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REAL ESTATE

Colorado Ski Country Homes for New Yorkers

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The Residences Viceroy Snowmass condominium was completed in 2009. Brent Moss for The New York Times

Big Deal

By JULIE SATOW

Some forecasters say New York City will be subjected to another polar vortex this year, and judging by the recent cold snap, I believe it. But while we grudgingly pull out our boots and mittens from the back of the closet, there is a bright side to the wintry weather: ski season.

This year, while many New Yorkers pack up their Moncler jackets and Ugg boots for the flight out West to spots like Vail, Colo., and Deer Valley in Utah, a new player will be vying for their attention.

Snowmass is one of Colorado's largest ski mountains, with a peak that reaches 12,510 feet, and when all its lifts are running, the most vertical feet of any ski mountain in the country. Snowmass is also just eight miles from Aspen and a short drive from the airport. Yet despite all it has to offer, it has never garnered the same glamour as some of its more famous neighbors.

A New York City developer and avid skier, Jeff T. Blau, is hoping to change this. Mr. Blau is the chief executive of the Related Companies and has been skiing at Snowmass since college. It wasn't until 2007, however, that he became professionally involved in the town. By then, Snowmass Village had spent three years working on a plan to develop the base of the mountain, a project known, appropriately enough, as Base Village. Related, in a joint venture with WestPac Investments, bought Base Village with plans to develop a million square feet with retail, night life, condominiums and hotels. But the recession took hold before construction could begin.

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Andrew S. Lombra and Terrell E. Polk, with their son, Preston Polk, near their Park Avenue apartment, recently bought two condos at the Viceroy. *Sasha Maslov for The New York Times*

Development stalled, and after several legal tussles, including a foreclosure sale, Related emerged in 2012 as the sole owner of the project. Now, Related is moving ahead with plans to convert an eyesore of cement slabs and vacant lots that sits at the bottom of the slopes into a full-scale development.

“It has been a lot of one step forward, two steps back, but I think it is fair to say there is some cautious optimism in the air,” said Andrew Ernemann, a broker associate at Aspen Snowmass Sotheby’s International Realty. “It feels like there is some positive momentum with the real estate market, that fundamentals are improving, and that Base Village may actually move ahead.”

James Walker, a managing partner at a hedge fund in New York City, agrees. He recently bought three units at the Residences Viceroy Snowmass, a condominium project at Base Village that was completed in 2009, although sales did not officially start until 2012. “I think Snowmass is one of the most underrated mountains in the West,” said Mr. Walker, who owns a four-bedroom unit for his family and two studios for visiting family and guests.

Seventy-one of the 152 units have sold so far at the Viceroy, and prices there have been increasing. Over the last 12 months, there have been 20 sales at the building, averaging \$828 per square foot, or \$829,200, according to data from Shane Aspen Real Estate. There are 11 listings on the market that are asking an average of \$1.024 million, or \$966 a square foot.

“This is the time to buy in Snowmass because all of the uncertainty has been removed from Base Village,” said Garrett Reuss, an owner and real estate broker at Aspen Snowmass Sotheby’s International Realty. “I believe that 2014 will be Snowmass’s best real estate year in seven years, and there is an exceptional opportunity to buy in front of a trend.”

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Related's plans at Base Village include a second phase of the Viceroy, to begin within the next year, with more family-friendly units of two-, three- and four-bedrooms. "We have taken an honest assessment of the market, and families are really where we play well," Mr. Blau said.

The company is also in contract to sell two parcels at Base Village to other developers. The Aspen Skiing Company, a longtime presence in the area that owns the lifts and trails at Snowmass, is planning to build a Limelight hotel, which is a boutique brand that is also in Aspen. The Limelight in Snowmass will have 102 rooms as well as 15 residential units at the top of the building that will be for sale and can be put into the Limelight's rental pool. Like most developments at Snowmass, the new Limelight will also feature ski-in/ski-out access directly onto the mountain.

The Sunrise Company, based in California, is also in contract for a development parcel at Base Village. It has plans to build a condominium complex similar to its Dancing Bear Aspen project. While the Dancing Bear is all fractional ownership — owners buy one-eighth shares in a unit to use six weeks a year — the project in Snowmass will be a mix of whole ownership and fractional ownership.



Base Village at Snowmass. Brent Moss for The New York Times

"We don't have a name yet for the project, but we are very excited at the potential," said Randall Bone, the chief executive of Sunrise Company. The Snowmass project will have primarily three- and four-bedroom units, and prices will start at just under \$2 million for whole ownership, and \$300,000 for fractional. The project will also have a handful of penthouses, not yet priced. While the deal is still under contract, "we would like to start construction in the summer of 2015, but officially we have targeted spring 2016," Mr. Bone said.

With activity finally taking shape at Base Village, and the market showing signs of rebounding since the recession, other Snowmass projects have begun to see price increases. "We have had our best year in seven years in terms of velocity of deals," said Keith Marlow, the sales director for Timbers Resort, which developed the Timbers Club at Snowmass. "We used to average six to eight sales a year, but this year we have had over 16 deals." As for pricing, a one-eighth share at the Timbers Club that cost \$265,000 last year is now priced at \$300,000, while a townhome at the development that sold for just over \$3 million in the early 2000s is now on the market for almost \$5 million.

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But even with rising prices, Snowmass is still significantly less expensive than nearby Aspen. This is especially true now that the market in Aspen has rebounded and even surpassed the levels it reached before the recession. “Historically, Snowmass has been about a 30 percent discount to Aspen, and now it is about a 50 percent discount,” Mr. Reuss said. In the downtown Aspen corridor, the town’s most expensive neighborhood, prices for condos are roughly \$1,800 to more than \$2,500 a square foot, and could reach \$3,000 a square foot in 2015, he added. At Snowmass, prices in and around the ski slopes range from approximately \$700 to \$1,300 a square foot.

Terrell E. Polk and her husband, Andrew S. Lombra, a bond trader at JPMorgan Chase, have been coming out to Snowmass for several years. “We tried other areas, but we decided we just liked Snowmass the best,” Ms. Polk said. Last year, the couple, who live on the Upper East Side, took the plunge and bought two condos at the Viceroy — a two-bedroom and a one-bedroom. Ms. Polk said she recently discussed the idea of buying even more units at the Viceroy, and would have gone ahead if the couple had not already owned several other vacation homes, including two houses in Southampton and a place in Rosemary Beach, Fla.

Steven Shane, the owner of Shane Aspen Real Estate, said, “Snowmass is arguably one of the top three ski mountains in the world, and its natural resources are spectacular. There is only a finite amount of developable land, and it was just a matter of time before companies began investing in the Base Village.”

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