



>>> **DESTINATION:**  
Aspen, CO

## FULFILLING A FANTASY

*The last resort she visited before the world changed, Aspen beckons one writer back to relive cherished memories.*

*By Megan Michelson*

It was early January and my husband Dan and I were on a getaway to Aspen, Colo., without our kids. Our friends Eben and Kevin had driven down from the Denver area early that morning to join us for a sleeper powder day at Aspen Highlands. We opted for the bootpack to the summit of Highland Bowl. At the top, Dan, Eben, and Kevin squished into the hanging double chairlift affixed to the rock, below a banner of prayer flags, to snap a photo.

After, we dropped into shin-deep pow off the bowl's north-facing steep, hollering with joy in a way that now seems so simple and carefree. We had no idea what was coming.

If you scroll through photos on my phone from January 2020, it's like a time-stamped journey into a new virus-laden world. First, there are the images from the trip to Aspen pre-Covid: a photo of Dan drinking coffee on the deck outside our swanky room at the W Hotel; a snapshot of my friend Tess bootpacking up Highland Bowl. Then the photo from the summit: Three people from different households standing close together without masks on.

The string of pre-pandemic memories from that trip stand out in my mind, striking moments of Life Before Covid. The bowls of shared curry inside the Highland's Merry-Go-Round lodge. The packed rooftop hot tub at the W. The gondola, filled with people we didn't know, whisking us to steep glades off the top of Aspen Mountain.

At the W, Dan and I drank a cocktail at the bar and chatted with the bartender. It would be the last bar I would sit at for a very long time. That night, we met up with friends at L'Hostaria and shared plates of mussels and calamari before ending the night with PBRs, packed shoulder-to-shoulder at the Red Onion, one of Aspen's most revered watering holes.

The next morning, I woke up with a headache and tried to ski it off with high-speed gondola laps before catching our flight home that night. We returned from the trip on January 11, 2020.

The next photo on my phone is from January 14, a few days later. It's a picture of a thermometer reading: 102.3. My temperature. For five dreadful days after our trip to Aspen, I struggled through full-body aches and chills, a scorching fever, and a cough that lingered for weeks. I thought it was the flu.

Eben also got really sick, with similar symptoms. He described lying on the cold bathroom floor with a fever that seemed to never relent.

By February and March, of course, Covid-19 was a well-known threat, making its rapid spread around the globe, and I remember thinking: Maybe I didn't have the flu after all? I'll never know.

But this much I do know: I can't wait to go back to Aspen when this is all over. I've been fantasizing about the things I was able to do on that trip, like warm up inside a lodge during a cold ski day and share a



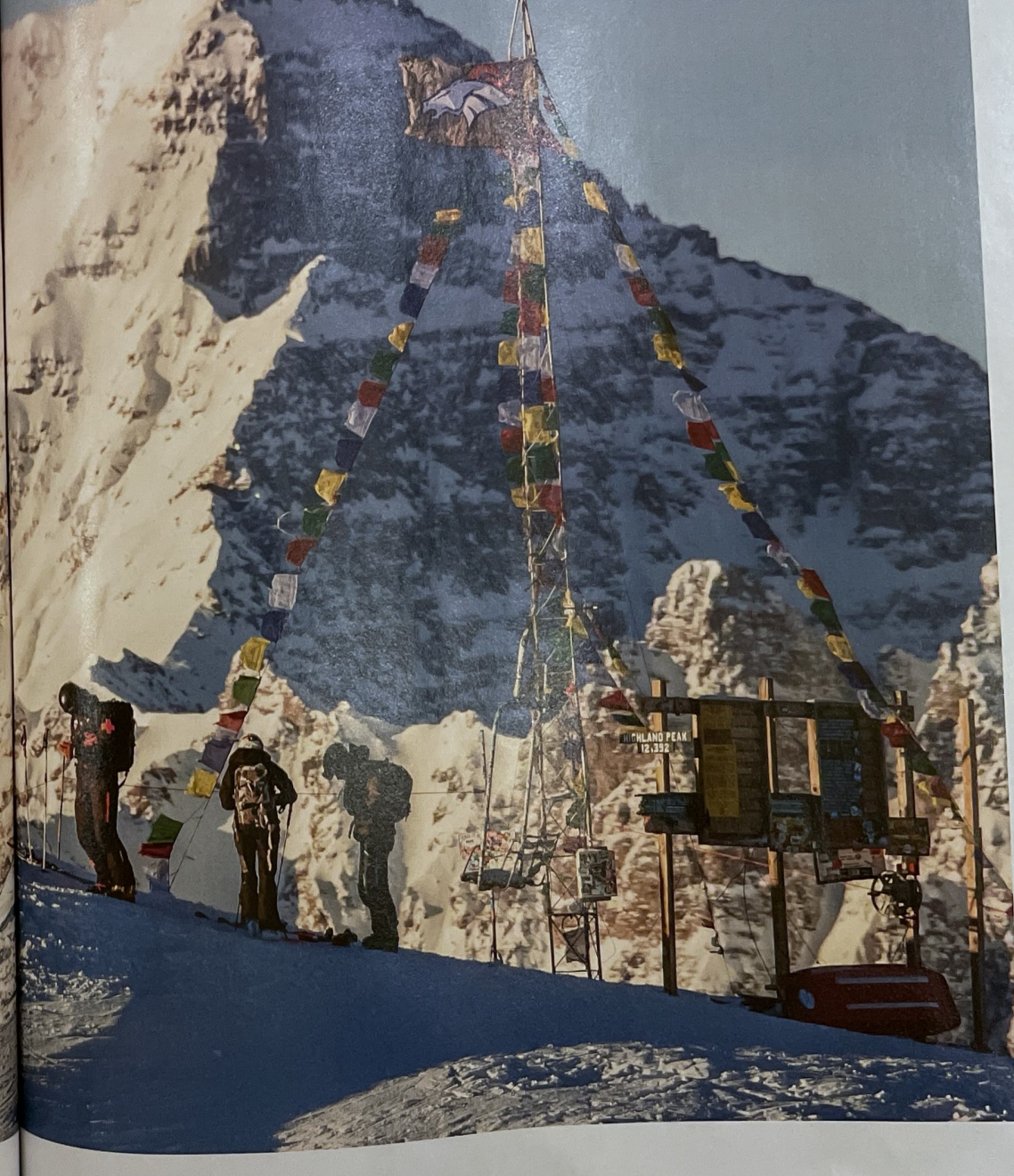
From left: Highland Peak (12,392 feet) and Loge Peak (11,675 feet) with Pyramid Peak in the distance; Aspen local Rhianna Borderick goes deep in the fluff.

