



December 31, 2004

JOURNEYS -- Skiing U.S.A.: Resorts on the Rise; Polishing Rough Edges At Crested Butte

By **CHRISTOPHER SOLOMON**

LAST winter, the Crested Butte Mountain Resort in west-central Colorado was reeling. Never mind that the resort was a birthplace of extreme skiing in North America, or that skiers here enjoy perhaps the best vistas in the state or that the groovy former mining town at its foot proclaims itself "Colorado's last great ski town." The resort had a drop of nearly 40 percent in skier attendance over the last five years, and the owners were so behind on the land's lease payments that the United States Forest Service had threatened to shut down the lifts.

What a difference 10 months make. In March, Tim and Diane Mueller and their family, owners of the Okemo Mountain Resort in Vermont and operators of Mount Sunapee in New Hampshire, bought the resort for close to \$50 million. In the off-season the Muellers spent more than \$6 million on a new chairlift and three new intermediate runs as well as less sexy catch-up work. Skiers who return this winter to the Butte, as it is called, will notice smaller changes like additional snow-making coverage, better slope-grooming machines, fresh uniforms on the ski instructors and new wood planking on the rusting lift houses.

Bigger changes are coming soon, however. Work will begin as early as spring on a \$250 million town center with nearly 1,000 rentable rooms at the base of the lifts, which now consists of little more than a few unpaved parking lots and a clutch of beige 1970's-era condominiums. The Muellers also want to expand skiing onto the flanks of adjacent Snodgrass Mountain, which would increase the ski terrain by a third. They are also planning to sell hundreds of new home sites and condos around the resort in the next few years.

Buoyed by the Muellers' purchase and their vision, other developers are jumping in. A few hundred yards from the lifts, a crane swings girders into place for the initial 29 units in the area's first luxury condominium complex, the WestWall Lodge, scheduled for completion by fall 2006. In June, the Gart brothers, of sporting-goods chain fame, bought the former Sheraton at the resort. They spent \$5 million converting part of it into condos and giving it a rustic-chic appearance (with mixed success) befitting its new name, the Grand Lodge Crested Butte.

Crested Butte, Mr. Mueller said, "is kind of like Okemo was 20 years ago -- kind of a diamond in the rough that many people maybe didn't even know was a diamond because it was tarnished for so many years."

A LACK of great skiing was never the resort's problem. Crested Butte Mountain, a 12,162-foot peak named for the geologic cowlick at its summit, offers thrills like few other resorts. The nimblest skiers spend their days skiing laps on the North Face, whose pinched chutes and mine-shaft drops offer progressive levels of thrills -- or terror, depending on one's state of mind. To enter one run, the Funnel, skiers shinny down a dead tree that locals call the Bat pole. "I'll spend a month in Europe, scaring myself all over the place -- Chamonix, Verbier -- and come back here and be just as scared," said Woody Lindenmeyr, a ski model, artist and judge for the national Extreme Freeskiing Championships, which have been held at Crested Butte since they began in 1992.

The mountain isn't only for pros, though. Groomed, lower-angle slopes for intermediates and beginners dominate on the lower mountain -- runs like Treasury, a long, buffed boulevard that dips and rolls and meanders a few thousand feet to the East River chairlift. Or, before dropping into the coiffed expanse of Paradise Bowl, skiers can torque their necks toward the double-diamond face of Headwall and collect the goggles and lip balm lost by out-of-townners who try to follow the locals too quickly down that cragged face. That said, even the expert runs can sometimes be benign. To arc wide and fast turns down Crested Butte's marquee run, International, in the buttery light of a late afternoon, is to know why it's a Colorado classic.

And while some resorts can boast of having more than Crested Butte's 1,073 skiable acres, or even double its 240 inches of average snowfall, few can claim a ski town like the one three miles from the chairlifts. The town of Crested Butte is a free-spirited community of about 300 dogs and 1,600 people, all so captured by the profligate beauty they found at road's end that they have never left.

A bulletin board advertises pay-by-donation yoga at Town Hall, Roling massage and telemark skis for sale. At night people ride their "townies" -- old Schwinn or retired mountain bikes -- to Elk Avenue downtown and park them in snowbanks in front of bars like the Eldo ("a sunny place for shady people"). "You can tell who are the tourists," Vinnie Rossignol, a 28-year resident, said one night as he drove his route in a bio-diesel-powered town bus painted with zodiac signs. "They're the ones who get out of their cars and lock them."

Despite these assets, the ski resort was in a downward spiral by the late 1990's, in part because of several low-snow years and years of opposition by growth-wary residents. "The last five years, they'd let the ski area run down like an old hotel," Jim Schmidt, mayor of Crested Butte, said of the Callaway and Walton families, who bought the resort in 1970. The former owners could not be reached for comment.

Compounding the malaise was the downside of Crested Butte's end-of-the-road appeal. It is a 230-mile drive from Denver. Only a handful of carriers fly directly into Gunnison-Crested Butte Regional Airport, which has made the resort less appealing to vacationers looking for a quick, one-flight ski trip. Ski magazine recently called it "the resort everybody loves but hardly anyone takes

the trouble to visit."

Since buying a near-bankrupt Okemo in 1982, the Mueller family has increased skier visits there more than fivefold, to 603,000 last year -- the second-highest in Vermont after Killington -- largely because of greater snow making and grooming and by concentrating on families. At Mount Sunapee, a state-owned ski hill about an hour's drive from Boston that the family runs on a long-term lease, visits have jumped 175 percent since the Mueller's first season as operators in 1998-99.

