



Affordable housing in ski towns is gone. Can resort communities stop the crisis from running locals out of town?

BY MEGAN MICHELSON



ABOVE: The mansions at most ski resorts are occupied just a handful of days a year.

PHOTO: Trent Bona

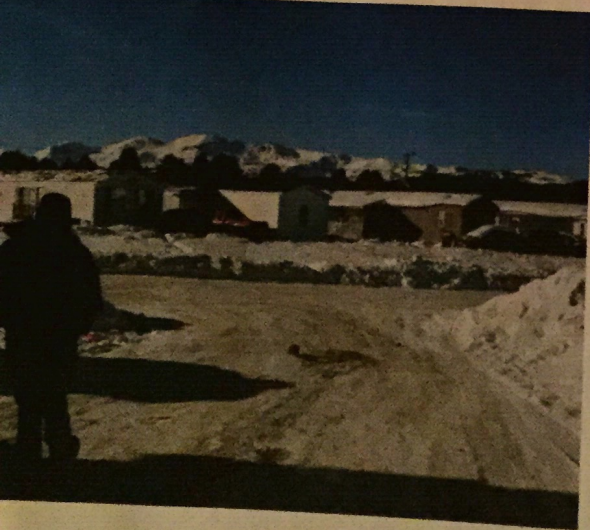
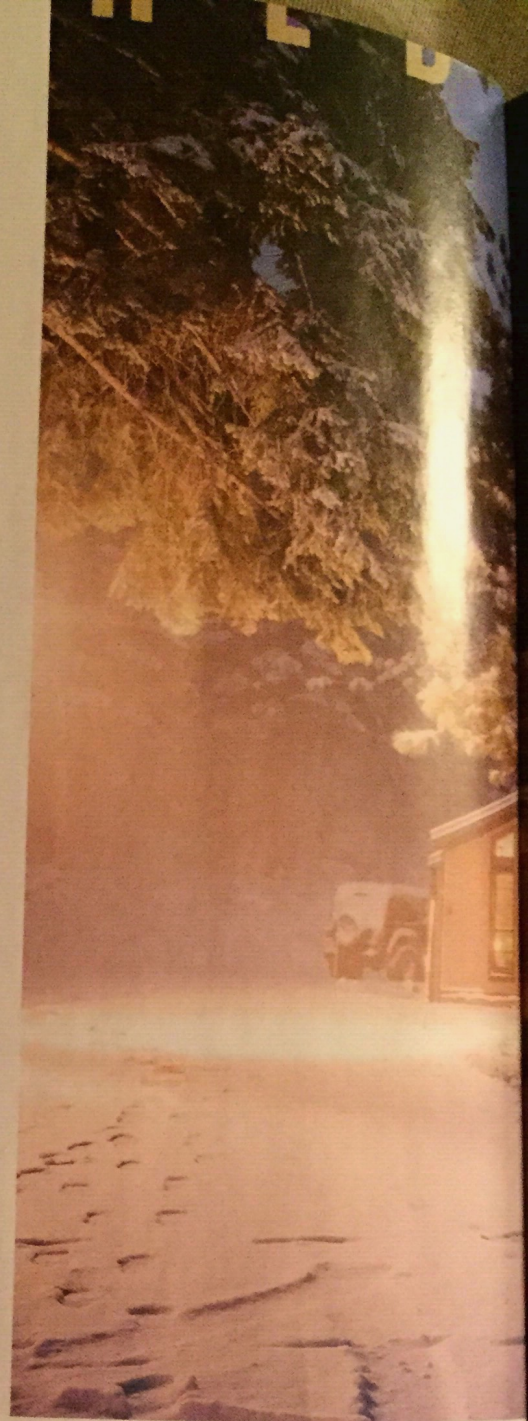
RIGHT: Meanwhile, the trailers in town are occupied 365 days a year.

PHOTO: Christian Pondella

BELOW: Houses are affordable in Leadville, Colorado, 40 miles from Breckenridge and 129 miles, in the winter, from Aspen. Oh wait, they have a housing crisis, too.

