

▀ Doug Evans takes the right of way.



The best ski area in Colorado might be **Loveland**, the place you just drove by

The Blind Spot

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IT'S SNOWING HARD. The car in front of me inches forward in the giant parking lot that is Colorado's Interstate 70. We've covered maybe a mile in the last 20 minutes, the anxious dread of gridlock heightened by today's snow report: 14 inches of fresh this morning and over two feet in the last 48 hours.

It's a Friday in January in the midst of one of the best Colorado winters in years. I'm apparently not the only one who decided to rise at dawn and drive to the snowy mountains towering over Denver.

Finally, I see a sign: Exit 216, Loveland Pass. I flick on my turn signal and realize I am the only one escaping the congestion. Every other ski-racked Subaru around me is powering on toward the Eisenhower Tunnel, trying to get to some farther, fancier ski resort down the road.

Not me. Not today. I'll be gorging on my fifth helping of bottomless face shots before the rest of these commuters even boot up. I pull into the Loveland Basin parking lot, approximately 60 miles from Denver, just before 9 a.m. The lot is filling up, but I snag a spot just 100 yards from the lift, cram my feet into my boots, and jog toward Chair 1.

The lift line is empty, except for a carefree ticket checker who doesn't actually check tickets, plus a bearded guy named Willy on a pair of 220cm Kneissl skis from the '90s, and a few wiry old ski bums sporting matching jackets emblazoned with "Over the Hill Gang" logos. Here's the thing about Loveland: From the outside, it looks like a podunk ski area more fitting for a Midwestern farm town than the Rocky Mountains. The infrastructure consists



of a couple of old lifts strung together on the side of the highway. Interstate 70 literally intersects the ski area, so truck horns from traveling semis are audible from nearly every corner. Hostile gusts of wind constantly whip off the Continental Divide, marking the upper ridge of the ski area that maxes out at an inhospitable 13,010 feet. Lower on the mountain, the base area is meager at best: an aging lodge with a cafeteria slinging \$5 chili dogs, a ticket window (daily rate: \$61 compared to Vail's \$139) and demo shop, and the Rathskeller—a basement bar that smells like a blend of mildew, beer, and popcorn. There's no Starbucks here, but you can get a latte at the deli counter for \$2.95. Hotels and shopping are non-existent. In short, people come

← You really can't overstate the horror of driving on I-70, yet most people drive past Loveland, right through the Eisenhower-Johnson Memorial Tunnel.
↓ "Oh, hey, Jim." Mark Morris says hello to his brethren on Loveland's Chair 1.

to Loveland for one thing only: the skiing. Once you meet the hill's hardest locals and ski its steepest shots, you realize there's so much more to Loveland than meets the highway. With 1,800 inbounds acres and immense backcountry access, Loveland's terrain rivals some of its upstream neighbors. Plus, the area receives an average of 422 inches of snow every year, the second-most of any resort in Colorado. **EBEN MOND GREW UP** in Iowa as an elite-level ski racer from the anthill that is Dubuque's 475-foot-tall Sundown Mountain Resort. He says he fell in love with Loveland because it reminded him of his home hill—intimate and family-friendly. "Sometimes when you ski those big resorts, you never see the same person twice," says Mond, a flannel-clad former telemark big mountain competitor who's got the look of a guy who hunts his own meat. "But at Love-

land, it's the same lifties, cooks, patrollers, and skiers year after year—there's something nice about that." Mond moved to Colorado in 2001 after a spring break trip that never ended. Now 33, he and his yoga-teaching wife, Darcee, and their 1-year-old son, Huxley, live 10 miles east of Loveland in the old mining town of Silver Plume, population 120 in the winter. In 2007, Mond helped launch Loveland's first freeride team, a motley crew of 13- to 18-year-olds that he now coaches, teaching them to navigate big mountain terrain. Before his coaching gig, he worked as a ski tech at Loveland's shop, which has been managed by the same woman, Sue Booker, for nearly 30 years. That's where Mond met Doug Evans, who still works there. Evans was born in Texas but moved to Colorado as a kid and grew up skiing A-Basin and Loveland.

