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## Jackson Hole: The Thrills Feel Seismic

By DEBORAH WEISGALL

THE little 19-seat propeller plane took off from Denver into clouds trailing a spring storm, and followed the Continental Divide northwest to Jackson Hole, Wyo. Over the Wind River mountains the clouds began to shred; I saw veins of creeks and bonelike ridges of conifers black against fresh snow. Skiing through that snow would be as light as flying through these clouds.

The plane started its descent. To the west the horns and cirques of the Tetons pierced the clouds like a brilliant obbligato to the line of the earth. Abrupt and startling, the mountains soared without foothills a mile above the valley floor. To the east rose the equally high Gros Ventre Range. Tetons and ventre: breasts and belly -- the French trappers' names for this place.

I climbed out of the cramped plane. The air was cold and arid; the sun, in and out of clouds, hot. Silvery light glinted on the new snow. The valley was like a hammered silver basin, so beautiful that it almost hurt to look at it. I am an avid skier. I was fresh from 10 days in Aspen last March, but suddenly I didn't care what I did; sitting still and looking would have been enough. The Tetons are only eight million years old, and Jackson Hole (a hole was what the mountain men called a high valley) shimmers with seismic energy; you can almost see geology happening here.

The road we took went straight toward Jackson, the largest town, 10 miles south. Gray split-rail fences bordered snowfields. Along creeks, cottonwoods and willows flushed vermilion and gold. Only two cars passed. Between the airport and town almost the only building is the National Wildlife Art Museum, whose rock facade clings like an outcropping to the side of a butte. The National Elk Refuge, created by Congress in 1912 after much of the huge herd of elk in the valley starved one brutal winter, extends to the town line.

The Federal Government owns much of the land in this corner of Wyoming. Congress preserved the Yellowstone wilderness as the first national park in 1872, the year after Thomas Moran had painted the Tetons and Yellowstone, grand peaks luminous with promise. The valley remained a wild, harsh and empty place of surpassing beauty long after most of the West succumbed to interstates. In 1981, John McPhee, in "Basin and Range," could write about a geologist as a latter-day mountain man. Jackson Hole was always a retreat for the very rich; in the last decade, it has come to symbolize the new and improved West: big, freshly earned dollars, the good life and the remote office.

Its longtime residents fear that it might suffer the same terminally glamorous fate as Aspen. But Jackson Hole has no mining-town history, and so far, only a little glitz has managed to cling, looking silly and out of place, like tinsel in July.

Jackson is mostly self-effacing: tourist shops, outlets, sports equipment stores, Western art galleries. Archways made of elk antlers adorn the town square. You can get a cappuccino at any one of a number of coffeehouses and buy full-color cowboy boots decorated with mermaids, but not the Chanel pumps and lame ski suits sold in Aspen. On Mondays in Moose, about halfway up the valley, a restaurant called Dornan's holds a hootenanny. Otherwise, not much happens.

Although three million tourists pass through Jackson Hole on the way to and from Yellowstone in the summer, less than a tenth of that number visit in the winter. Most come, as I did, for the skiing. There are three areas near the valley: Snow King; Grand Targhee, on the gentler and often snowier western slope of the Tetons; and the Jackson Hole Ski Area, whose precipitous runs are as legendary as the landscape.

At the Jackson Hole Ski Area, there is a prominent warning sign: "This mountain is like nothing you have skied before. Its terrain offers everything from groomed slopes to dangerous cliffs. And its weather is just as

variable." Many American resorts avoid such risks and bulldoze and otherwise reconfigure the terrain for comfort and conveyor-belt skiing: down a slope, up a high-speed lift, down again.

Teton Village, the Jackson Hole Ski Area's newer development, has changed little since it was built in the 1960's; hotels, stores and condominiums cluster around an Alpine-looking clock tower. The best places to stay on the mountain are the Alpenhof and the Best Western Inn at Jackson Hole, but I wanted to see the mountains, not only ski them, even if it meant staying at a distance from the ski area. So I chose the Spring Creek Resort, a cluster of elegant log cabins with fine service, an excellent restaurant and an atmosphere of coddled isolation perched on the edge of a butte near Jackson. From my room I saw the east face of the Tetons.

