

ski guide

Boom uncorks Steamboat splendor

By Kyle Wagner
Denver Post Travel Editor

Article Last Updated: 10/20/2007 03:19:55 PM MDT

When former Burton Snowboards sales rep David Helman and his wife, Laura Brewer, were looking to leave South Haven, Mich., for a ski town in Colorado last year, they asked Helman's industry contacts for recommendations.

And then they moved to Steamboat Springs, sight unseen.

"We chose Steamboat on blind faith," Brewer says. "Totally based on Steamboat's reputation as a small town with a progressive attitude and, of course, the champagne powder snow conditions."

So many of Helman's buddies at Burton, as well as boarders he ran into at competitions and people Brewer talked with through her work as a professional photographer, mentioned Steamboat's "laid-back lifestyle, 'real town,' as opposed to some of the faux ski towns you see, and killer powder days," that they were sold.

"As snowboarders, we were seeking longer winters, better snow conditions and generally living the mountain lifestyle. And we love the scenery here," says Brewer, who is trying to establish a photography business in town.

"Because we both work on the Internet now — David runs a surfing/eco-tour company in El Salvador — we can basically live anywhere. And now we're really looking forward to checking out the mountain."

With nearly 3,000 skiable acres and an average of 331 inches of snow, not to mention legendary tree skiing in sections such as Christmas Tree Bowl, smooth corduroy on runs such as Buddy's and plenty of champagne powder pockets in the Chutes, there's a lot to look forward to.

The champagne reference, trademarked by the ski area, points both to the way the snow drifts down, light and fluffy like bubbles in a glass, how it sparkles when it lands, and how, on a powder day, it makes skis and snowboards do magical things.

And it seems to make the people who live in Steamboat pretty happy to be there.

"Well, I can't imagine living anywhere else," says Kent Eriksen, who hitchhiked from Aspen to Steamboat on the last day of 1974 and never looked back. "I mean, where else can you ski to work?"

Eriksen's office is in the back of Orange

Peel Bicycle Service on Yampa Street, where the Mountain Bike Hall of Famer builds custom bikes. His wife, world champion mountain bike racer Katie Lindquist, handles the books. But in the winter, he skate- skis every time he can get a free moment.

That's after he skis to work, of course. "I live about 7 miles north of town, right on the edge of full-on wilderness, and it's about a 1,200-foot drop into town," he says. "I can get a block away from the shop on my skis."

When Eriksen first came to Steamboat, the Wisconsin native had planned to be a photographer, but then mountain biking came along, and he fell in love with the sport.

Steamboat "was a different town then," he adds. "It's really changing right now; you look at the corners downtown, there's all these three-story to four-story buildings going up with retail on the bottom and luxury condos on top. But I think the people here will stay the same for a while."

The word "unpretentious" is often applied to the town and its inhabitants.

Steamboat is at the center of some of Colorado's most valuable ranch country, as much wrangled as wrangled-over in agricultural versus developmental disputes. This all infuses Steamboat with an authentic cowboy charm, and it influences the choices in the shops and restaurants. That means plenty of Western wear and top-notch local produce.

Improvements abound

Intrawest, which bought Steamboat Ski Resort in March, continues to pump money into the area, with \$16 million invested this year and an unspecified commitment over the next five years, says Michael Lane, the resort's public relations director.

New this year is the Christie Peak Express, a six-passenger high-speed detachable chairlift that was installed in response to complaints about Steamboat's inability to handle early-morning, powder- day crowds.

Also look for the new Headwall redesign at the bottom of the mountain, scheduled to be done by opening day Nov. 22. "It had better be," Lane says, laughing.

"It's in the beginner area," he adds. "Look for a couple of different fall lines, three new trails with consistent pitch from 9 to 20 percent. It will really be a great improvement in that area, especially when there are a lot of people coming down."

