

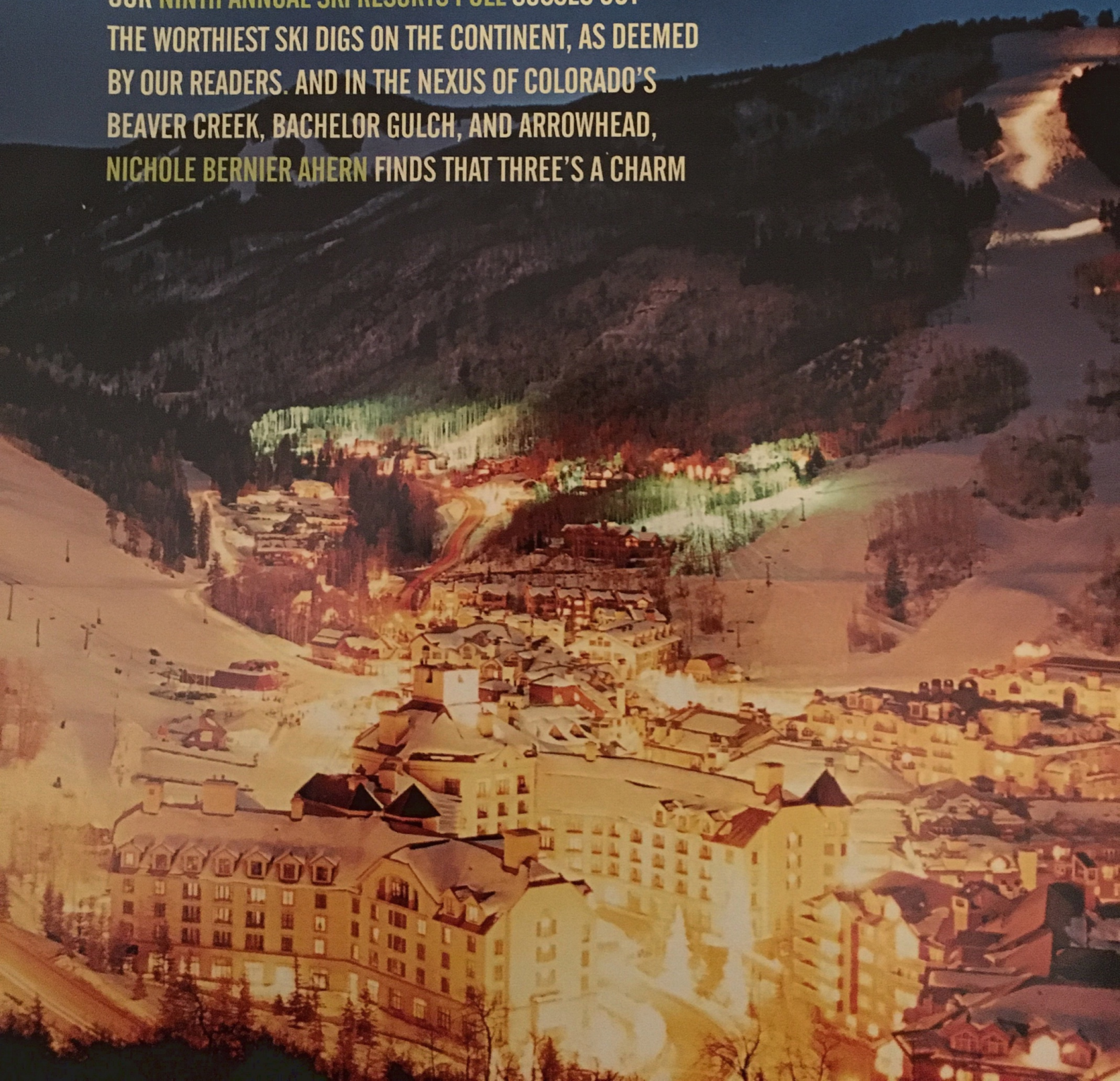
2004 READERS' POLL

TOP 50

# SKI RESORTS

IN NORTH AMERICA

OUR NINTH ANNUAL SKI RESORTS POLL SUSSES OUT THE WORTHIEST SKI DIGS ON THE CONTINENT, AS DEEMED BY OUR READERS. AND IN THE NEXUS OF COLORADO'S BEAVER CREEK, BACHELOR GULCH, AND ARROWHEAD, NICHOLE BERNIER AHERN FINDS THAT THREE'S A CHARM



