from 1990 to 2000. Today many of the people who work in Jackson Hole live in outlying communities like Victor, Idaho, and must make a 45-minute commute over treacherous Teton Pass. "Jackson, California," is what some residents now ruefully call their hometown.

Still, even critics of Jackson Hole's new upscale face said that the resort had done some things to court them. They praised, for example, a decision in 1999 to open the ski area's boundary gates permanently so the intrepid could enter the wild, powder-choked terrain of the surrounding Bridger-Teton National Forest. "My friends and I who ski here, we rarely ski in-bounds anymore," said Mr. Gonzales. (Of course, visitors unfamiliar with the backcountry and its hazards can hire a guide for up to \$200 a day.)

And Mr. Blann, the resort president, said that despite all the new luxury touches and creature comforts at the base, die-hards would not be disappointed with the "new" Jackson Hole. "The hard edges, if you will, of Jackson that really do attract the true extreme skier cannot, and will not, change," he said. "It's not only part of our brand and our essence, it is steeped in 38 seasons of skiing on this mountain."

Correction: January 2, 2004, Friday A front-page picture caption in this section on Dec. 12 with an article about development at the Jackson Hole ski area in Wyoming identified the pool incorrectly. It is at the Teton Mountain Lodge, not the Snake River Lodge.

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