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Premier is a word not to be taken lightly when describing events, places or people. Indeed, it evokes synonyms of “the best,” “top-flight,” and “first in its class.” Only a select few can truly wear the word well. Devil’s Thumb Ranch wears the declaration proudly. It is not only considered the premier cross-country ski center in Colorado but it also wears the tag of one of the top eco-friendly hotels in the world. In fact, the mission statement of the Ranch states, “the premier true Colorado experience.” The 5,000-acre spread has garnished a bevy of awards to solidify its eco-friendly stature to include the EPA award for “Environmentally Sensitive Remodeling and Expansion of the Historic Devil’s Thumb Ranch.”

Since the beginning, when they acquired Devil’s Thumb Ranch and the surrounding Diamond Bar T Ranch between 1999 and 2001, owners Bob and Suzanne Fanch considered sustainability methods



that would preserve the land first. The goal being to create an environment that honors the great outdoors and the beautiful natural resources while paying tribute to the rugged individualism of the West. Essentially the concept evolved into offering guests a unique experience where restoration is highlighted as part of the Ranch mantra, “restoration of resources, restoration of

body and restoration of spirit.”

Accolade upon accolade continues to reign upon the Ranch. And with all that praise attached to the property, I concluded it was high-time for this mountain gal to strap on the skinny skis and try out the first-rate offerings of the Nordic center and resort environment to see what all the fuss was about.

Setting the tone for Western ambience is the drive into Fraser Valley, which is 10 miles west of Winter Park Resort and 65 miles west of Denver. Snow blankets the valley welcoming travelers into a winter playground of outdoor pursuits with the Continental Divide serving as a backdrop to the wonderful vista. On my approach into the Devil’s Thumb I was rewarded with a lively meadow scene of a silver fox darting across the blaze of white snow in hot pursuit of perhaps an evening meal. I was in fact looking forward to my own evening dinner at the Ranch House Restaurant & Saloon where

DEPARTURES

executive chef Ken Ohlinger embraces the concept of sustainability and creates American Ranch Cuisine with classical techniques.

Inspired by the national park lodges of the Pacific Northwest, the new (as of winter 2007/2008) main lodge presides as a grand “parkitecture” equivalent, ready to accommodate with 52 guest rooms and suites. Nordic skiers could be seen just beyond the main lodge gliding along the trails illuminated by lights set up for night skiing. It was a postcard perfect panorama. My cross-country skis almost leapt out of the car into the ski valet’s hands in anticipation of traversing across the more than 100 km of groomed trails.

A warm welcome is extended by staff members immediately upon entering the grand main lodge. Imbued with the décor of its history, the main lodge is adorned with tasteful modern and antique western furnishings accented in a rustic ranch meets chic style. Owner, Suzanne Fanch had a hand in selecting the many antiques that grace the property and rooms. She was also instrumental in commissioning the artwork from local resident, Karen Vance, a nationally acclaimed Colorado landscape artist. Environmental features of the lodge include a water sand filtration system, geothermal radiant heating system and recycled asphalt used throughout the Ranch roads. Other promi-

nent environmental features are the use of beetle-kill pine on the interior wall trim and ceiling beams in the halls and guest rooms, as well as stone used throughout the lodge and spa that comes from a local rockslide. Guestrooms are beautifully appointed in mountain high-style. Wood floors bedecked with area rugs, antiques and hand-crafted furnishings, wooden canopy or cast iron beds covered with quilts, soft linens and fluffy pillows offer a wonderful repose. Bathrooms are thoroughly upscale with an atmosphere beckoning a restorative mode with a quality mix of natural toiletries at your disposal.

Beyond the tranquility of the guestroom one can explore the wide variety of recreational amenities of the resort...oops, did I say resort? Secret is out: Devil’s Thumb actually is a “resort” disguised as a “ranch.” Actually it was a ranch first—originally built in the 1930s and used as a working ranch and guest dude ranch. The homestead still exists today as the Ranch House Saloon.

