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100 Things We Love About Calgary

Our eclectic list of what makes us love the city now

Fashion Forward

New Flames forward, TJ Galiardi, is a hometown hero with a sense of style

PLUS

Avenue Weddings

Fabulous local celebrations
Top tips for destination weddings
Host a stylish tent party

Murphy O'Brien

by Jennifer Hamilton

Rocky Mountain High-end

The terrain at Snowmass Mountain offers something for every kind of skier, including excellent gladed runs.

There's great skiing, for sure, but the real lure of Aspen is the après experience that's unlike any in Canada

Given Calgary's close proximity to the Rocky Mountains, it's easy to wonder why someone would venture all the way to Aspen, Colo., to ski.

The answer is it's not about the skiing.

That's not to say Aspen — which is really four ski areas rolled into one — doesn't have some epic skiing, because it does. In particular, Aspen (or Ajax) Mountain, which rises dramatically from the edge of downtown Aspen, poses some formidable challenges to even the most hard-core skiers in the form of steep pitches and punishing moguls.

But what really distinguishes Aspen from any ski town in Canada (yes, even Whistler) is the glitz, the glamour and the slightly off-kilter vibe that comes from fur-clad A-listers co-existing with off-beat artists and bona fide ski bums in this famously liberal setting.

The layout of the town, where the population swells from about 6,600 in the summer to as many as 30,000 in the winter, is neatly contained in an easily walkable downtown area. It has the feel of a genuine ski town with history, rather than a resort that sprang up with no raison dêtre but for the amusement of those who love schussing downhill. There are more than 20 art galleries, 125-plus shops, ranging from hippie boutiques and ski shops to Gucci and Prada stores and well over 100 restaurants, meaning one could have a grand old time in Aspen and never actually hit the slopes.

In fact, gonzo journalism guru Hunter S. Thompson, who lived just up the road from Aspen Mountain for almost 40 years, reportedly went skiing only once, preferring to spend his days in the J-Bar at the Hotel Jerome. Aspen's oldest hotel, this 19th-century red brick hotel recently underwent a renovation. Its original ornate tin roof and rich wood accents remain, while the updated furnishings and menu in J-Bar and Living Room still attract an eclectic mix of skiers, socialites and hipsters enjoying creative cocktails and tasty tapas.

Another bustling locale for excellent upscale-casual dining is Brexi Brasserie in the lobby of the Dancing Bear Aspen. (Upscale-casual defines much of the dining scene in Aspen, where "dinner jackets" are typically made of Gore-Tex.) The French menu features hearty traditional dishes like beef bourgignon and roast chicken — exactly what a cold winter's night calls for.

On the more contemporary side of fine dining is Element 47 at The Little Nell. Aspen's only ski-in/ski-out hotel, the Little Nell dining

Murphy O'Brien

Above Element 47 in the Little Nell.

Left The Elk Camp restaurant and event centre on Snowmass mountain.

room recently underwent a multi-million-dollar reno. As beautiful as the interior is, it's still acceptable to schlep around in ski boots. For celebrity sightings, this is the place to go. But the real draw is the food, which is exquisite, and the award-winning wine list, which is one of the best in America, according to *Wine Spectator.*

In the 1960s, Aspen was where intellectuals went to drop out. Thompson, famous journalist, author and boundless imbiber of drugs and alcohol, may well be rolling over in his grave at how fancy Aspen has become since then. But he might be happy to know the Woody Creek Tavern is still there. Just a short drive from Aspen and next door to a trailer park, it was Thompson's favourite watering hole, and is worth a visit to mingle with jaded locals and other curious tourists. The decor is rumpus-room redneck-meets-ironic hipster chic, and it serves margaritas that would satisfy even a Thompson-sized

For those who plan to fit some skiing into their visit to this famous ski locale, there's that, too. Three of Aspen's four major mountains — Aspen Highlands, Aspen (Ajax) and Buttermilk — are clustered close to downtown, while Snowmass is down the valley and connected by a free shuttle. All four mountains can be skied with the same ticket.

On a powder day, the best place to be is Aspen Highlands, a favourite of locals for its stunning views, the longest vertical drop in Colorado and

X Games Aspen 2014

Buttermilk will host the Winter X Games from Jan. 24 to 27. The town comes alive with the buzzy energy of the games, and the events themselves are definitely worth seeing if you have even a passing interest in action sports. The size of the jumps, the air the athletes get and the spectacle of the ESPN production have to be seen live to be appreciated.

Murphy O'Brien

The Prada boutique is a beautiful example of rustic-chic modern design.

some of the most challenging big-mountain terrain in North America. Aspen Mountain has 65 per cent of its runs rated "advanced" or "expert." For anyone whose knees are still intact and who remembers skiing on straight skis, it's worth a visit to see mogul fields that harken back to the days of the neon one-piece. Rounding out the skiing experience are Buttermilk, with its gentle slopes perfect for beginners, and Snowmass, which has runs for skiers of all levels.

Fashion is big in Aspen and the aesthetic is influenced by a combination of the town's Western heritage, the practical outdoorsiness of the sporty set and the luxe glam of millionaires and movie stars. Shearling jackets and fur coats abound, and ski outfits — which must match, obviously — rock metallic and fur accents with nary a hint of duct tape. The Prada boutique is worth visiting, if only to browse and admire the rustic-chic modern design of the shop done by architect Roberto Baciocchi of Arezzo, Italy. Hamilton Sports, which is owned by former competitive speed skier Bill Miller, whose record speed is 130 mph, carries the hot high-end technical apparel brand Kjus, and also does performance rentals that you can pre-book online. Performance Ski is another great shop for stylish skiwear, with a range of brands and very helpful staff. But, really, this being Aspen, the ski stores are all good, choices are practically endless and the only limit is on your Platinum card.

Own a Piece of Aspen

America's most-pedigreed ski town is also one of the most expensive places to buy real estate in the United States. As such, fractional ownership is a popular option here, and there is perhaps no better place to part-time-own than Dancing Bear Aspen.

A Timbers Resort property, there are nine three-bedroom residences with an array of shared amenities including a theatre, wine cellar, decked-out children's playroom and hot tubs on the roof with the best views in Aspen.

Each residence and all the common areas are decorated with original art and unique furnishings, so the feeling of luxury and exclusivity is palpable in every corner.