Besides acumen with a balance sheet, they also have credibility on the slopes. Tim and Diane Mueller, both 54, are known as earthbound hands-on owners. Their daughter, Erica, 23, is on the United States Snowboard Team's development squad. And their 27-year-old son, Ethan, may be the only director of resort operations -- he's Crested Butte's -- who can nail a front-side McTwist on a snowboard in the half pipe.

One of the family's strategies to buff Crested Butte is to broaden its offerings. While the wild, worry-your-mother sections of the mountain like the North Face helped give it national prominence in the 1990's, the ski area needs more terrain to entertain intermediate-level skiers and families during a week's vacation, since they are the bulk of skiers, said John Norton, a consultant who is working on the resort.

The Snodgrass Mountain expansion would add roughly 300 acres of such skiing. The resort plans to have a proposal before the Forest Service, which administers the terrain, within six months and hopes to open lift-served skiing there within three years, Mr. Norton said. The Muellers also plan to sell real estate on private land at the foot of Snodgrass and have already started selling home sites on another parcel of ski-in, ski-out property called Prospect not far away. Prices are from \$850,000 to \$1.3 million for acre lots with views of the Elk Mountains and the ski hill.

Still, even residents who turned out to celebrate the Muellers' purchase of the resort with a street party and fireworks are cautious. They say they worry that so many changes, and so fast, will transform their mellow community of dollar-poor-but-life-rich athletes and artists and ranchers into another playground for plutocrats, like Aspen or Telluride. Or, as The Crested Butte News asked recently, "Will we remain Colorado's last great ski town?"

The aftershocks of the purchase began almost before the ink dried on the Muellers' check. In 2003 about \$98 million in land and homes sold in the northern end of the Gunnison Valley. "By the first of November this year we were double that number," said Doug Kroft, founder of Red Lady Realty. "It's off the charts." Home prices jumped, too. In the first 10 months of 2004, the average price of a single-family house in the town of Crested Butte rose nearly 60 percent from the overall level for 2003, to \$680,000. Gunnison County's median per capita income, meanwhile, did not top \$23,000 in 2002.

As well-heeled buyers push real-estate prices into the stratosphere, people like

Mr. Schmidt fear that Crested Butte's middle-class residents may be forced out. "One of the best things about this town is that it has been classless -- you can sit at a bar next to a guy who's a multimillionaire, and the other is a ski bum," said Mr. Schmidt, a three-term mayor, who rode into town on a motorcycle in 1976 and never left. "Now we're starting to see the separation of the classes again."

But Tim Mueller said that no one was "in favor of rampant, uncontrolled growth -- including us." The resort points out that the long-term goal of 600,000 skier visits annually is just 50,000 more than the resort's record, set in the 1997-98 season. Executives also said that the resort was likely to sell only 400 to 600 housing units or lots around the foot of Snodgrass Mountain, even though Mount Crested Butte, the incorporated village right at the ski lifts, has already approved 1,800. Plans for the new base area also don't have many shops or restaurants, Tim Mueller said, adding that the vibrant town below is the resort's heart and should remain the focus of dining and night life.

TWO weeks before Christmas, the mountain still had a day-before-opening-night feel. Though a blizzard had dumped 40-odd inches over Thanksgiving, the sun had shone almost daily since then, and the sky had stubbornly remained the color of washed blue jeans. Much of the toughest terrain wasn't yet open, so skiers stuck to groomed runs like Keystone and Black Eagle. At the base of the Twister lift, employees struggled with big blocks of ice to build the popular Ice Bar and Restaurant, which was about to open. New outdoor heaters already stood on the deck, waiting to warm the new chairs.

Below Paradise Bowl a platoon of snow-making guns was working overtime to pile up snow for the new super pipe. Empty runs had been smoothed by new grooming machines -- the same kind the Muellers use in the Northeast and which, Ethan Mueller said, do a better job of keeping high-traffic areas from becoming icy. And those areas felt silkier than other spots on the hill.

On the horizon, the Colorado Rockies were laid out like a saw blade. Over those mountains, just 17 miles away, glittered Aspen and its ski-lebrities. In winter, however, it's a three- to four-hour drive away, since the more direct mountain roads are closed. But locals like that distance fine. Now they just hope they can keep it.

IF YOU GO

Skiing in Colorado Without the Aspen

SKI season at Crested Butte Mountain Resort runs until April 10, conditions permitting. Lift tickets are \$66 a day, with discounts for multiple days and late season. One-day adult ski rentals start at \$22.50. Snow is likely to be most abundant between mid-February and mid-March.

Getting There

Delta, Continental, United and United Express serve Gunnison-Crested Butte Regional Airport, a 40-minute drive from town. Free and frequent town buses make rental cars unnecessary. Travel to and from the airport on Alpine Express,

(800-822-4844, www.alpineexpressshuttle.com) is \$51 round trip for adults.

Where to Stay

Accommodations are available in Mount Crested Butte at the foot of the ski hill or in the town of Crested Butte, three miles away and connected to the ski area by the free bus system.

North America's only Club Med ski property (500 Gothic Road, Mount Crested Butte; 800-258-2633) opened in 2000 in a revamped Marriott, 30 yards from the nearest chairlift. The resort, which has 240 rooms, offers seven-night packages starting at \$1,300 a person.

The Grand Lodge Crested Butte (6 Emmons Road, Mount Crested Butte; 888-823-4446) is a former Sheraton. Some suites have been made into condos. Rates begin at \$99 a night.

More lodging information is at (800) 544-8448 and www.skich.com.
CHRISTOPHER SOLOMON

Copyright 2005 The New York Times Company | [Permissions](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)