PHOTO: Nick Cote

TAKE A DRIVE THROUGH any ski town, and chances are you'll find a lot of dark houses. Fancy homes where nobody lives, million dollar crash pads where the lights shine just a few times a year.



Stroll through the Ski Trail Mobile Home Community in Mammoth Lakes, California, a rare neighborhood where you can buy a home in a mountain town—granted it's a 1,200-square-foot doublewide trailer—for an affordable \$60,000. The streets stir with activity. Christmas lights twinkle on snow-covered porches; fat skis rest on truck tailgates; and kids congregate with candy-colored plastic sleds.

Aaron Shober, 24, and his girlfriend, Ally Hoffman, 25, live here on a cozy block lined with modular homes. They moved to town last winter. Hoffman got a job as a ski instructor at Mammoth Mountain, while Shober works on wind turbines. They're both avid skiers who dreamed of a chance to live in the mountains.

Mammoth's employee housing was already full, so a month prior to moving from a Sacramento suburb, they lined up a one-bedroom apartment for \$800 a month. Shober says he told his landlord they had a dog, but after less than a month of living there, their pit bull got them the boot.

"We didn't know what to do. We were getting kicked out in January with no place to live," says Shober. He combed the classifieds and found their three-bedroom place in the trailer park for \$1,600, which maxed their budget. Shober didn't care. He was just happy to have a roof over their heads.



As a result of the shortage, people are commuting farther to their jobs, some are left homeless and living in cars or tents, and others are giving up entirely and leaving the mountains for good.

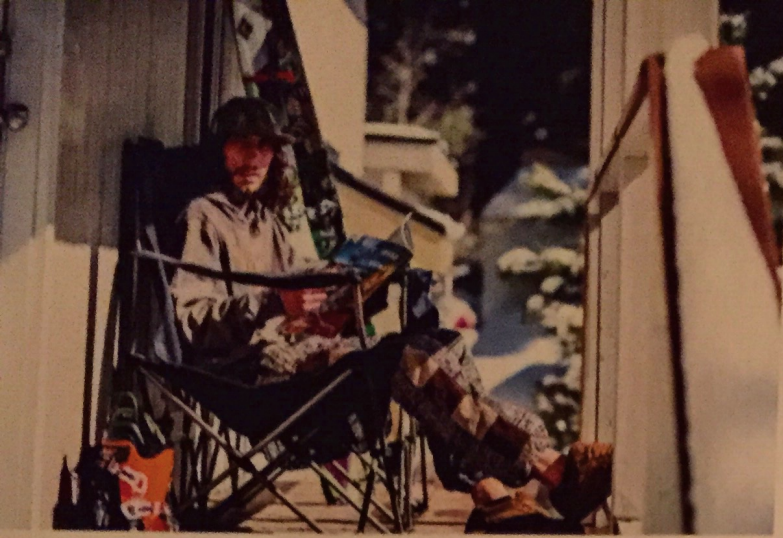
In Mammoth, it's not just ski bums and 20-somethings who can't find places to live. Cops, teachers, and nurses are struggling, too. According to a recent Mammoth housing study, 52 percent of homes are empty most of the year—used intermittently by vacationers. Of properties in the full-time rental pool, less than 2 percent are vacant, meaning if you want to score an apartment, you better call within minutes of the ad being posted and be prepared to compete.

The same thing is happening in ski towns across the country: Not only is housing overpriced, but it's practically impossible to find. In Tahoe, 76 percent of locals fork over more than the nationally recommended 30 percent of their income on housing and the wait time for affordable units can take up to two years. In Vail, resort employees have been asked to live two to a room. In Telluride, there's a 1 percent vacancy rate among rental units. In Teton County, Wyoming—home of Jackson Hole—a survey found that nearly 60 percent of residents say their quality of life is threatened by a lack of affordable housing. It's not just a minor problem. The housing issues that have plagued mountain towns for years are reach-

ing crisis levels. It's in part due to a boom in houses getting converted into lucrative Airbnb-style vacation homes, which eliminates those properties from the full-time rental market. As a result of the shortage, people are commuting farther to their jobs, some are left homeless and living in cars or tents, and others are giving up entirely and leaving the mountains for good.