I looked forward to the 10-mile drive to the ski area, past ranch land with horses and cattle grazing through the snow. While litigation and the constraints of building within the national forest have kept the ski area small and simple, there is also a purist esthetic operating here. This is hard-core skiing; only seven chairlifts and a tram serve 2,500 acres of terrain, much of it never groomed.

Mornings the temperature at the summit was zero. The tram, crammed mostly with young men, rose almost a mile from the valley floor to Rendezvous Peak (10,450 feet) in less than 10 minutes. The tram operator recited: only expert trails led from the summit, you could ride the tram back down, anyone caught violating closed boundaries would lose skiing privileges. At that, people laughed.

WHILE I was there, the back country was officially closed due to avalanche danger, but everywhere the powder was cut by tracks of poachers taunting fate and the ski patrol. Beside the trail a porcupine dozed; the only forms of portable communication equipment were the ski patrol's transceivers.

But I did see one lame ski suit. The man wearing it snaked turn after breathtaking turn; he was Peter Stiegler, who owns a fine restaurant nearby that bears his name. His brother, Pepi, a former Austrian ski champion, is Jackson Hole's director of skiing.

I didn't poach, though I was tempted. The real glory of Jackson Hole skiing is the back country, but some of the scariest runs in the world are under the tramline, like Corbet's Couloir. To ski Corbet's, one leaps off a dangerous cliff and makes several urgent, short turns between narrow rock walls. My husband, who does such things, calculated the logistics, but conditions weren't right for that, either, and even the cowboys weren't jumping.

The treeless, open slopes of the Tetons resemble the Alps, but rarely in Europe can one find such cascading tiers of bowls: steep, glacier-scooped funnels. A catwalk laced back and forth across the face of the mountains. I perched at the rims of the bowls, ski tips over air, leaned out and let gravity take me. I skied run after run, high from adrenaline and effort and the sheer thrill of almost flying.

Yes, there are lots of easier runs over by Apres Vous mountain (and, this season, a new high-speed quad lift to get you up there), but that's not why people come to Jackson Hole. Everybody I met told me to say that the skiing was cold and hard. It's cold and hard. That warning sign is accurate. Snow in shade froze from slush to ice in 10 minutes and soft moguls hardened like granite. It's scary. It's unforgiving. It's humbling and addictive. I wanted to move there.

To get my bearings on my first day in Jackson Hole, I drove out past Kelly, one of the towns scattered around the valley's perimeter, to the Teton Science School, which has courses in wildlife and ecology and is housed in a former dude ranch. I scanned drawers of animal bones -- wolves to voles -- and jars of petrified scat and hefted the weightless wing of a hawk. Then I strapped on snowshoes, lent to me by a friend who works there. Just behind one of the school's cabins, I encountered a moose calf, scruffy and antlerless in March, nibbling willows on the banks of Ditch Creek. Downstream a pair of slate-gray birds called water ouzels did their dipping mating dance.

On a Sunrise Expedition, a four-hour tour organized by the Great Plains Wildlife Institute that left downtown Jackson at 8 A.M., I rode in a van equipped with binoculars and compact telescopes with nine other visitors. We traveled through the valley, along the Snake River and up into the National Elk Refuge guided by Ann Band, a young biologist. As we looked where Ann pointed, we saw clumps of sagebrush that turned out to be elk and bison. Brown mule deer materialized from the dead grass on a hillside; two coyotes

gray as limestone cliffs chased a herd of bighorn sheep. In a tree not a hundred yards from us, a bald eagle sat in a nest like an inverted giant sombrero. Rocky Mountain bluebirds flitted over an elk carcass, and, gliding across a thermal pool, a pair of trumpeter swans twined their necks about each other. The week I was there, the newly introduced wolves in Yellowstone finally ventured out of their pen. Everywhere, ravens played.

JACKSON HOLE is a public Eden, bought with private money, a tension that has pervaded the politics of the valley for a century. Nobody but outlaws tried to live in Jackson Hole until 1883. It snows in October and freezes in June -- and ranchers soon discovered that, as the saying went, dudes wintered better than cattle.

