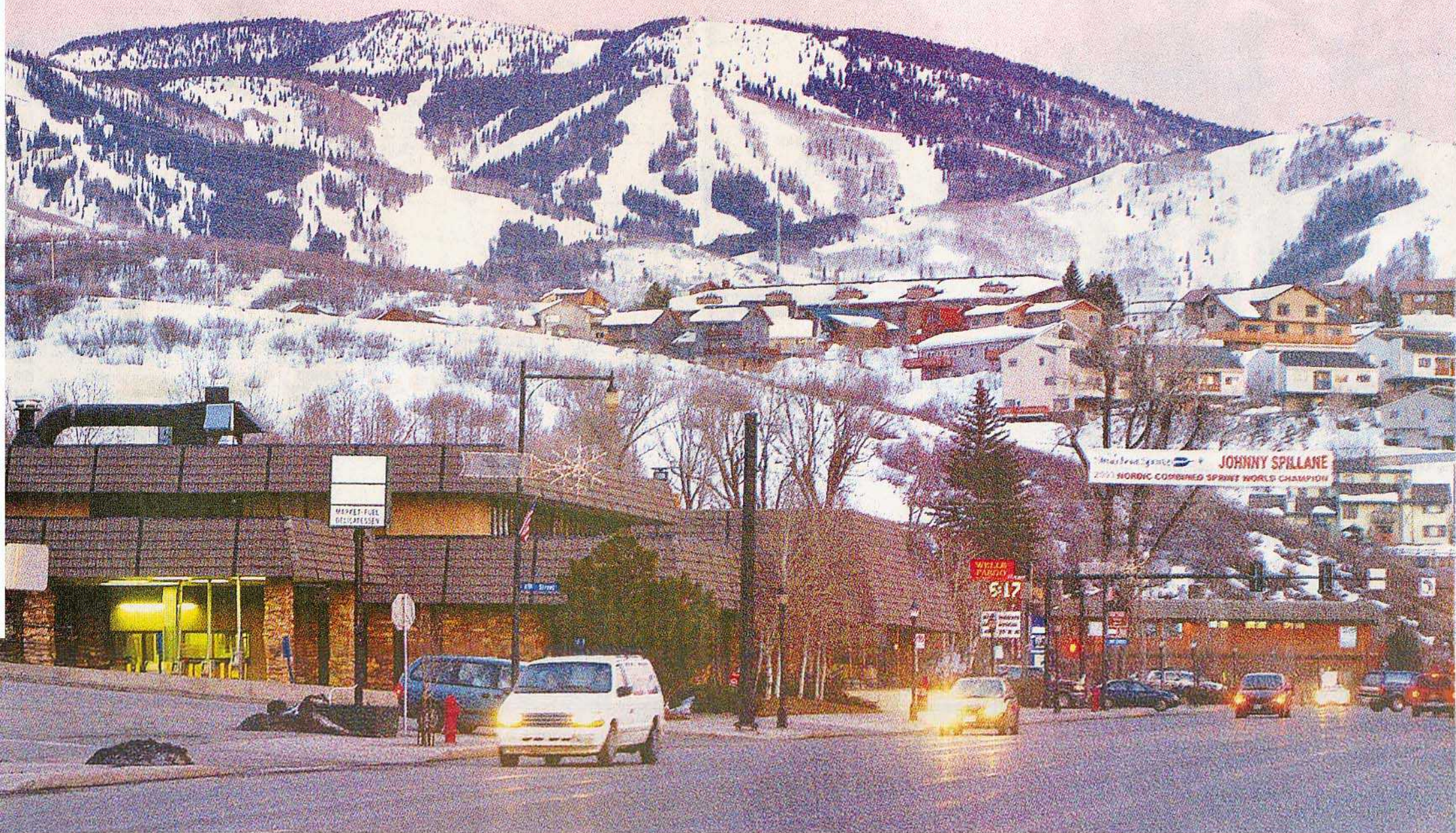


BEST FINDS: Explore Italy with a guide to the finest gardens, cuisine, luxurious hotels and stunning art. Author Barbara Milo Ohrbach penned *Dreaming of Tuscany: Where to Find the Best of Everything* (Rizzoli, \$45), a coffee table book created for dreamers.

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WINTER SKI ISSUE



An old-time atmosphere emanates from downtown Steamboat Springs, a ranch community that predates today's ski center and has a 1950s retro feel to it. —STEVE HAGGERTY/COLORWORLD/PHOTOS FOR THE SUN-TIMES

SKI STEAMBOAT

'Champagne powder' and legendary Billy Kidd bring skiers to the slopes in northwest Colorado

BY ANNE Z. COOKE
AND STEVE HAGGERTY

STEAMBOAT SPRINGS, Colo. — By January, the snow lies steep and deep on the slopes at Steamboat Ski Resort in northwest Colorado.