Around 2002, Mond and Evans were out hucking the cornice off Chair 9, when a big, blond guy with a striking resemblance to Thor started going bigger than them off the same feature. It was Mark Morris, a native of Idaho Springs, 20 miles east, who learned to ski through the local Snow Dodgers program—a club that has been bussing kids from Clear Creek County to Loveland every Saturday since 1963. "I'd hit the cornice harder, then they'd go back up and go even bigger," Morris recalls. "Finally we met up and we were like, 'Who the hell are you?' We've all been best friends ever since." Now 30, Morris lives with his wife in Golden, just outside of Denver, and works at a ski shop there. He's the lead singer and guitarist of a bluegrass band called Rapidgrass, which plays in the Rathskeller on spring weekends and tours nationally in the off-season. (The gig gets Morris a free season pass.) He's tried to move away—Crested Butte, Washington, Maine—but Loveland keeps drawing him back. "Loveland is my church, it's the top of the Earth," says Morris. "There's something about that mountain that fills my spirit with so much joy. That wind honking in your face, nobody else around, I find so much peace up there." Morris, Evans, and Mond are skiers to the bone and the fastest, hardest-charging guys on the mountain. (All three are also sponsored by Flylow, which is owned by my husband.) You'll find them lapping manmade groomers at

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↑ Coffee with Mond.



↑ Loaves and Ledbetter in Silver Plume.



↑ Community with Morris (on the guitar).



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—Jim “Whip” Whipperman

Loveland in October, as the ski area is often the earliest in the country to open. In June, after the lifts close, they’re out hiking for three turns on a puddle-size patch of snow high on the mountain. Even their emails include the phrases “skideepowder,” “iskipowder,” and “tele77.”

On a powder day in January, there’s only one place all three of them will be: Chair 1.

THE LOVELAND SKI TOW COMPANY opened in 1936 with one rope tow, making Loveland the second oldest ski area still operating in Colorado. Chair 1, the area’s first chairlift, was installed in 1955.

Chester Upham, a Texas oilman who went by Chet, was one of the partners that bought Loveland Ski Tow Company in the 1950s, and in 1972, he purchased the area outright. Noticing the diesel compressors used to dig the Eisenhower Tunnel, Upham and then general manager Otto Werlin helped engineer the first snowmaking equipment in the state, which was put to use at Loveland around the mid-1980s and contributed to the resort’s early season-opening dates. Upham died in 2008, but his Mineral Wells, Texas-based family still owns and operates Loveland, making it one of the longest-standing family-owned resorts in the country.

Over the years, little has changed at Loveland, besides a few lift upgrades and renovations to the base lodge. The biggest news in recent years was the addition, in 2012, of cat-accessed skiing along the Ridge, the uppermost portion of the mountain reached by the frigid Chair 9. Terrain that previously required a 25-minute hike to reach (or if you were lucky, a sketchy snowmobile tow from a ski patroller) is now accessed by a comfy 20-person cat that’s free of charge, keeping in line with Loveland’s mission to remain an affordable option for Front Range families.

“We don’t have the corporate mentality here. That’s one of the things that people really appreciate,” says Jim “Whip” Whipperman, Loveland’s recently retired 65-year-old caretaker. A former veterinarian, he’s lived on-site in a 600-square-foot apartment next to the Rathskeller for 14 years, handling plumbing and power-outage emergencies and taking care of carpentry and welding needs.

Whipperman says things are changing at Loveland and more people are starting



to show up. “We were always the place that people drove by. It was cold and windy and people thought, ‘I wonder what that place is like?’ But the past few years, word is leaking out that we have really good snow.”

The future of Loveland will likely look much like its past. The master plan for the ski area includes upgrades like a new mid-mountain warming hut, a new magic carpet, and a remodeled food court, which were completed last summer. There is no plan for terrain expansion, hotels, or anything resembling a village.

I FIND DOUG EVANS FIRST. He rockets into the Chair 1 corral alongside me, appearing out of nowhere as if he just parachuted in. He’s skiing solo. We ride the slow triple chair that

climbs 1,000 feet from the base area, hovering over a sheer, powder-filled chute under the lift.

“Today is good. But you should have been here yesterday,” he tells me. “It felt waist deep.”

At the top, Evans whispers something to a nearby ski patroller, and the next thing I know we’re following a red coat to upper Over The Rainbow, a long, sustained pitch that’s been closed for the duration of the latest storm. From the vantage point on the traverse, we can see the traffic roaring by on the highway below. The patroller drops the rope right in front of us and in we go: deep marsh-

mallow dreaminess, the kind of cold, feathery snow that only falls at 12,000 feet.