THE RESORT WAS NOWHERE TO BE FOUND. “Why would they build it out here, anyway?” said my husband, Tom, clicking on the interior car light and poring over the road atlas for the stretch of I-70 in Eagle County. “Bachelor Gulch isn’t even on the map.”

A phone call to the Ritz-Carlton Bachelor Gulch yielded directions like something out of *The Da Vinci Code*: Loop around several traffic circles and bear right at the statue of stampeding bulls, kick into four-wheel-drive for a mile uphill, cruise through the checkpoint gate, head into the darkness and under an arch, and then hairpin into the courtyard, where you’ll be greeted by two men.

And, twenty minutes later, we were. Two bellmen in full-length oilskin coats and ten-gallon hats appeared from the doorway and relieved us of our bags and skis. Inside, the lobby

was elegant yet low-key, built in the log-and-beam style of Western national park lodges, with subtle touches of five-star taste. The registration desk faced a grand gathering space with a cathedral ceiling and a massive stone fireplace. Leather couches and chairs were clustered in circles conducive to chatting, reading, and sipping cocktails. Outside, visible through the plate-glass windows, a bonfire was roaring, a few faces illuminated in the orange glow. Behind them was blackness. We were presumably somewhere near Beaver Creek, part of a trio of base areas—with Bachelor Gulch and Arrowhead—linked in a symbiotic village-to-village ski network. Vail, the country’s largest ski area, was only fifteen miles away.

Whether or not Bachelor Gulch is acknowledged by Rand McNally, the ski area is on the map for winter-sport enthusiasts. The town was settled in the

early 1900s, when silver-mining bachelors and such homesteaders as Allie Townsend (the first female resident) and Zach Allen (her father) set up house; today, two mountaintop cabins bearing their names are used for gourmet dining and special events. The area’s brief heyday as a lettuce-farming community ended during the Depression, and the land fell into private ranching hands, where it remained for decades until it became part of the grand plans of a burgeoning ski area. The ski mountains debuted one at a time: Beaver Creek in 1980, Arrowhead in 1988, and, lastly, Bachelor Gulch in 1996. In 2002, Bachelor Gulch was populated in earnest. Ritz-Carlton built its 237-room luxury resort, which in its first year came in fifth on this annual list of the Top 50 North American ski resorts, and this year ranks third.

The location for Ritz-Carlton’s first ski resort was deftly chosen, tucked in the crease between Beaver Creek and Arrowhead mountains, making it part of things without being at the heart of things. For people who like their privacy, this is a bless-

## THE BEST TERRAIN + CONDITIONS

**95.8** VAIL, COLORADO  
Sheer size and variety are the forte of the U.S.’s largest ski area, with 7 bowls on 5,289 skiable acres.

**95.0** Snowmass, Colorado

**91.1** Jackson Hole, Wyoming

**88.9** Telluride, Colorado

**88.8** Beaver Creek, Colorado

Telemark skiers  
zigzag down  
Beaver Creek’s  
scenic Sheephorn.



TO WARM UP, WE WANTED WIDE TRAILS. EVERYTHING AT BACHELOR GULCH FIT THE BILL, AND ALL MORNING WE SKIED IN NIRVANA

## METHODOLOGY

The independent firms of Lieberman Research Group and Millard Group asked Condé Nast Traveler readers to evaluate 212 North American properties that they had visited in the past three years. Properties were rated excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor on seven criteria—Terrain and Conditions, Lifts and Lines, Location, Accommodations, Service, Dining/Food, and Other Facilities. Scores represent the percentage of the first 1,305 readers who responded and rated criteria excellent or very good. Only properties that received a required minimum number of responses were eligible to be included in these rankings.