Photos: Matt Power

Nuu-agma-tuvupu (Ute) land

Closest Airport:  
Aspen/Pitkin  
County

Pass: Ikon



Skiers willing to take the bootpack to the top will be rewarded with panoramic views of Pyramid Peak and an amphitheater of wide-open steeps.  
Photo: Jeremy Swanson

plate of wings with friends in the pub afterward. In my mind, that trip was the pinnacle of indulgence. We skied powder. Ate delicious food. Spent quality time with good friends in a beautiful setting. Soaked in a hot tub on a rooftop while drinking a beer and looking at a mountain I'd just spent all day zipping around on skis.

And, yes, glitzy ol' Aspen is known as a destination for the one percent and the ultra-famous. But those people barely ski off-piste, leaving untracked lines for the rest of us. Sure, you can shop for high fashion at Gucci or Prada, but you can also pick up crampons and ice axes at the Ute Mountaineer to scale nearby peaks.

You can dine on fresh oysters from either coast at Clark's. You can also drink free coffee from the carts at the base of all four ski resorts—Aspen Mountain, Buttermilk, Snowmass, and Aspen Highlands—or

get an eight-dollar burrito from Big Wrap that'll last you two meals.

You could sleep in a suite at the W for \$800 a night, or you can bunk up for \$79 with a bathroom down the hall at the St. Moritz Lodge. My point is: Aspen isn't just for the rich and fur-clad. Real-life ski bums live and visit here, too.

When I go back—hopefully this winter—I can't wait to ski until my quads quiver from nonstop runs down Deep Temerity at Aspen Highlands and hunt powder in the trees off Jackpot at Aspen Mountain.

But I also plan to live it up a little (within reason and budget, of course), like one should do in a ritzy town like this. Maybe have a glass of champagne at Cloud Nine Bistro, or truffle fries at the Ajax Tavern, or a spa treatment at the St. Regis. We are surviving a pandemic, after all. We deserve it.

## ASPEN ON THE CHEAP

**Ski:** The Ikon Pass gets you five to seven days at Aspen's four mountains (you'll need to upgrade the Base pass for an additional \$150). Or get a Mountain Collective Pass for two days at Aspen's resorts, plus two days at 22 other destinations.

**Eat:** Open until 2 a.m. from its upstairs perch in downtown Aspen, New York Pizza slings \$5 slices to the late-night and budget-conscious crowd. Jumbo subs cost less than \$10 at Grateful Deli, as does a bowl of steaming soup at Tiki Mana.

**Sleep:** The Limelight Hotel Aspen just underwent a total remodel and is re-opening in time for this winter. Or check out rooms at Mountain Chalet Aspen, an old-school spot two blocks from the gondola where you can get a bunk in a shared room from \$59 a night.

**To Do:** It's free to access the 90 kilometers of groomed trails operated by the Aspen Cross Country Center, and Nordic gear rentals start at \$35. Take in some fine art with a free visit to the Aspen Art Museum.

**Get Around:** You don't need a car here. Town buses in Aspen are free and come at regular, on-time intervals. There's also the Downtowner for free, on-demand transport in open-air electric vehicles.

Aspen may be home to the rich and famous, but the fixed-grip doubles celebrate her true spirit.

Photo: Matt Power

