

Telluride: ski at the end of the world

TRENT EDWARDS
CALGARY HERALD
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Welcome to the end of the world.

We're not talking Bora Bora, but rather its winter equivalent four hours by plane from Calgary in southwest Colorado.

The moment you arrive in Telluride you feel the stresses of city life melt away. Tucked into the end of a box canyon, about a seven-hour drive from Denver, the tiny town and its ski resort perched in the San Juan Mountains above make your mind go aahhh. Traffic sounds are replaced by the quiet whirr of the gondola that takes you from the resort's mountain village and the town for free, and skiers' boots clacking as they walk.

If you stay at the stunning Capella Hotel (\$295 US and up per night; capellatelluride.com) in the mountain village as I did with my wife Krista, you can expect to be treated like royalty. Rich hot chocolate, homemade cookies and marshmallows dipped in milk or white chocolate and crushed pistachios await in the cosy common room each afternoon. All the hotels in the village feel this posh. The more budget-conscious have plenty of options in the heart of a real ski town down below.

Wherever you stay, stow your stuff on arrival and head to the mountain village for a stroll along the pedestrian streets. Any image of the region being a rustic place dominated by ski bums will be dispelled as soon as you see the village's elegant seven-storey hotels. They are lined with a mix of luxury shops, fine-dining restaurants, ski shops and a tiny open-air skating rink. Try to get to bed early, because you might have trouble sleeping (the village sits at 2,660 metres). Actually, you can expect to stay breathless in Telluride for days, from the high altitude, the mountain views that burst into the sky like the broken teeth of a giant to the fluff they call snow here on a powder day.

You can take a break in one of the half-dozen eateries on the mountain, such as the new European-style Alpino Vino hut near the top of Gold Hill. You'll leave breathless with an over-full belly from some of the items served here: gigantes beans with truffle oil, fine cheeses, gourmet soups and sandwiches, and perhaps a bottle of wine from the extensive wine list.

Catch your breath, though; some serious skiing awaits. More than 800 hectares of terrain is spread out across several faces, with enough trails to keep every level of skier happy.

Stashed among the highest

If You Go

- Non-stop flights are available on Air Canada from Calgary to Denver, where you can catch a connecting flight to Telluride Airport.
- Skiable terrain: 810 hectares (2,000 acres); Longest run: 7.4 km (Gallopings Goose)
- Trails: 120; Difficulty: 23 per cent beginner, 36 per cent intermediate, 41 per cent advanced
- Lifts: 18 (2 high-speed gondolas, 7 high-speed quads, 1 fixed-grip quad, 2 triples, 2 doubles, 2 surface lifts and 2 magic carpets)
- Vertical drop: 1,349 m (4,425 ft) Maximum elevation: 4,008 m (13,150 ft)
- Lift capacity: 22,386 per hour
- Annual snowfall: 789 cm
- For more details, call 1-866-237-5341 or visit telluride.com.
- An adult day-pass is \$92 at the ticket counter, but is often \$40 to \$60 per day when bought as part of a travel package with a company such as Merit Ski Vacations (meritskivacations.com).

concentration of peaks taller than 4,200 metres (the 14,000-foot club) in North America, Telluride's scenery is among the best in the Rockies. It was usually overcast during our trip, but breaks in the clouds let enough sun through to put a jaw-dropping spotlight on the long ridges and pointy peaks of the youngest range in the Rockies.

My wife and I had just 2½ days to ski as many of the resort's 120 runs as our legs would allow. We sampled a wide range of trails, from beginner to expert, on our first day. Though there was a lack of any real snowfall in three weeks — a rare drought — excellent grooming and cruiser runs wider than any ski area near Calgary kept us happy. Most of the steep tree skiing was too icy for all but the best skiers, but they offered great potential for a powder day.

Starting runs from heights of up to 4,000 metres, we didn't expect to see trees. But Colorado's tree-line is the highest in North America, allowing us to take shelter from brisk winds or find our way when the light went flat by slipping between stately spruce trees that topped out at 3,300 metres.

