



Central City is a charming town founded during the Pike’s Peak Gold Rush. Photos by Laura DeMarco, The Plain Dealer

# Colorado ski vacation takes several twists and turns

FROM K1

the wayward tourist back down the way we came. Before we followed, we exchanged thanks. “If anyone gets stuck on the way, I’ll be heading back down in half an hour,” he shouted.

“That’s how it is in the mountains,” my brother explained. “Everyone helps everyone else out.”

Our off-roading trek complete, we decided to continue our adventures for the day.

After all, that’s one major factor that brought us west last month: the opportunity to visit family; to explore an area of the country I had not visited since childhood; to see snow, which has been absent this gray Cleveland winter; and to ski.

All of our goals were accomplished, though none as we planned. In large part due to the fact that the night of our arrival the Denver area had its biggest snowstorm of the season. Not only did this mean a two-hour white-knuckle drive across to my brother’s home in Littleton, a suburb in the foothills 30 miles southwest of the airport and 15 miles south of the city. It meant our plans to ski the next day would be canceled, since Interstate 70 up to the mountains was closed.

Plan B. I had always wanted to snowshoe, but there never seems to be enough snow in Cleveland. Why don’t we try that today, my brother suggested. Why not indeed?

He suggested we head toward Mount Falcon Park, a lovely park in the foothills (2,000 foot elevation) for hikers and equestrians that included a 1.7-mile Turkey Trot circular trail and 11 additional park miles. We picked up some snowshoes at one of the rental shops that seem ubiquitous in the Denver area, and headed out into the elements.

My picaresque dreams of strapping on tennis racket-like paddles and leisurely walking around the snow were replaced by reality: modern snowshoes are strap-on metal contraptions, and snowshoeing is basically walking up a mountain in snow. Not as fun as I imagined, but a good experience.

We chose Mount Falcon for its proximity to Red Rocks Park and Amphitheatre, which I always wanted to see. I never expected to see its iconic red cliffs and hills covered in white, but it was certainly memorable to walk around the ruddy formations in swirling snow. Despite the weather, we were far from the only visitors exploring the open-air amphitheater, which has been used for concerts since the time of the Ute Native Americans. Groups of vigorous young men, most of whom looked like Mike Clevinger, were using the steps for an open-air workout.

We opted to walk around the area, which is also home to the Colorado Music Hall of Fame, and head back to our car. On the way back to Littleton, we stopped for dinner at Los Dos Potrillos, a popular local Mexican chain where the house margaritas were the perfect wind-down to our day.

Saturday morning, we finally decided to hit the slopes. As I had not skied for more than a decade and my 13-year-old had never skied, I put some time in figuring out the best resort in the area for a beginner. We considered Copper Mountain, 75 miles north of Denver in Summit County, and the lower-cost Arapahoe Basin, a favorite with locals, before deciding on Winter Park ([www.winterparkresort.com](http://www.winterparkresort.com)) a lovely resort 65 miles west of Denver with more than 3,000 acres of skiable terrain, 3,000 feet of vertical rise, and seven territories “designed for every skill level.”

We loved it — when we finally got there. I had heard the week before about the weekend traffic jams on I-70 on NPR. They did not exaggerate. What would have been a 90-minute drive on a weekday took us nearly four hours with parking time factored in. In the future, I think I would stay overnight in the charming, very European-looking town of Winter Park around the resort.



Snowshoeing in Mount Falcon Park.



The snow transformed the Rocky Mountain foothills into a winter wonderland.



Red Rocks covered in snow was a little less red.



Denver’s 16th Street Mall offers shopping, dining and sightseeing.

Unlike many other resorts, Winter Park offers first-time group lessons for a variety of ages, meaning my teen did not have to learn to ski with toddlers. It was pricey (\$125 - \$152 half-day), but worth it. By the end of a few hours, the laid-back instructor had her skiing down “green” level hills, having mastered the bunny slopes.

