

United States of America



Ski_USA / DO THIS.

Colorado, cowboys & champagne powder

Craig Tansley STEERS CLEAR OF THE BIG-NAME SKI RESORTS AND FINDS CHARACTER FILLED COLORADO SKI TOWNS THAT ARE OVERLOOKED BY AUSTRALIAN SKIERS.

THERE'S NOWHERE IN THE WORLD QUITE like Colorado; the skies are bigger and bluer and the mountain ranges rise up over 4,500 metres and go all the way to Utah and Wyoming. Set in amongst this landscape are the sorts of ski towns you'll only ever find in this US state. Crested Butte and Steamboat Springs are the ultimate Colorado ski towns: they're relics of a forgotten era when miners and cowboys ruled the roost. These days they're home to a multitude of fancy restaurants, bars and boutique stores but they still look like the same 19th century one-street cowboy towns. There are ski resorts and ski towns in Colorado you'll know better – Vail and Aspen are the best examples – but Crested Butte, Steamboat Springs and The Home Ranch epitomise the Colorado experience. »



SECRET SLOPES
The twinkling lights of Crested Butte town in the shadow of the mountain.

PICTURESQUE Crested Butte

That Australian skiers aren't swarming all over this – the prettiest ski mountain in all of Colorado – is testament to the fact the people at Crested Butte are far too humble to spruik their offerings to the world. So it remains Colorado's biggest secret, with all the small town charm it's had since mining created it 132 years ago. But small town charm doesn't mean Crested Butte isn't sophisticated. On the contrary, this town looks just like a miniature version of Utah's world-famous Park City and its ultra-trendy Main Street. There are over 30 bars in this tiny village and just as many restaurants offering cuisine from every

corner of the globe. It's alternative too; there are art studios, yoga workshops, alternative wellness clubs and whole food grocers, but then there are gun shops, Stetson shops and a bar where Butch Cassidy used to drink.

Crested Butte is perhaps the US's most picturesque ski mountain – its name comes from the jagged, dramatic peak that juts out nearly 4,000 metres from the Earth and is the resort's striking centre-piece. Crested Butte is surrounded on all sides by a sheer landscape of classic, triangular mountains. This is a mountain for extreme skiers, it has North America's easiest access to some of the steepest

ski slopes on the continent – like the North Face and Headwall which boasts slopes of over 50 degrees. But then there are plenty of wide-open beginner and intermediate runs too, making it ideal for families with varying abilities of skiing talent.

There are no traffic lights in town, nor are there chain stores. In fact the hardest choice you'll have staying here is whether to ski all day, or spend your days checking out all the town has to offer – from its surprising range of eating choices to its entertainment options and specialty stores and art galleries. Town is just a five-minute free bus ride from the resort.

WHERE TO STAY

Elevation Hotel & Spa is at the base of the mountain, right next to the chairlift. Standard King Suites start from US\$109 (about A\$111) per room per night, skicb.com/cbmr/elevation-hotel-and-spa.aspx

WHERE TO EAT

Try Crested Butte's finest steakhouse at Maxwell's on Crested Butte's main street (maxwellscb.com) or eat on top of the mountain at rustic Uley's Cabin (skicb.com/uleys). For more information on Crested Butte ski resort and town visit skicb.com

CHAMPAGNE POWDER Steamboat

This is a cowboy town that just happens to have a ski resort in it," a local in a Stetson explains. He has a point – Steamboat Springs sells as many Stetsons as North Face ski jackets. At its most famous rancher outfitter store – FM Light & Sons ("Outfittin' The West For 100 Years & Five Generations") – you can choose between knives, pistols, rifles, banjos, jerky or something from Gun Tote 'N Mamas (the brand for affordable leather concealed weapon handbags). But then the alternative lifestyleers have their place: like a lot of Colorado mountain towns, there are just as many hippies as cow-bothering types, you'll find just as many flyers for Pure Flow Yoga Retreats and meditation workshops as posters for rodeos or snowboard competitions.

SKI THE ROCKIES
Clockwise from above: The gondola at Steamboat; One of Steamboat's legendary tree runs; Downtown Steamboat Springs. Opposite page: Crested Butte has some of the steepest ski runs in North America.



