

Say the word Aspen and we're on the same page, aren't we? It's the American Dream on steroids and skis, celebrities and millionaires – make that billionaires – shushing around every bend. All of which is largely true in winter. But summer in Aspen is a gloriously different proposition.

Come May, when the last of the snow melts, a different town emerges – a place of culture, learning and ideas. Celebrities still abound, but the people turning heads are likely to be Nobel- or Pritzker-prize winners, musicians, artists, and men and women of letters.

Surprised? Yes, I was too. And delighted.

Aspen's dual identity goes back to the 1940s when a Chicago industrialist, Walter Paepcke, decided the mining town in the Rocky Mountains' Roaring Fork Valley was the ideal place for creative types and "thought makers" to gather and reflect on the values needed to create a good and just society.

Today, the Aspen summer calendar is crammed with festivals dedicated to literature, music, film, art, design, food and wine and "ideas that matter". Aspen has its own philharmonic and chamber orchestras, a ballet troupe and a couple of Broadway-standard theatre companies. It also boasts its own opera house and has a world-class music auditorium, not to mention numerous art galleries and museums.

At the core of Aspen's transformation from struggling mining town to the realisation of Paepcke's dream is the Aspen Institute, a think tank with branches around the globe.

Not bad for a small town that measures nine square kilometres with a permanent population of less than 7000. The locals are fond of saying that Aspen has all the advantages of a small town and the culture of a big city.

#### SPOILT FOR CHOICE

The summer tourist is faced with an almost bewildering choice of music, theatre, performances, musicals, workshops, talks, and lectures.

When I visited last season I saw Shostakovich's notoriously difficult *Symphony No. 6* – reviewed favourably in *The New York Times* – and Benjamin Britten's *Cello Symphony* – not so favourably. (Perhaps the critic would have been more complimentary if world-renowned cellist Yo Yo Ma, who was in residence at the Aspen Institute, had been plucking the strings.) I was enthralled by a performance of *Les Misérables* starring numerous Broadway stalwarts, and I could have caught former US secretary of state Madeleine Albright talking on leadership at the Aspen Institute. ►

Aspen's mix of breathtaking nature and abundant culture is a visitor's delight in summer.

## A TOWN FOR ALL SEASONS

*Aspen is synonymous with celebrities and snow, but the Colorado town, with its charming alpine scenery and crammed event calendar, is equally appealing in the summer months.*

Words by **Kay O'Sullivan**

## IT TAKES ALL TYPES



Could there be more disparate characters than Hunter S. Thompson and John Denver? Yet both loved, and lived, in Aspen.

Legendary gonzo journalist Thompson lived in the district for 40 years, attracted by the intellectuals who descended upon Aspen to drop out in the 1960s. Thompson ran for sheriff in 1970 on a platform of legalising drugs. He lost. Today, thousands visit one of his favourite watering holes, the Woody Creek Tavern, to pay homage to him and drink margaritas.

Meanwhile, Aspen's affection for singer/songwriter John Denver is immortalised in a park and a music festival in October. On the edge of town, the John Denver Sanctuary is a green and quiet space where the words of his songs, most of them homages to his beloved Rocky Mountains, are etched on stones.

Others who have been similarly smitten and have homes in Aspen include Amazon founder Jeff Bezos and PC magnate Michael Dell, various members of the Lauder family, Michael Kors, Kurt Russell and Goldie Hawn. And actor Kevin Costner loves Aspen so much, he wants to be buried there.



When visiting Aspen in summer, take your pick of activities: *Clockwise:* hiking; shopping; white water rafting; eating treats such as Ajax Tavern's truffle fries; milling around in the many cafes; or listening to the famous guest speakers of the Aspen Institute.



But if that all sounds as rarefied as the Aspen air at 2438 metres, it is worth remembering that Aspen is a ski town that takes its partying seriously. Through both summer and winter, the stars of the rock and pop music worlds can be found playing and partying at the Belly Up nightclub or at Jimmy's, anointed one of the top-50 bars of America by *Food & Wine* magazine.

### GET MOVING

As compelling as the cultural life is, the main game in Aspen, irrespective of the season, is the mountains. To get the most out of Aspen you have to get out into the great outdoors – everyone else does. Settle into any of the town's cafes for an early-morning coffee – my recommendation would be Victoria's Espresso because the owner is an Aussie and knows how to make a proper cup of joe – and the chatter is all about which hike, bike or kayaking trip is on the day's agenda.

