

past the roundabout



# Dropping into Silverton

STORY AND PHOTOS BY CHRISTINE BENEDETTI, TIME OUT WRITER



As we're dividing into groups for the day, a tall man in a red beanie asks about our skiing style. "Do you like to straightline?" he asks. "Do you want to hike fast?"

We answer yes to both, though I hesitate knowing that straightlining in the San Juans and straightlining on Spar Gulch mean two entirely different things. Splitting into groups of eight with a guide, my husband and I are matched with six others — three skiers and three snowboarders — half of which are friendly faces from Aspen.

We start our beacon check and get the safety lesson from our guide, Josh, aka Wild Horse. There are about seven other groups doing the same thing, and soon a woman approaches ours.

"You guys are from Aspen?" she says. "Aspen is like our sister mountain. You guys come here and you get it."

Turns out she's Jen Brill, co-owner and founder of Silverton Mountain. The man in the red beanie is her husband, Aaron, and together they've developed an area that offers the big-mountain experience of skiing in Alaska without the flight. It's a simple operation with big rewards for those willing to work for them.

It goes like this: One double chairlift brings riders from the base area — a heated yurt and parking lot — to above treeline where they can access more than 1,800 acres of advanced to expert terrain. Most of season, guests are required to hike with a guide except for limited access during the spring (\$129/day with guide). Hikes range anywhere from five to 40 minutes, and a ski-traffic controller calls out where each group goes to ensure safety and untouched snow.

"We're not snow farmers," says Troy Nordquist, the ski

patrol director. "It's a systematic way of working things. It's a complicated puzzle."

Silverton staff obsessively monitors and controls the snow. Every rider is required to wear an avalanche beacon and carry a shovel and probe, as well as be versed in search-and-rescue efforts should the worst happen. It's a controlled backcountry experience, and the constant blasts of avalanche bombs are a reminder of that.

And in concert with those booms is the slow thump of a helicopter, constantly humming throughout the day. Silverton is the only area in the lower 48 states that offers single heli skiing drops; it leases more than 22,000 acres in the surrounding area. Guests can buy a single drop (\$179) or go for an all-day package with six drops (\$999).

It's the cheapest legal fun you can buy.

After signing our life away and being whisked across the valley at 15,000 feet in a small metal bulb, we found ourselves standing on top of Hero Couloir and the only way home was to ski down.

Nordquist, our guide for this round, tells us he skied the couloir next to it earlier in the day and "it was terrible — wind-blown and rocky." We get a stern lesson on self-arresting and then a reminder to enjoy the turns that would follow in the apron below.

And then fun happens. The kind that's hard to write about or bottle for later, but the type of simple joy that reminds you why you're alive.

"I feel like I just did something wrong," gasps one rider in the group at the bottom of a perfect run, with another adding that it "might actually be better than sex."

It does feel illegal, or at least like it should be harder to do. But Silverton, which opened in 2002, has perfected its hike-to-guided operation and is continually building its heli

touring. While the mountain opens in mid-December, heli tours don't start until Jan. 15 so most of the 12,000-foot-plus peaks and bowls are filled in.

And even getting to the helidrop is easier from Aspen, with the recent addition of chartered flights so one can literally put on their ski boots here and be heli-skiing in the San Juans by mid-morning. Once the plane drops riders at the Telluride airport, Silverton's helicopter is there waiting to whisk them to untouched, pristine powder.

But for those who want the full Silverton experience — including the requisite toasts, smiles and stories retold in the yurt after the ski day — a number of family-owned lodges, saloons and diners in the small town of Silverton, 6 miles from the ski area, offer a hospitable rest.

When every day is a powder day, it's hard to leave and there's always a reason to go back.

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