Back in Mammoth, 37 percent of the town's residents commute from elsewhere, including Bishop, 42 miles away, and 25 percent spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing. (In other ski towns, it's often over half the population that's considered cost-burdened by housing.)

Mammoth Mountain houses 600 employees in various units, including motel-style



rooms where you can bunk up with a co-worker for \$14 a night, or about \$420 a month. The town's housing authority has 84 low-income rental units, but that's hardly enough to solve the problem.

"Everyone who manages workforce housing here has wait-lists," says Jennifer Halferty, executive director of Mammoth Lakes Housing. "We've always had a shortage. That's not new. But it's the worst it's ever been. The shortage is feeling more prevalent because we're breaking records with how many tourists are coming to town."

Tourism, of course, is critical for ski towns—it's what keeps the economy moving. But with more tourists come more jobs and more people moving to town to fill these jobs, yet no additional units are built to house the newcomers.

Halferty says when you have a housing shortage, overcrowding is inevitable, which puts more strain on homes. There's so much demand for rentals, landlords can still charge top dollar without making improvements. So much of the town's housing stock is crumbling with deferred maintenance.

"It's hard to find a lot of hope right now in town," says Halferty. "We have limited funding for new buildings, limited land, and political will is tough, too."

The future of ski towns is at stake. With no place to live, locals will vanish. And when there's nobody left to do the jobs that need to get done—to stock the groceries or patrol the mountain or teach the children—what will happen then?

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Jennifer Halferty, Mammoth Lakes Housing





COURTNEY HALL, 26, just got off a bartending shift at River Ranch, a restaurant near the base of Tahoe's Alpine Meadows ski area. She hops in her Jeep Cherokee with Vermont plates and drives to meet yet another landlord at yet another house. This time it's a lease in Tahoe City—four bedrooms, furnished, \$2,500 a month. It's only a four-month lease, so she'd have to move again come spring.

She's been looking for a home for months. Hall grew up in Boston and spent the last five years working at Bolton Valley, a small ski area in Vermont. She road-tripped west and landed in Tahoe last winter. Her first night in town, she didn't have a place to live, so she and her cat slept in her car in the train station parking lot.

Hall splurged on a \$60 motel room for a couple of nights when it got below freezing and eventually found a room on Craigslist for \$750 a month, well over half of her monthly bartending wages. But the house was under construction, the kitchen dismantled. She moved out and wound up splitting a room with a guy she knew from home, which was cheaper but not ideal. Now she and five of her co-workers—plus a few pets—are looking for a house of their own.

The ski-lease landlord ends up passing her over—choosing fewer people, no pets—and a few months later, Hall packs her Jeep, quits her job, and leaves town for the California coast. "I wasn't willing to fight as hard as I needed to live in Tahoe," she says. "I came to ski. But honestly, I just couldn't make it work."

A 2015 Tahoe housing study reported that 59 percent of people working in the area commute from elsewhere, a number that's increased by four percent since 2003. The median rental price for a one-bedroom in Tahoe is around \$1,200, which is way out of the affordability range for many of the area's lower-income residents. Last winter, a Truckee church opened the area's first homeless shelter as an emergency refuge for cold nights.

If people can't find housing, it raises a major issue for the community:

Companies can't retain employees. Around 2,400 people come to work at Squaw Valley and Alpine Meadows each winter. Of those, the resort estimates around 1,000 of them need housing. And like many ski towns, from Jackson Hole, Wyoming, to Whitefish, Montana, there aren't enough beds to go around. Just 43 lucky employees end up in Squaw's employee housing—clean, modest apartments with views of KT-22 that cost \$300 a month. Some workers wind up in nearby hostels or long-term motels. Squaw also started offering a free employee shuttle on weekends for workers who live in

FAR LEFT: When Aaron Shober got the boot from his house in Mammoth, he was, essentially, SOL.

PHOTO: Christian Pondella

BOTTOM LEFT: The skiing makes the unaffordable rent totally worth it. Right? Joe Sagona makes the most of life at Mammoth.