The Ranch/Resort is designed in such a way that non-skier’s can delight in a snowy getaway as well. There’s a fitness/workout room, and to keep the younger ones and young-at-heart busy a game room offers foosball, air hockey, pool tables, shuffleboard and a candlepin bowling alley. The library room is stocked with children’s books and family-friendly board games. There’s also a 37-seat movie theater in the main lodge where I happened to catch a “Final Four” college basketball game after enjoying a casual meal at Heck’s Tavern. It was a fun way to meet other guests and root for our teams in a convivial setting.

Winter activities off the skis include sleigh rides with a camp-fire pit stop for s’mores and hot drinks; to winter feed sleigh rides where guests can get up close with ranch horses, oxen and mules; snowshoeing on groomed trails and guided snowshoe tours and outdoor ice-skating as well as swimming in the heated indoor/outdoor pool and outdoor hot tub. There is nothing like swimming in a heated pool while snowflakes flutter around you with the Continental Divide within view. That was certainly a personal highpoint during my stay.

Oh, and then there is the cross-country skiing! Yes, you *can* spend a weekend at Devil’s Thumb Nordic Center and probably not ski all the trails. Why? Because there is more to life than skiing and the Ranch covers it all. In addition to the game room, the mini-theatre, the fine dining and swimming, Devil’s Thumb Ranch provides one of the finest spa opportunities in Colorado.



It was easy to push myself on the variety of trails because I’d planned a spa treatment afterwards to soothe any sore muscles. Instead of using my skis, I rented Fischer classic skis from the Nordic Center where they offer a wide variety of ski equipment including infant sleds and skijoring rigs. I classic skied the intermediate trails named Ute Camp and Sawmill but decided against the advanced trail named Screamer. Didn’t sound like my kind of fun. After schussing and gliding for most of the day, the reward was waiting for me at the spa.

The new 12,000-square-foot Ranch Creek Spa opened in February 2008. The spa’s experience is designed to complement the mountain setting of the Ranch, including being environmentally sensitive in all facets of its operation. Treatments change seasonally depending on the mountain environment. The facility reflects the main lodge in style and feels like a natural extension of the building. There are a number of private areas that friends and family can relax in as well as common lounge areas

TRAVEL PLANNER

Devil’s Thumb Ranch
3530 County Road 83
Tabernash, CO 80478
800.933.4339
devilstumbbranch.com

GOOD TO KNOW INFO.

- Devil’s Thumb Ranch offers dog-friendly cabins to accommodate guests traveling with their canine companions.
- The Ranch is also an exciting summer destination offering opportunities for fly-fishing, kayaking, rafting, horseback riding, hiking and mountain biking.

GETTING THERE

From Denver, head west on I-70. Take exit 232 onto Hwy 40. Follow Hwy 40 for approximately 30 miles through Empire, over Berthoud Pass, and past Winter Park and Fraser. About 2 miles past Fraser, take a right on County Road 83. Take the right hand fork, and follow it 3 miles to the Ranch.

that resemble the comfort of a beautiful home rather than staid spa waiting areas. Eight inviting treatment rooms offer guests nature-based and restorative services such as massage, facials, hand/foot treatments, soaks and reflexology. There is also a 600-square-foot spa suite, men and women's locker rooms with dry sauna, steam room and an oxygen therapy room. Upstairs provides a yoga room with floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the Continental Divide where Pilates, strengthening/stretching and yoga classes are offered on a weekly schedule.

During my spa visit, the Turquoise Sage Wrap left me feeling refreshed and my skin ensconced in a delightful lavender sage aroma. The heavenly scent hung in the air as I was being given the Altitude Adjustment Hot Towel Infused Massage. Hot steaming towels bathed in lavender-sage essence combined with a deep tissue massage melted away any muscle tension leftover from skiing. It was difficult to leave this "home" of restoration of both body and soul, but I managed to walk the short path back to the lodge into my cocoon of a room. I knew then, that the only possible thing that could top this premier experience was another day of it. And I'm sure you can guess what the next day entailed. **D**



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