Lately, wealthy landowners have blanketed the valley thick as snow, crowding the animals and longtime residents. (Many have moved to Idaho, where they traded a license plate embossed with a bronco for one featuring a potato.)

Jackson restaurants like the Blue Lion and Sweetwater, which occupies one of the oldest cabins in the valley, dish up solid, bountiful meals. The Granary, at Spring Creek, as befits its setting atop a butte, offers finer cuisine, plus the best chocolate bread pudding I've ever tasted.

And then there is the Snake River Grill, a little bit of Hollywood in Jackson; Alan J. Hirschfield, the former head of Columbia Pictures and one of the two owners, wanted a tonier alternative to places like Bubba's Bar-B-Que or the Mangy Moose, a bar at the base of the ski tram. The menu closes with credits, including one for the person who "turned logs into wallpaper" by slicing the pieces of lodgepole pine that line the walls. The food is trendy, substantial and delicious. When I visited the fire was roaring, the room buzzing, and August Spier, the other co-owner, treated all the patrons as if they were stars.

But Jackson, too, is a bit of a stage set, an Old West romance that owes its image as much to "Shane," filmed there in the early 1950's, as to history. However, it still has the good sense to dress down, and a precarious balance holds between preservation and development, reticence and display.

By the side of the road just before the wooden entrance gate to Spring Creek Resort lay the bleached skeleton of an elk, its skull a Western vanitas. My window looked north along the Tetons to where they disappeared in the banks of clouds over Yellowstone. Evenings, I lighted a fire and stood at the window until it got dark, so that I would not miss some brief magic trick of light on the mountains.

One evening, a circular rainbow flared at the tip of one of the peaks. The sun, setting just to the south, must have caught a plume of cloud or a feather of windblown snow. The rainbow shone beyond artifice for a few moments, and then it vanished.

### Skiing the real West

Jackson Hole Ski Area is scheduled to open Dec. 7 and close April 6. Daily hours are 9 A.M. to 4 P.M. Adult passes good for all lifts range in duration from a \$46 one-day pass to a \$287 seven-day pass; for ages 14 and younger or 65 and up, it's \$25 to \$154, respectively. For information, call (307) 733-2292.

### What to See

To reach the Teton Science School, (307) 733-4765, take Highway 89 north from Jackson and make a right onto Gros Ventre Road. The second right after the town of Kelly is Ditch Creek Road, which will take you to the school. One-day wildlife and ecology courses are \$50.

The Great Plains Wildlife Institute, Post Office Box 7580, Jackson Hole, Wyo. 83001, (307) 733-2623, fax (307) 733-0096, offers full-day wildlife-viewing trips for \$140 a person, including lunch. Four-hour sunrise trips are \$70; ages 5 to 12, \$40.

### Where to Stay

The Spring Creek Resort, Post Office Box 3154, Jackson, Wyo. 83001, (800) 443-6139, fax (307) 733-1524; among its 115 rooms are spacious accommodations in cedar cabins (four rooms to a cabin) with fireplaces

and stunning views. Double rates are \$160 to \$190 and include full breakfast.

The 42-room Alpenhof Lodge, Post Office Box 288, Teton Village, Wyo. 83025, (800) 732-3244, fax (307) 739-1516, is at the base of the mountain. Double rates are \$89 to \$220.

Another slopeside hotel is the 83-room Best Western Inn at Jackson Hole, Post Office Box 328, Teton Village, Wyo. 83025, (800) 842-7666, fax (307) 733-0844. Doubles: \$75 to \$225.

#### Where to Eat

Prices are for a dinner for two with wine.

The Granary, at the Spring Creek Resort, (307) 733-8833; \$82. Open daily noon to 2 P.M., and 6 to 9 P.M.

The Snake River Grill, 84 East Broadway, (307) 733-0557; \$70. Open nightly 6 to 10. Closed until Dec. 5.

The Blue Lion, 160 North Millward Street, (307) 733-3912; \$60. Open nightly 6 to 10.

Sweetwater, 72 South King Street, (307) 733-3553; \$50. Situated in a cabin built in 1915. Open daily 11:30 A.M. to 2:30 P.M., and 5:30 to 9:30 P.M. D. W.

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