PHOTO: David Reddick

LEFT: Courtney Hall couldn't find a spot to live—even though she applied to countless places—so she left town. Bye, Courtney.

PHOTO: Keith Carlsen

BOTTOM RIGHT: Mike Kosdrosky moved to Aspen to work for the town's housing authority. His income afforded him a home 20 miles away in Basalt.

PHOTO: Tom Zuccareno

Reno, an hour away.

"What I hear a lot from employees is, 'I can't get anyone from Craigslist rentals to call me back,'" says Brittany Clelan, vice president of human resources for Squaw Valley. "Each fall, all of the employees at ski resorts around North Lake Tahoe are calling for rentals and they're overwhelming the housing stock in the community. We've lost people who would have potentially moved here because they couldn't find housing."

It's no wonder more landlords are turning their homes into vacation rentals—they can make more money charging tourists top dollar on weekends than they can renting to a full-time, heavy-impact crew of lifties and waiters with dogs.

Squaw would like to build more workforce housing—a massive development plan that would increase the base village with 1,500 more hotel rooms and condos also includes dorm-style units for an additional 300 employees—but political and environmental hurdles are slowing plans. Even if that passes, it would hardly be a complete solution—a recent housing survey estimated that Tahoe needs some 12,000 additional units to meet workforce demands.

The predicament extends to Aspen, Colorado, possibly the world's most expensive ski town, where the average price for single family homes in 2015 was \$7.2 million, up 29 percent from the previous year. Because of those astronomical rates, the town has seriously invested in its affordable housing over the last 30 years. The town's inventory of 3,000 deed-restricted units are now worth over \$1 billion and their latest development, which delivered 82 much-needed, family-friendly affordable units—many at sale prices under \$200,000—sold out immediately.

"Aspen prides itself on being a year-round, lights-on community," says Mike Kosdrosky, executive director of the Aspen/Pitkin County Housing Authority. "Cultural and economic diversity is what makes Aspen, Aspen. We don't want to become a community of primarily second homeowners."

But that doesn't mean it's easy to find hous-



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-Will Cardamone

ing in Aspen. When Kosdrosky relocated from Denver in 2015 to take the job of running Aspen's affordable housing program, he and his wife didn't qualify for subsidized housing yet couldn't afford to buy a free-market home in town. Instead, he commutes from Basalt, over 20 miles away. In a survey of major employers in the area, 86 percent said that finding workforce housing was a critical problem in Aspen.

Like most resort towns, Aspen has rules in place requiring developers of new projects to either build affordable units or pay a fee designated to go toward workforce housing. Housing is also supported by a voter-approved real estate transfer tax. But there's only so much land in a tiny valley surrounded by towering peaks. "Are we looking to develop more? Certainly," adds Kosdrosky. "But we realize we can't build our way out of this problem. We're reaching build-out and there's very little land left for affordable housing opportunities."

At the base of Aspen Mountain's Lift 1A, there's a sliver of land known as the Skier's Chalet, a former hotel with historic designation where a half dozen spirited ski bums live in ski-in, ski-out studios for \$350 a month. Will Cardamone, 31, lives in one of them. In his 250-square-foot room, which looks more like a college dorm than a grown man's apartment, he has a hot plate, mini-fridge, toaster oven, and world-class skiing 100 steps from his front door.

"We're right next to these multi-million-dollar townhouses and they're empty 75 percent of the time," says Cardamone. A sponsored skier and fly-fishing guide, he grew up in Aspen. Before he snagged a coveted chalet room, he lived in a yurt in the woods. Prior to that, he bounced between shared homes every six months and spent summers in a trailer park.

In 2015, the Skier's Chalet sold to a local hotel developer for \$22 million. The current tenants live month-to-month, waiting for word that they'll be kicked out. "We all joke that they should turn this place into a real-life museum where people could look in the windows and see how real ski bums live," says Cardamone. "There are a few last remaining spots like this in Aspen. Once they go, it'll change the town for sure."