Boarders head for Beaver Creek's midmountain Spruce Saddle Lodge (above); red and beige jackets both by Burton, goggles all by Oakley. Right: Après-ski around the fire pit at the Park Hyatt Beaver Creek. For clothing information and stores, see page 194.

## THE LAST RUN DOWN GUNDER'S WAS MY BEST OF THE DAY: LONG, SMOOTH S-CURVES COMPOSED IN THE ZEN OF SOLITARY SKIING

ing; for those who like the world at their door, perhaps less so. Unlike Beaver Creek, Bachelor Gulch has no base village per se—the hotel is the alpha and the omega of dining, shopping, and nightlife in the immediate area. But the ski perks are palpable. The resort claims the foot of the mountain like a pampered only child. Guests encounter no competition for the morning lift and can ski Bachelor Gulch—which no one save Beaver Creek connoisseurs has heard of—with plenty of elbow room, or the adjacent slopes of Arrowhead, the equally underpopulated area directly to the west. One downhill run away is Beaver Creek, with 109 trails and a city-like base area of shops and restaurants, all connected by heated walkways and featuring covered outdoor escalators—no need for staggering ski-boot stair climbs here. From Bachelor Gulch, the drive to Beaver Creek takes about fifteen minutes. Sometimes, a little distance can be a good thing.



## PLACES & PRICES

Searching for a plush place to hang your ski hat at the end of the day? For details on booking a room at the Top 50 North American ski resorts, turn to page 176.

FROM THE BREAKFAST TABLES AT REMington's at the Ritz-Carlton, you can look directly out at the lift line. On a sunny forty-degree Wednesday in mid-March, the scene had almost as much in common with a beach as it did a ski area. Skiers riding up the Bachelor Gulch Express lift were wearing T-shirts, shorts, and sunglasses. The cloudless sky was a sapphire blue. A flotilla of ten Sno-Cats moved in formation across the mountain face like synchronized water-skiers. We finished our last sips of coffee and headed to the lift, where there was virtually no line.

To warm up, we wanted some wide intermediate trails. Everything at Bachelor Gulch fit the bill, and all morning Tom and I skied in first-day-out nirvana: Gunder's, named after an early settler, was immaculately groomed. Sawbuck was a wonderful runner—not too narrow, not too flat. Grubstake was a nice blend of corduroy, corn, and the occasional soft spot. Midmountain, we passed hikers trekking with crampons clamped to their boots, accompanied by Bachelor, the Ritz-Carlton's companionable Loan-a-Lab.

For our fourth run, we decided to ski over to Arrowhead Mountain and take two blue trails,

Pow-Wow and Cresta, to the base. There wasn't another soul to be seen, and it reminded me of late-season skiing at Sundance, when the crowds, the film buffs, and probably Redford himself have packed it in. Even the topography of the slopes was Utah-esque, with sage-colored scrub poking through the snow trailside. But the sun hadn't yet softened Arrowhead's runs, and our skis skidded—kkkkccch—over a thin sheet of ice. So we worked our way back to Bachelor Gulch peak, planning to slip

down into Beaver Creek Village for lunch.

The access trail between Arrowhead and Beaver Creek, Stirrup, is a greenie but no mere cow path: It's steep enough to gather speed on, broad enough for turns. Just before we hit the juncture of Cabin Fever (a wide blue runner), an immense cabin appeared on our left: Walls of windows were separated by wide beams, and a large chandelier of woven branches hung inside the main room. Even among the impressive homes (Continued on page 184)

(Continued from page 174) around Bachelor Gulch, this one is a showstopper. As it turned out, we were admiring Zach's Cabin, which has reservations-only dining at night, members-only dining at lunchtime. "Not a bad piece of real estate," Tom commented as we watched a small group of people stamp their boots and head inside.