Everything was pricey at Winter Park (\$154-\$189 for a one -day lift ticket), but alas that is the same as just about everywhere else in the area. (Tickets are cheaper by the week; call 1-800-979-0332. Winter Park, and most resorts are open through April and again in November, better deals can often be had in the spring and on weekdays.)

Once she was safely ensconced in her class, I set out on the nearby slopes. Fortunately, I learned skiing is a lot like riding a bike — it came back naturally.

When the slopes closed at four, we were not yet ready to face the traffic heading back down the hills and made a dinner reservation in town. We wouldn’t have chosen a more Colorado-y place to cap our day. Idlewild Spirits Distillery ([www.idlewildspirits.com](http://www.idlewildspirits.com)) was a rustic-meets-hipster after-ski spot with fantastic drinks — that hot toddy was the perfect apres-ski pick — and new American cuisine from crispy Brussel sprouts to chicken cordon bleu sandwiches.

Driving home was far less hassle, but none of us were up for another six-plus hours in the car Sunday, so we decided to pursue some winter sports closer to town. Echo Mountain ([echomtn.com](http://echomtn.com)), is a smallish, low-cost ski/snow-tube spot only about a

half hour drive from Denver. It took us a lot longer considering all of the snow coming down on the winding mountain road that took us there. So you can imagine our dismay when we arrived and tubing had been cancelled due to too much powder. An email cancellation would have been nice, considering we had booked in advance. They did offer us free lift tickets (a \$62 value), but since we had not brought our equipment we demurred.

The drive wasn’t a total bust, though. On the way there, we had seen a sign on the interstate for Buffalo Bill’s gravesite and museum ([www.buffalobill.org](http://www.buffalobill.org)). Not wanting to pass up an unexpected chance to see the resting place of an American legend, we followed the signs up another snowy mountain to the homey museum located in a lodge near the summit of Lookout Mountain. The Wild West showman’s final resting place at the mountaintop provided views for miles — a chance to reflect on the changing American landscape and its beauty, which Bill Cody worked to preserve. On the way back to the highway, we even saw a herd of buffalo.

“Hey, do you want to do some off-road-ing and see a ghost town?” my brother asked next. You know how that story ends.

Following our mountain adventure, we continued on to see two of the most well-known small towns in the foothills: Central City and Black Hawk. Today these two historic mining towns are best known for their casino scene, but they have a fascinating history that predates the slots and poker tables. Founded in the 1850s in the Pike’s Peak Gold

Rush, both are now charming tourist destinations, lined with bars and cafes and bohemian shops — and, yes, quite a few cannabis dispensaries.

Having finally made it there late on a Sunday, not too many shops were open, but we did find a cozy corner bar in a century building on Main Street, Dostal Alley Saloon ([dostalalley.com](http://dostalalley.com)), where we toasted our adventurous day with a local IPA.

Dinner in another historic town, Golden, home to Coors Brewing, topped the evening. Covered in twinkling lights and white fluff, the city of 20,000 looked like a Christmas card come to life. Also established during the Pike’s Peak Gold Rush, today Golden is a bustling residential and tourist city. Myriad restaurants beckoned but we opted to try a Colorado favorite at Woody’s Wood Fired Pizza ([www.woodysgolden.com](http://www.woodysgolden.com)). The semolina-and-honey crust was worth the drive alone.

Our last day in the West was spent in the city, as we had a few hours to spend before our afternoon flight (we flew direct on Frontier, for \$164 per person, on one of their many Denver-Cleveland flights per week). On the advice of my sister-in-law, we headed for the famous 16th Street Mall, an I. M. Pei-designed 1.25 mile open-air pedestrian mall lined with more than 300 upscale shops, gift stores and bistros. With quite a few shops we don’t have in Cleveland, like the sleek Japanese casual wear Uniqlo, it was an entertaining place to spend our last afternoon. We even picked up a few gifts on the way out and one of the many Colorado tourist stores. No Broncos gear, of course.