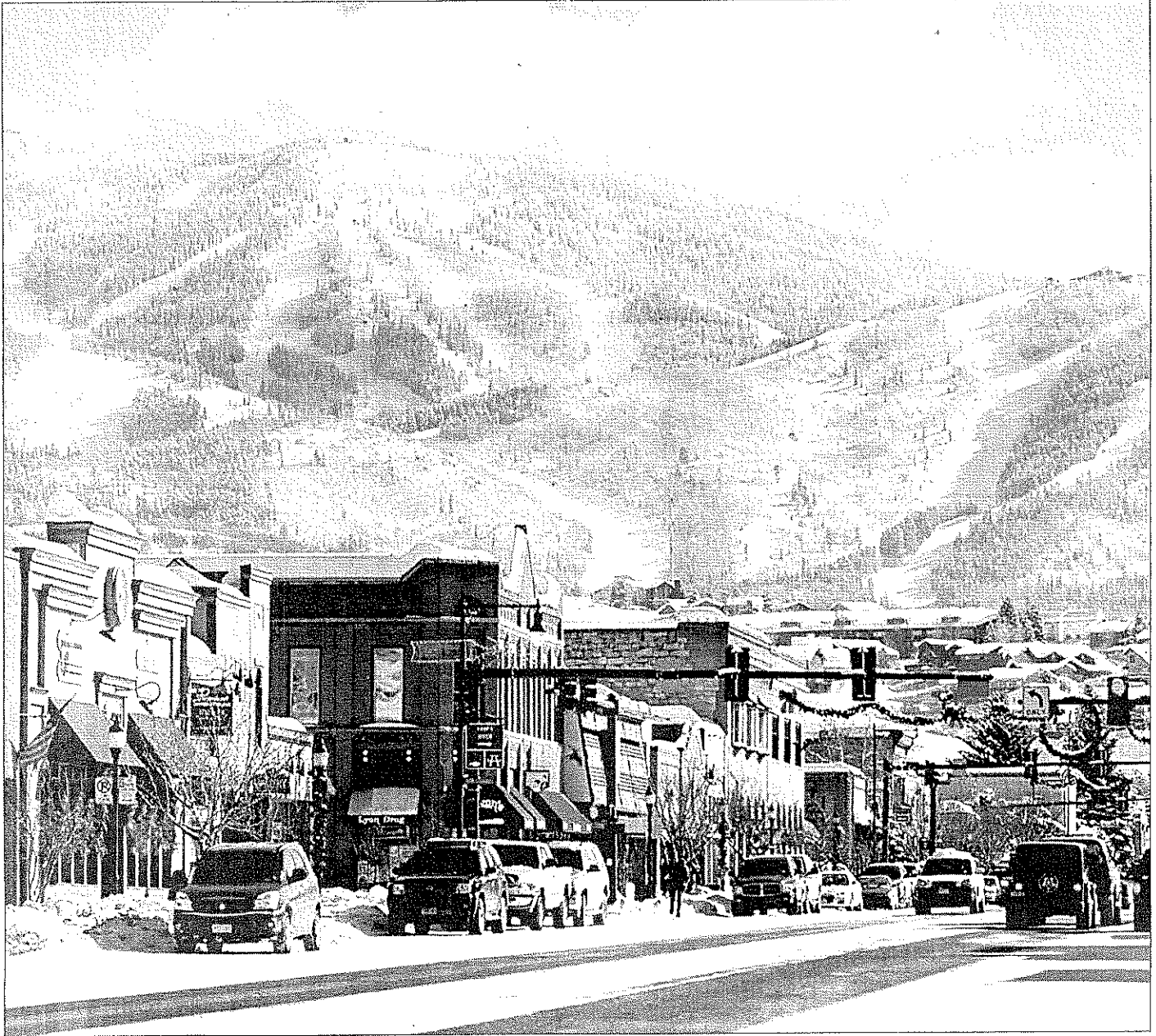
The resort does expect a significant increase this season over the 1.02 million visits last year, in part because of the addition of Steamboat to the Rocky Mountain season-pass lineup. The Super Pass Plus to Winter Park/Mary Jane and Copper Mountain (\$499) allows for six days of unrestricted skiing as well as free skiing after noon every Friday at Steamboat. The Rocky Mountain Ultimate Pass (\$1,344) offers unrestricted skiing at all three resorts.

"We've had tremendous response to those passes," Lane says. "No final numbers yet, of course, but definitely a noticeable amount of response."

Not all of the locals applaud the influx of newcomers, but Eriksen says you have to take the increased traffic and construction noise in stride.

"It's getting expensive, but luckily we got a home before it got out of our price range," he says. "There are good people here, and if more come, well, I just hope it's more good people."

Travel editor Kyle Wagner: 303-954-1599 or travel@denverpost.com



The abundant snowfall around Steamboat Springs attracts thousands of skiers every year, but Steamboat also is in the center of some of Colorado's best ranching country, lending the town an authentic cowboy charm. *Larry Pierce, Steamboat Ski Resort*