We joined the hoi polloi at the Beaver Creek Chophouse (formerly the Beaver Creek Tavern) in the village, dropping into chairs on the patio. As Tom slipped off to strike a collegiate-style deal with a ski-tuning attendant (a quick lunchtime turnaround in exchange for a six-pack of Molson), I stripped off my outer layers and tilted my face to the sky. There's something about basking in the sun while skiing that seems an even richer experience than lying on the beach. It's tied up in unexpected luxury, the same phenomenon that, when camping, makes cheese and stale bread taste like something whipped up by the Barefoot Contessa.

Judging from the crowds at the base area—and the relative emptiness of the slopes—the balmy afternoon was slowing everyone else down too. We paid the bill, my husband vowing to come back for a beer at day's end. I planned instead to test the spa back at the Ritz-Carlton.

Afternoon skiing in Beaver Creek's Larkspur Bowl was soft but not damp. Spring skiing without getting wet? Either I was really on my game or I was only hitting the easier parts of the mountain. The main Centennial trail, which runs below the lift of the same name, was well groomed even in its upper black-diamond section. The summit area, unlike that of many mountains, was almost entirely designated a family zone, all friendly greens and blues. Even Larkspur Bowl, one of three ski areas that make up the Talons (Beaver Creek's most difficult terrain), was surprisingly doable. From what I'd gleaned from conversations in the lift lines, the teeth-rattling runs were mostly within Beaver Creek's Birds of Prey and Grouse areas, whose slopes were only a lift ride away. I considered trying them out, but with my energy flagging, I opted instead for coffee at Spruce Saddle, the midmountain lodge. There, I shared the sun porch with a sixty-something couple reclining in Adirondack chairs, who tapped their ski boots in time with the Big Band tunes being broadcast across the patio. Overhead, two paragliders floated above the Centennial Express

lift, drifting slowly like bits of colorful lint caught in the breeze. This was not a day to exert any pressure or to push limits.

Tom and I reconnected for a few more runs, but at the bottom of the Centennial Express lift, we parted company. I skated across the bridge to the Strawberry Park Express lift, which accesses Bachelor Gulch. I ducked under the rope just as the attendant began to block off the entrance and pleaded my way onto the lift seconds after its four o'clock closing, visions of the Ritz-Carlton's grotto-style hot-tub pool making me more persistent than I would ordinarily be.

That last run down Gunder's was my best of the day: long, smooth S-curves composed in the Zen of solitary skiing. No need to match someone else's pace, no pausing to confer. Near the bottom, I passed a pair of hikers bringing the well-exercised Bachelor back home. (His dance card had apparently been full that day.)

I can ski hard, but I'm a sucker for creature comforts. The Ritz-Carlton's spa was labyrinthine, as if mirroring the circuitous route to the resort itself, but I honed in on my destination: the palatial women's soaking room. The hot-tub pool was surrounded by natural-rock walls, with tiny waterfalls spilling from between the stones. Opposite the pool were the glass-walled sauna and steam rooms. As I unwound in the pool that evening before my Altitude Adjustment massage, I couldn't decide which was more perfect: the sapphire sky, the radiant sun, the smooth S-curves, or the hot soak.

Tom met me outside afterward. The bonfire was again roaring, and a dozen or so guests were warming up around it—including a recently retired professional basketball player who was there with his kids, chatting amiably with the other guests. While I was having my massage, Tom had put in some patio time at the Chophouse, and we'd both begun looking forward to dinner. In a little while, a Sno-Cat would take us to Zach's Cabin, churning uphill like a mechanical sleigh. This was our first vacation dinner—and indeed our first vacation—away from our two children, who were back home with their grandparents. Tom and I welcomed the chance to recuperate from the grueling work of raising a preschooler and a toddler, but for a moment we were wistful about the separation. Still, a little distance is a good thing, we agreed, watching white flakes of ash drift from the fire like fresh powder. □