But that's Steamboat Springs' appeal, for this is the ski town with the lot. First and foremost, it offers skiers one of the largest ski mountains in the United States (1,200 hectares). Its tree runs are legendary – the perfect spacing between aspens and pines makes Steamboat the best tree skiing mountain on earth. Let's not forget the snow; for that's Steamboat's real trump card. This is the home of champagne powder, that is, snow with the lowest water content in the entire United States, meaning it's as light and fluffy as anything on the planet. The name also gives away its other infamous natural phenomenon,

its natural springs. Just outside town, Strawberry Park offers the most spectacular mineral springs in the world. Set amongst forest, you can sit in natural rock pools while snow falls into naturally heated water and elk feed metres away. You can also experience Watsu massage in the hot pools, where therapists gently knead your body while holding you in the hot water.

Steamboat Springs now offers over 40 restaurants and bars – more than US\$30 million has been spent in the past five years to expand the services offered. There's also over 90 specialty stores for non-skiers and for time off the slopes. >>

WHERE TO STAY

Sheraton Steamboat is at the base of the ski area offering ski-in, ski-out accommodation. Traditional Rooms start from US\$169 (about A\$173) per room per night, sheraton.com/SteamboatSprings

WHERE TO EAT

Steamboat's best cuisine can be found at Café Diva (cafediva.com), or eat on top of the mountain at Ragnars (dining.com/restaurant/menu/44/Ragnars). For more information on Steamboat ski resort and town visit steamboat.com





CROSS-COUNTRY The Home Ranch

If it wasn't such a picture-perfect depiction of cowboy life in the Rockies, you could be forgiven for thinking staying at The Home Ranch is a little contrived. For starters, there's a cowboy in a Stetson who takes you out each morning to feed 100 or so horses. Then there are the dogs that follow you round night and day, no matter how far you roam. Then every second night or so four ranchers from neighbouring farms play American country ditties on guitar in your enormous stone and timber living room. But there's not a thing contrived about The Home Ranch; it's as down-home and country as sleeping in the Rockies could possibly be.

Located a 45-minute drive from Steamboat Springs, The Home Ranch offers Australian skiers respite from downhill skiing on their ski vacation. There aren't many hills to ski down here, just miles and miles of perfectly groomed cross-country tracks through an empty wilderness that's home to coyotes who

howl at night while you sleep.

But this all comes with a high-end touch – The Home Ranch is part of the exclusive Relais & Châteaux family. Located on 4,000 acres of farmland and framed between mountains that stretch on all the way to Wyoming, while the Home Ranch experience is under-stated, everything drips in style. Soak in your own private hot tub amongst all the snow and enjoy massages any time of the day or night. The most distinctive feature of The Home Ranch is its impeccable service. An army of staff are on-hand for every one of your whims: any time you feel like cross-country skiing someone will take you out and offer you skis and invaluable tips, while meal times are a gourmet delight from a kitchen of the region's best chefs and bakers, washed down by the world's finest wines.

The Home Ranch offers accommodation in one of eight private cabins or six lodge rooms.

COUNTRY CHARM

Main image: The Home Ranch.
Above from left: Relax in a hot tub; Meet the friendly locals.



STAYING THERE

The Home Ranch has cabins that start from US\$585 (around A\$599) per room per night. Lodge Rooms start from US\$475 (around A\$487) per room per night. Rates include airport transfers from Steamboat Springs, food and activities. homeranch.com

WHEN TO GO

The snow season starts in late November and lasts until early April but for the best coverage head to Colorado during January or February. For more information on skiing in Colorado visit Colorado Ski Country USA's website, coloradoski.com

GETTING THERE

To Colorado

Qantas flies daily to Los Angeles (LAX) from Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney. Flight time is around 14 hours. Return economy class fares start from A\$1,499 and business class fares from A\$8,863. Oneworld codeshare partner American Airlines flies to Denver, Colorado from LAX. Flight time is about two hours. Return economy class fares start from US\$289 (about A\$296) and business class fares from US\$1,725 (about A\$1,767). qantas.com; aa.com

To Crested Butte

American Airlines operates flights from Denver to Gunnison-Crested Butte Regional Airport. Flight time is around one hour. The flight operates economy class only and return fares start from US\$868 (about A\$889).

To Steamboat Springs and The Home Ranch

American Airlines operates flights from Denver to Yampa Valley Regional Airport. Flight time is around two hours. Return economy class fares start from US\$560 (about A\$573) and business class fares from US\$2,012 (about A\$2,062). Storm Mountain Express operates private transfers from Yampa Valley to Steamboat from US\$745 (about A\$763) return for up to six passengers. Transfers take around 30 minutes. stormmountainexpress.com The Home Ranch offers private transfers from Yampa Valley that are included in the room rate and take around 45 minutes.