Which is just how ski legend Billy Kidd likes it. But Kidd, a former Olympian and silver medalist, doesn't need any icy white stuff to imagine a wintry wind whipping his face and his skis slicing through crust. There's snow in his yard this morning on the hill 10 minutes from Steamboat Springs, but he doesn't give it a second look. Instead, he jumps up from the breakfast table to give an impromptu lesson.

"I can improve your skiing right here in this room," says the expansive 62-year-old reaching for a pair of imaginary ski poles. He bends his knees and balances lightly, poised to power carve through a feather-light drift. "You don't believe me?" he asks visitors invited over for scrambled eggs, not waiting for an answer. "The secret is visualization."

Steamboat's skiing ambassador

We had watched Billy — everyone calls him that — in action the day before at one of his "Ski With Billy" clinics, held on most winter days at the top of the Gondola. The free, 90-minute clinics are one of the mountain's most popular events.

By the time Billy showed, wearing his signature cowboy hat with the pheasant feather hatband, a crowd had gathered waiting to meet the man whose face and career are synonymous with Steamboat Ski Resort.

Some were serious skiers, hoping for a moment of enlightenment. Others were fans, there to gawk and shake his hand. But few could resist Billy's high-energy enthusiasm. After the final ski-along down to the base area, even skeptics went away convinced that sliding on snow was as natural as a Sunday stroll.

Steamboat's so-called "champagne powder" (locals claim that the phrase was coined right here) was one reason that Billy hitched his star to Steamboat Ski Resort when he gave up racing and put down roots. If there's a flurry within 100 miles of here, it finds its way to the Park Range at the westernmost slope of the

Rocky Mountains. The snowfall is so predictable that climatologists come here to study it.

"It's our location that's so unique," said Mike Lane, a ski resort spokesman. "We get the south end of northern storms and the north end of southern storms. We're the first real barricade Pacific storms hit after they cross the Wasatch Mountains."

Last year's total snowfall, 36 feet measured in early April at mid-mountain, was almost a record-breaker, he said. And the storms came at conveniently regular intervals, dumping anywhere from a few inches to more than a foot of powder.

Though Steamboat Resort looks like a single hunk, its 2,939 skiable acres actually jog over four connected summits — 10,372-foot Storm Peak, 10,384-Sunshine Peak, 10,565-foot Mount Werner and a fourth hilltop called Thunderhead.

Twenty ski lifts access 150-odd trails following sloping ridge lines, plunging down gladed steepes and dropping through aspen groves to intersect with long, dog-leg runouts back to the base.

Double-black-diamond verticals aren't Steamboat's forte and the relatively low elevation, always below tree line, means you won't find those high, open bowls. But there's plenty of glade skiing through aspen and spruce forests and enough narrow plunges off Mount Werner to keep thrill-chasers challenged.

This is intermediate country. More than half the mountain ranges from groomed cruisers to almost-expert trails. One-tenth of the trails



Steamboat's "champagne powder" is one reason why former Olympian Billy Kidd hitched his star to Steamboat Ski Resort.

are groomed for beginners and all are a good place to practice self-visualization.

Proponent of 'building the basics'

Ahead of his time by two decades, Kidd discovered the powers of the imagination in his hometown, Stowe, Vt., where skiing was a school elective. While most of the kids were shooting hoops, Billy was jumping the bumps. And when he wasn't on the slopes, he was pretending.

"I realized I could sit in the classroom and build muscle memory by imagining how to turn," he says. "When I got older, I watched films and analyzed what the skiers were doing.

You've got those mental images in your head, then you just let it happen."

Where it happens today is at the Billy Kidd Performance Center at Steamboat Resort. Designed for motivated skiers, the one-, two- and three-day performance camps offer Olympic-style coaching with a strong emphasis on what Billy calls "building the basics."

The coaches start with a natural stance and emphasize positive attitudes and winning strategies. They also carry video cams and use them liberally to help you analyze your good and bad habits.

"I recommend the camps to people who want intensive coaching beyond the regular ski school format," said Suzy Good, ticket manager. "Most of the coaches have either worked with Olympians or [have] been ski racers themselves."

Steamboat's other ski school programs for kids, recreational skiers, snowboarders and beginners are also highly rated. The snowboarding terrain at Bashor Terrain Park has been enlarged and redesigned.

The base area — always too crowded — could use a face-lift, but at least it has personality. And so does the town of Steamboat Springs, an old-time ranch community with roots that predate skiing. Old Route 40 runs through the middle of town, with parking spaces marked off on the diagonal, a nostalgic bit of 1950s retro. The brick buildings are old-timers, too, and so are most homes on adjacent blocks. If you're into the way things were, stop

SKI

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Kidd brings skiers to Steamboat's champagne slopes

at the Tread of the Pioneers Museum, located in a vintage house on Oak Street.