After the day's last run, we walked through the mountain village, a place that can keep visitors occupied for hours. You can pop into one of the apres-ski restaurants such as the Hop Garden, with its international list of craft beers. Or shop 'til your husband literally drops, as my wife did.

Neve Sports at Capella Hotel sells chic winter clothing from Prada (think \$900 jackets), De-



Photo courtesy, Krista Breau

scents and UGG boots. The North Face outlet offers select ski clothing you can't find in cities, and some surprising deals. Other village activities range from snowshoeing to soaking at the spa.

We stayed in the village for dinner our first night, gorging ourselves on a sublime meal at The Onyx, a fine-dining restaurant owned by the Capella. My main was a perfect fillet of Colorado trout served with stone-ground mustard spaetzle, asparagus, oven-dried tomatoes and lemon caper broth for \$23.

We spent the next morning ripping our way through the moguls and trees on the mountain's west side. But, wanting to give our aching legs a break, we signed up for a snowmobiling tour of the 19th-Century mining ghost town of Alta, a short drive out of the canyon. Excellent decision: our guided tour with Telluride Snowmobile Adventures (\$149 per adult, telluridesnowmobile.net) gave us two hours of high-revving thrills and fantastic backcountry views.

Soon after, we rode the gondola into town for a historical walking tour of Telluride with guide Ashley Boling (\$20 per adult, bolingashley@hotmail.com). The part-time actor keeps history buffs — 32 of the town's buildings are on the U.S. Registry of Historical Places — and kids entertained with 140 years of local lore as you walk through late-19th Century buildings, such as the Sheridan Opera House.

The town is almost as colourful today as it was when Butch Cassidy was shooting into the air on Main Street to celebrate his first bank robbery. Locals range from hippies to mountain men to retirees living in \$10-million ski-in, ski-out mansions off Chair 10.

The town has earned most of its money from ski tourism since the 1970s. But residents have taken pains to keep the place from losing its charm. You feel Telluride's blue-collar roots as you walk the

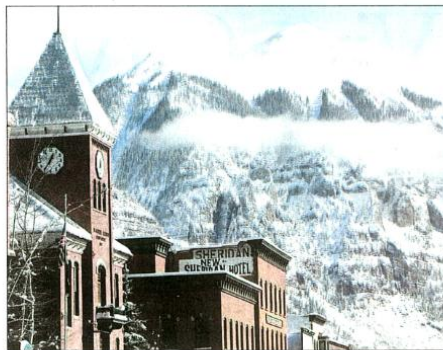


Photo courtesy Telluride Ski Resort

The San Miguel County Courthouse and the new Sheridan Bar and Hotel on Main Street are dwarfed by Ajax peak in the background. At left, Trent Edwards tries a run at Telluride Ski Resort.

streets. There are no franchises here, other than an Ace Hardware store built before the town banned the big boys in 1982.

Despite its remote location, this is a legitimate foodie's destination. You could spend months sampling a range of cuisines before eating your way through the outpost's 50 restaurants.

It snowed about 15 centimetres on our last night at Telluride. Pushing off from the Gold Hill Express lift after riding three lifts to the back of the resort, we dropped into Revelation Bowl via the steep Liberty Bell run. Our whoops of delight broke the silence as we entered that skier's state of bliss where you rhythmically bounce

down the slope, each turn softened by a new pillow of snow.

When we reached Revelation lift, the lifties congratulated us on being the day's first skiers. For the next three runs, we owned one of the best bowls in North America. Untracked boot-top powder, challenging moguls, and perma-grins on our faces until we arrived back at the hotel a few hours later, just in time for our shuttle.

It's no wonder so many townies come for a winter and never leave. Telluride offers the luxuries of a mega-resort, but with the empty slopes you'd expect to find in a skiing Shangri-La.

TEDWARDS@THEHERALD.CANWEST.COM