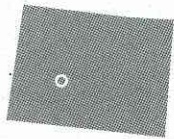


# traveler



## Crested Butte, Colo.

One of the West's best skier's mountains debuts new terrain, lodging and dining. And that's just the beginning.  
By Chris Hawkins

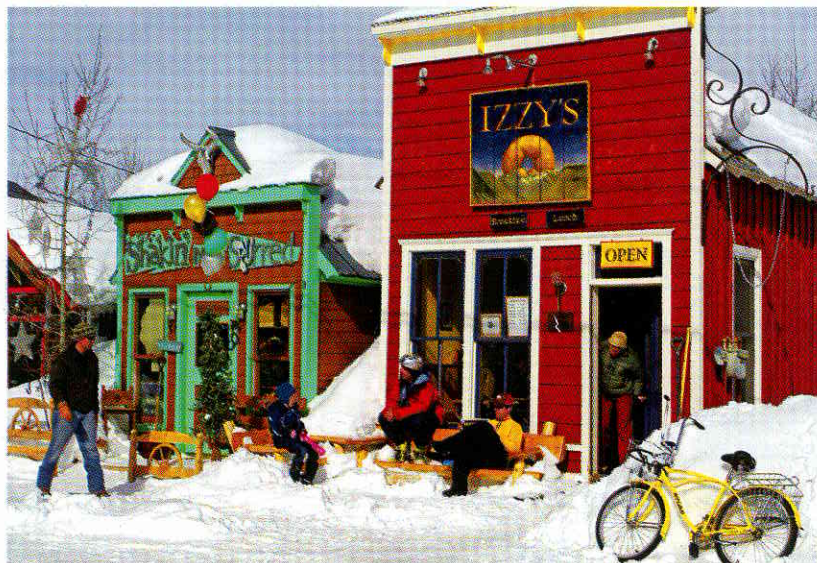
**Cruising up the Silver Queen Express** in steady snowfall, it's hard not to be amazed by how steep and narrow Crested Butte's terrain is. Off to the right are a handful of chutes like Peel and Banana Funnel. The latter is currently socked in by low-hanging clouds. But it's there. I know because when you drive into town on a clear day, it's the first thing you see—a tight gulley running down the mountain that gives this small town its name. And if steep and narrow aren't enough, the mountain also throws in rocks—rather, boulders—trees and plenty of cliff drops. Even the bowls are narrow by most mountain standards. It's no wonder the U.S. Extreme Skiing Championships are held here every year.

Crested Butte Mountain Resort is a mountain at the end of the line—there's only one main road into the valley—with big yearly snow and challenging skiing. It's set just a few miles from its laid-back

**TOUGH COOKIE** With 60 percent expert terrain, Crested Butte is a place where even the best skiers test their skills. A proposed expansion should broaden its appeal.



TOM STILLO



**FUNKY TOWN** Crested Butte's historic downtown is rich with shops, restaurants and bars, each reflecting the small-town spirit of the place.

town, which lacks the megaresort high-rises, Starbucks and chain restaurants. For years, the resort was operated like it was still the 1970s, waiting to be unearthed and polished. Then came Tim and Diane Mueller who, in 2004, purchased the resort and started injecting millions of dollars. (The Muellers sold Crested Butte to CNL Properties last year, but are still managing the resort.) They've retained the Butte's roughhewn feel—just sanded the edges a bit.

Some changes are subtle, such as Thin Air Sports, a high-end clothing store added to the clutch of shops at the base. Others, such as Elevations Hotel & Spa, with a luxury spa and enough fitness

**THAT'S THE UPSIDE OF INACCESSIBILITY: LIFTLINES ARE OFTEN NONEXISTENT, AND YOU CAN EASILY RACK UP 20,000 FEET OR MORE OF VERTICAL A DAY IF YOU'RE SO INCLINED.**

machines to train an NFL team, less so. The new terrain in Teocalli Bowl, opened last spring, offers even more options for experts. At Django's, in the new Mountaineer Square at the base, sheer curtains drape from ceiling to floor. Hundreds of wine bottles line one wall—

as much décor as beverage. Sit at the curved bar, sip an Argentinean malbec and wonder, just for a moment, if you're in Spain—or maybe South Beach. Yet despite it all, the genuine Crested Butte, with its Western hospitality and still slightly crunchy vibe, is as comfortable as a favorite pair of jeans.

"There are these colorful characters in the community," says Daren Cole, vice president of sales and marketing. "And there's kind of a small-town spirit." Cole, a Colorado native and ski industry veteran, could be the face of the new Crested Butte. His affable personality and do-what-it-takes work ethic are the kind of values that draw people here. But Cole knows it takes more than just down-home smiles to woo folks away from Colorado's glitzier, more accessible resorts.

"We're trying to position ourselves as that next level of luxury," Cole says. Some of those levels include: 9380 Prime, a contemporary chophouse; Trackers, a bar and grill inside the recently built Lodge at Mountaineer Square; and Camp CB, a new kids ski school. The resort's master plan calls for more than \$2 billion in property development, with neighborhoods at the mountain and in town. A proposal for more than 250 acres of beginner terrain on nearby Snodgrass Mountain—to be accessed by gondola from the resort—is in the approval process with the U.S. Forest Service. The resort is also tackling that

accessibility problem. This season, three major airlines will fly into Gunnison/Crested Butte Regional Airport, with direct flights from Chicago, Atlanta, Salt Lake City, Dallas and Denver.

Yet even if you take away all things shiny and new, Crested Butte still lures die-hard skiers just by being what it is. "People are into finding new experiences," says Ethan Mueller, vice president of operations and Tim and Diane's son. "We have an awesome natural playground to be able to offer that."

And a playground it is. But contrary to popular belief, it's not just a haven for experts. Take the groomed cruisers off the Paradise Express. Perfectly pitched, these blues are crowd-pleasers—without the crowds. That's the upside of inaccessibility: Lifelines are often nonexistent, and you can easily rack up 20,000 feet or more of vertical a day if you're so inclined. But if instead you prefer to knock off early for a beer or two on Tracker's patio, go ahead. It's part of the new Butte allure. ●

## SIGNPOST CRESTED BUTTE

**1,167 skiable acres; 2,775 vertical feet; base elevation 9,375; summit elevation 12,162; 300 annual inches; 121 runs; 16 lifts. Lift tickets: \$82; young adult (13-17) \$74; child (7-12) \$41; seniors \$62**

**LODGING** Elevation Hotel & Spa is at the base of Mt. Crested Butte, with 262 oversized rooms and suites, an 11,000-square-foot spa and fitness center, and a ski concierge. It's also pet friendly; \$249–\$966 per night; skicb.com; 800-810-7669.

**DINING** In town, morning coffee and excellent breakfast burritos are on offer at Camp 4 (camp4coffee.com). The Avalanche, at the base, serves good pizza, burgers and Colorado microbrews (avalanchebarandgrill.com). Django's does Mediterranean-inspired small plates and has a good wine list (970-349-7574).

**APRÈS-SKI** Butte 66 has BBQ, brews and slopeside views (skicb.com).

**GETTING THERE** There's nonstop service from five major cities to Gunnison's airport (gunnisoncrestedbutte.com). Montrose Regional airport, 95 miles away, is another option (montroseairport.com). The drive from Denver is about five hours.