"I guess we won't see any gongs," quipped our son, Paul, as we window shopped on Lincoln Avenue in the middle of town. He was remembering the \$15,000 Oriental gong we'd seen for sale in an art gallery in Aspen. Instead, we wandered through F.M. Light, 100 years in business and still selling cowboy hats, jeans, work overalls, leather belts, gloves and jackknives. We tried Billy's favorite Stetson, a smooth felt with a slightly-rolled brim, but we could not do it justice.

Rollicking Western barbecue

Bar hopping is an option here in town, but instead we treated ourselves to the Western barbecue dinner served at the resort on Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights. The dinner, held at the top of the Gondola, sounded corny but provided a rollicking good time. The reservation times are staggered so that diners (riding uphill in the Gondola) don't arrive all at once.

The buffet line and the food — rare roast beef, chicken, pork ribs, a half-dozen vegetables, potatoes, rolls, salads and dessert — was surprisingly fresh and hot.

About 9 p.m. the Sundogs, a local country and bluegrass band, started their first set, playing and singing tunes from Patsy Cline to Rocky Top and the Orange Blossom Special. Adults, teenagers and kids jumped up to dance while the rest of us tapped our toes.

Skier numbers up

Although we were there in mid-March, there were few lift lines and no crowding on the slopes, especially on the upper mountain. We wondered whether high gas prices and the economy were keeping people away. But Mike Lane said that the official skier numbers were up over the previous season.

Maybe they came because getting here is easy. You can fly non-stop from Chicago, Dallas, Minneapolis, Houston or Newark, or rent a car and drive from Denver. Or maybe they came because it's so affordable.

But a more likely explanation, say scientists at the weather station atop Mount Werner, is that special snow. When the last bits of moisture from distant Pacific storms reach Steamboat, they form feeder clouds of tiny super-cooled droplets. Whirled and swirled into miniature flakes, they keep skiers coming back for more.

Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty are California-based free-lance writers.



Steamboat Ski Resort's base area — in need of a face-lift — is always crowded, but has plenty of personality. —STEVE HAGGERTY/
COLORWORLD/PHOTOS FOR THE SUN-TIMES



Skiers at Steamboat Springs Resort can savor meals at places such as the Rendezvous Saddle Cafe.

IF YOU GO

STEAMBOAT SPRINGS RESORT

LESSONS, CLINICS AND LIFT TICKETS: Most ski resorts now wait until the last minute to announce prices for lessons, clinics and tickets. Discounts occur throughout the season, based on weather and snow conditions. For current pricing for one-day and multiday tickets, check the resort Web site, www.steamboat.com.

One-day tickets are priciest. Five- or six-day lift passes save money. For each adult ticket purchased, one child can ski free. Children's all-day ski-school programs start at \$87 per day and include lunch. Enroll your 5- or 6-year-old in the Jackalopes

group if you want him/her to have the same instructor all week.

Billy Kidd's two- and three-day performance camps start at \$225 per day. One-day "trial" camps are held Monday or Thursday. Book at the Ski & Snowboard School, (800) 299-5017.

MORE INFORMATION: Steamboat Springs Chamber of Commerce: (970) 879-0880 or visit www.steamboat-chamber.com. For the resort call (970) 879-6111 or visit www.steamboat.com.

GETTING THERE: American Airlines flies nonstop to Hayden from Chicago.

The ski area is 22 miles from Hayden Airport. Alpine Taxi runs 20-passenger ski shuttles to your hotel or condominium. Round-trip fare is \$50 for ages

13 and up, \$30 for ages 6-12, free for 5 and younger.

ACCOMMODATIONS: The Bear Claw Condominiums are as good as it gets — 500 yards up-slope from the resort base. The building is older but maintenance is first class. The one- to three-bedroom units are spacious with modern-rustic decor; amenities include televisions in each room, fireplaces, sofas beds and equipped kitchens.

The complex has private parking, an outdoor heated pool, hot tub, game room, apres-ski bar, ski lockers, 24-hour front desk service and a movie library. Two-bedroom units start at \$700 per night, not including taxes and lift tickets; prices vary depending on date. Call (800) 232-7252 or visit www.bear-claw.com.

The Shadow Mountain

Condominiums, in the economy category, are a half-mile from the ski area base. Rated "excellent," Shadow Mountain units are clean but plain with comfortable furnishings, an equipped kitchen in a nook and television. The building has a swimming pool and ski storage. Two-bedroom units start at about \$150 per night.

For all accommodations, call Steamboat Central Reservations at (800) 922-2722 or visit www.steamboat.com.

GETTING AROUND: Free ski shuttles operate between all accommodations and the ski base, and between the resort and Steamboat Springs.

DINING: The Western barbecued dinner is \$40 for adults, \$30 for teens 13-17, \$20 for kids 6-12, and free for 5 and younger.