Mond must have known by intuition where the goods were, because he finds us near the bottom of that lap. “That traffic sucked this morning,” he groans in lieu of hello. Before



- ← Drive-by airing. Mond indulges.
- ↑ You know what’s better than a traffic jam? This. Mond cuts down on his CO₂ by inhaling some frozen H₂O.
- The commute into Loveland’s lift-accessed backcountry.



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the department of transportation outlawed it, Mond used to bypass the traffic by driving his snowmobile up the frontage road from his home in Silver Plume.

The next lap, we’re at a zone called Mr. Rock, a huge granite boulder with mini airs into puffy pillows, when Morris materializes out of the woods. He’s being followed by a 9-year-old named Oliver Search, a Loveland race team kid who Mond also coaches on the freeride program, even though he’s technically too young to be on the team.

I figure there’s no way Oliver can keep up with the power trio of Mond, Evans, and Morris, who have found each other without planning it. But with no hesitation, Oliver launches off Mr. Rock right behind Morris and, suddenly, I’m the one left in the dust.

A few runs later, we bump into Oliver’s mother, Mishaun, an on-duty ski patroller. The Search family, which includes father Scott, also a patroller, and a younger son and daughter, lives next door to the Monds in Silver Plume, where the kids are homeschooled by their mother.

“You don’t mind that Oliver is just out chasing these guys around the mountain?” I ask her. “Not at all,” she says. “The kids know so many people here—they know all the lifties, patrollers, locals. They ski by themselves here all the time and I never worry because I know they’re in good hands. We’re a family here.”

Oliver learned to ski at 18 months on Loveland’s separate beginner zone, called Loveland Valley, and now he’s getting his first alpine touring setup to skin into the backcountry with his dad. When I ask Oliver why he likes this place, he says, “Because it’s not like those other big resorts. It isn’t as crowded.”

More than one local I meet at Loveland compares the ski area to the old TV show “Cheers.”

“Here, everyone knows your name,” says James Koepsel, a ski instructor turned rocket scientist who grew up in Idaho Springs and whose parents started skiing Loveland in the 1950s (his mom, age 83, still skis here). “It’s the same people year after year. It takes a while to know the place well. On face value, it’s just a little ski area, but as you learn it, you see how much great terrain there really is.”

Bob Clawson, a Loveland ski patroller for the last eight years and Silver Plume resident, tells me he recognizes someone on about every third or fourth chair. “This is basically our

backyard,” says Clawson. “And there are just less people here than most places. Everyone else just drives by, I guess. A lot of folks don’t even know we’re here.”

Clawson adds that today, a powder day, is particularly busy. I can’t help but notice that every other chair is empty.

LIKE ALL GOOD POWDER DAYS, this one ends at the bar. After skiing from first chair to “power hour,” as Mond calls the precious 60 minutes before the lifts close at 4 p.m., the fast-moving trio of Mond, Morris, and Evans finally call it quits and heads to the Rathskeller.

We order a pitcher of beer and Morris says the one thing that keeps him coming back to Loveland winter after winter isn’t the skiing—although, of course, he’s a fan of that, too. It’s the people. “My friends—that’s 100 percent of the reason why I still ski Loveland,” says Morris. “The community here is rad, my best friends ski here, and it’s always challenging for me.”

When I ask Morris if he’s noticed more people showing up at Loveland than in the past, he nods. “It used to be pretty lonesome up here. The parking lot was always half full. But there have been some shifts in the marketing and thanks to social media, I think news is out that this place has good snow. The parking lot is full every weekend now.”

He says the image of Loveland is changing, too. “Years ago, this place catered to people from Nebraska who’d skied a dozen times in their lives and showed up wearing jeans. Now, there are a lot of skiers on fat skis and everyone’s getting after it.”

“But that guy from Nebraska—is he still skiing here?” I ask.

“Oh yeah,” Morris says. “That guy is still here and he’s still wearing the same pair of jeans.” ❄️

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Details, Details

LOVELAND, COLORADO

SkiLoveland.com

\$61

TICKET PRICE

422"

ANNUAL SNOWFALL

2,210'

VERTICAL

Eat: Cafeteria for \$5 chili dogs

Drink: Pitchers of Coors at Rathskeller

← Just another powder day at Loveland, where every other chair, if not more, are empty.