MOUNTAIN TOWNS AREN'T TRYING to drive local skiers out. In fact, they're doing everything they can to keep them there. "Affordable housing is something we've been seriously talking about for over 15 years," says John Warner, a dentist and former mayor of Breckenridge, Colorado. "The population was beginning to burgeon. We had more of a year-round economy with year-round housing needs, but we didn't have a place to put people. We knew, like a train, it was coming at us."

The town of Breckenridge has approved many affordable housing projects over the years and tried to make it easy for workforce housing





months before scoring the spot of a lifetime in downtown Breckenridge. Bonus: The apartment had a black mold problem.

PHOTO: Liam Doran

BOTTOM LEFT: Squaw Valley has submitted plans to build 300 dorm rooms for employees—and 1,500 more hotel rooms and condos. Amie Engerbretson, shown here, lives in nearby Truckee.

PHOTO: Jeff Engerbretson

developers, even providing land for new builds. An affordable housing project currently under construction will erect 26 units on the dirt where the area's recycling center used to be.

"We're breaking ground on a few projects at once and we're really in high gear," says Warner. "There are people who criticize what we're doing—they say that employers should be paying their employees more, but I run a small dental office and I know that higher wages are just a partial solution that many companies cannot afford."

Warner thinks it'll take another 500 or 600 units to house Summit County's workforce, so he's brainstorming creative solutions, like a tiny house community where a collection of 250-square-foot miniature homes could shelter many in a small space.

Ellie Reiley knows what it is like to be homeless in Breckenridge. She and her boyfriend lived out of her Subaru and slept on friends' floors for three months last fall. They stayed in a different spot every night while searching for a place to live.

"It's never been as hard to find a place as it is now," says Reiley, 29, who waits tables and moved to Breckenridge from Michigan about five years ago. "We'd contact a landlord and they'd have 40 to 70 responses already. It was like we had no chance from the start."

Reiley and her boyfriend had been living in a one-bedroom apartment for \$850 a month on Breckenridge's French Street, where they put up with filthy carpets and a black mold infestation that made them sick in order to be across the street from the gondola. Their landlord then decided to turn the place into a vacation rental and terminated their lease.

After two months of looking, she and her boyfriend finally teamed up with other friends and found a three-bedroom place for \$2,100 five miles out of town. "We pour your coffee and fit your boots and serve your food and these are the people who the housing crisis is affecting most," says Reiley. "Part of me thinks these towns want to get rid of ski bums, but we're the ones who do the work that makes the town go 'round. I hope we don't get shut out because I'm not sure how these towns could function without us."

The housing problems are big, but so are the solutions towns are coming up with. Telluride ski resort recently purchased a hotel to transform into employee housing, a move other resorts are doing as well. Steamboat workers are staying at a once dormant, city-owned hotel. The town of Mammoth is looking at buying a



LEFT: In Jackson Hole, 60 percent of residents say the lack of housing threatens their quality of life.

PHOTO: Ryan Dorgan

BELOW: But the people keep coming to Jackson for turns just like these. Peter Romaine takes advantage of living in a ski town.

PHOTO: Chris Figenshau

40-year-old apartment building and renovating it into affordable units.

Vail Resorts has pledged \$30 million to workforce housing across their properties in Colorado, Utah, and California. In Jackson, Wyoming, where a 200-square-foot shanty goes for \$600 a month, elected officials recently added a ballot measure calling for an extra penny of sales tax that would go toward affordable housing and transportation. The tax would bring in an estimated \$11 million a year. Last January, Jackson passed a new policy to start issuing citations to landlords who rent out homes on Airbnb, desperately trying to keep housing available for permanent dwellers.

None of these fixes will solve the problem entirely. But they are steps. And for those who are willing to fight to find a home in a ski town, the payoff comes in bottomless powder days and a tight-knit community of fellow mountain dwellers who've also battled, risked, and compromised to claim the life they're living.

Back in the Mammoth trailer park, Aaron Shober couldn't be more content. The Sierra had a snowy winter his first year in town, and he and his girlfriend are talking about buying the mobile home they're renting.

"We never thought we'd be able to buy a place here," says Shober. "I feel very lucky we found this spot. We're ridiculously happy. If we hadn't found this place, I don't know if we would be living in Mammoth right now." *

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