There are hundreds of hiking trails criss-crossing the Roaring Fork Valley, ranging from paved saunters to hardcore multi-day treks that only experienced mountaineers should attempt.

In a week I did two hikes – one a three-hour stroll through Castle Creek Valley described as “beyond comparison” by the explorer who mapped most of Colorado. The other, which took me from Aspen to the quaint town of Crested Butte over a pass of 3810 metres, was perhaps the most challenging 10 hours of my life, with my resolve, lung capacity and thigh muscles tested almost beyond endurance. But the pleasure of endless peaks and passes, dense groves of silvery Aspen trees, fields of wildflowers and forests of firs outweighed the pain ... though perhaps not during the final scramble up to the pass.

I also kayaked on the Colorado River and did some biking, albeit around the flat and manicured West End, perhaps the loveliest suburb in America with its perfectly preserved 19th-century clapboard houses set amid glorious gardens. (It was more to my liking than the billionaires' enclave of Red Mountain, where entry-level houses are around the US\$8 million mark.)

Serious bikers will be rewarded. There's a reason why the USA Pro Challenge starts in Aspen and that's the presence of eight “14ers” – Colorado-speak for mountains over 14,000 feet (4267.2 metres) – in the Roaring Fork Valley. Lance Armstrong has a home in Aspen, but don't let that put you off.

I confess that I opted out of one of Aspen's hardcore traditions – the hike up Aspen Mountain's main ski run – instead taking part in another great Aspen tradition: lunch with truffle fries at the Ajax Tavern overlooking that extremely steep run.

## FACT FILE



**The Limelight Hotel**  
355 S. Monarch St.  
Rooms from US\$160 a night during summer, includes airport transfers, breakfast, use of bikes and in-town transportation. The hotel also offers packages for the 17-kilometre Aspen to Crested Butte hike, with shuttle to trailheads, Spot GPS Messengers that allow hikers to track their progress on the trail or call emergency help if needed, two nights at the Limelight Hotel, two nights at the Nordic Inn in Crested Butte, shuttles and a choice of either shuttle (US\$1440) helicopter (US\$4679), or small plane (US\$2994) back to Aspen.



**The Little Nell**  
675 E Durant Ave.  
Rooms from US\$489.



**The Snowmass Rodeo**  
Every Wednesday night from June 11 to August 20. Entry US\$20.

### ENVIRONMENT MATTERS

Thanks to a vigilant community, the local authority has strict environmental measures in place. It is illegal to remove plants from the mountains and the bones and beauty of the 19th-Century silver mining town have largely been preserved.

Last summer, a bike-sharing scheme was introduced and public transport is encouraged with free shuttles to trailheads in the summer. In winter they do drop-offs on the slopes.

For a town touted as a playground of the rich and famous, there is a lot that is free or affordable in Aspen – yoga on the top of Aspen Mountain, for instance. Three times a week you can catch the Silver Queen gondola up to the mountain's peak for an hour-long class. If the asanas don't transport you to Nirvana, the views of the surrounding mountains – Snowmass, Buttermilk and Aspen Highlands – will.


Snowmass, 13 kilometres down the valley from Aspen, has a terrific rodeo and the Aspen Music Festival has more than 300 events over the summer, many of them free. Aspen and Snowmass combine for a two-week celebration of jazz and world music through June, with free weekly Thursday night concerts in Snowmass.

Of course, if you've got cash to splash you're in the right place. Chanel, Prada, Dior and the like have a presence. But in summer it's the bike shops or outfitters such as Ute Mountaineer, Taylor Creek Fly Shop and Pitkin County Dry Goods that attract the crowds.

There are also some unmissable vintage shops, a pleasing by-product of all the wealthy residents. I saw Prada, Chanel, Stella McCartney and Hermès hanging on the racks of Little Bird, a favourite shopping stop, on E Cooper Street.

There are exclusive clubs that ask US\$100,000 for the pleasure of joining and the five-star rated Element 47 restaurant at The Little Nell hotel – the choice of celebrities when it comes to lodgings in Aspen – does a brisk trade in US\$10,000 bottles of wine during the winter. That said, Element 47 (the name is an homage to silver) is affordable with mains, or entrees as the Americans say, around the \$US40 mark.

Aspen is truly a town for all seasons. If I had a dollar for every time a local – be it a bartender, a driver or hotel employee – said to me, “I came for the winter, but stayed for the summers,” I'd be on my way to a deposit on a property on Red Mountain. MF

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