

THE ASPEN IDEA

Go beyond the glam, and **Aspen, Colorado** harbors the vision to change the world for the better.

BY RACHEL WALKER

ASPEN CHAMBER RESORT ASSOCIATION

MOUNTAINS OF CULTURE
Aspen Mountain rises above downtown Aspen, where the culture is as extreme as the scenery.



We all know about Aspen, Colorado: The town is wealthy and elite and exists in a shimmering bubble of its own making. While true, these descriptions fall far short of telling the Aspen story in its entirety. In the six decades before it was a glamorous ski destination, it was a quiet mining community in the secluded Elk Mountains. After enormous booms, gold and silver busts bankrupted the town and sent it into near obscurity. But then outsiders, like the Chicago philanthropists Elizabeth and Walter Paepcke, came in and ignited and inspired a reinvention of Renaissance proportions.

Today, the town—and the entire Roaring Fork Valley in which it sits—has a status of supreme cultural relevance, on par even with some of the world’s most cosmopolitan destinations. This humanistic evolution coincided with the development of world-class outdoor recreation and is the reason why Aspen is now unlike any other mountain destination in the world.

“The Paepckes built this incredible foundation, so that when the ski bum era came in the early 1970s, people were drawn to Aspen not only to drop out of society and ski but for the cultural life,” says Andrew Travers, arts editor at the *Aspen Times*. “Generation by generation, the intellectual life of the town has grown and strengthened, and it enriches everyone who lives here.”

Add in the immense wealth, a culture of philanthropy, and a progressive community—Aspen was the first mountain community to actively develop an affordable housing program for the town’s low-income residents, and both the town and the Aspen Ski Company are leaders in environmental initiatives that drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions—and you have a recipe for continuing the Paepcke legacy in perpetuity.

“There are a lot of extremes in Aspen, and much of that is geared toward extreme athleticism,” says Heidi Zuckerman, CEO and chief curator of the Aspen Art Museum. “But there’s also extreme curiosity and intellectualism and culture. If you’re not pushing yourself, you don’t feel alive. And in Aspen there’s a prevailing aspiration to being exceptional and living an extraordinary life.”

Aspen might have evolved into a glitzy ski town minus the culture and intellectualism had it not been for Walter and Elizabeth Paepcke, Chicago industrialists who made a fortune in Walter’s family’s business, the Container Corporation of America. In the late 1930s, Elizabeth took houseguests for a ski weekend to Aspen and returned to Chicago charmed by the boarded-up Victorian town’s potential.

About six years later she returned with Walter, who saw

a business opportunity. Soon they had bought prime Aspen properties and secured long-term leases on the Jerome Hotel and the Wheeler Opera House. Proud intellectuals, the Paepckes’ vision was to develop Aspen for their wealthy peers, but Walter then became enamored with what he dubbed “the Aspen Idea.” The town would be the “Salzburg of the Rockies,” where art and ideas would hold equal court with science and philosophy, architecture, music, and more, says Cristal Logan, Vice President, Aspen, and Director, Aspen Community Programs, of the Aspen Institute. The institute is another Paepcke legacy, which Walter established after organizing the 1949 Goethe Bicentennial Convocation. Among the honored guests at the convocation was the French-German theologian Albert Schweitzer (this was the only time Schweitzer ever visited the United States).

Today’s Aspen Institute grew from the Aspen Institute of Humanistic Studies (founded in 1950), the International Design Conference of Aspen (IDCA, founded in 1954), and the Aspen Music Festival and School (founded 1951). They organized their vision around the “Aspen Idea,” where a complete life would revolve around one’s ability to “earn a living, profit by healthy physical recreation, [and have] facilities at hand for his enjoyment of art, music, and education.” To that end, the

Paepckes also founded the Aspen Ski Company with several other partners in 1946, determined to fashion a European-style ski resort in the mountains surrounding the town. Ultimately, the Paepckes strived to ensure that Aspen would always be a place where mind, body, and spirit could thrive.

“If you want a great place to ski, there are other places you can go,” says the *Times’* Travers. “If you want natural beauty, there are other places. But if you want those things and this rich cultural life, I don’t know if there’s anywhere like Aspen.”

There’s an old saw in Aspen: that woman pouring your \$90 bottle of wine at Fig? She’s probably got a Ph.D. and can hold her own in a discussion on Proust. Put simply, smart people come to Aspen, including Barack Obama, Tom Price, David Brooks, Charles Sykes, and Ruth Bader Ginsberg, among many others. Many come to take part in the Aspen Ideas Festival, an annual summer event organized by the Aspen Institute that’s a who’s who of the world’s powerful and influential. “Our mission is to be a place where leaders can come to solve problems and find common ground in this place that’s not only gorgeous but also substantive,” says Logan of the Aspen Institute.

Today the institute continues to foster and provide a nonpartisan space where ideas can be exchanged. Home to

A VISION REALIZED

(Clockwise from left) The Aspen Institute campus in the 1950s; “The Marble Gardens” by artist Herbert Bayer; Anderson Park; Walter Paepcke breaking ground on the Aspen Institute campus. (Opposite page) The Aspen Institute campus during the annual Aspen Ideas Festival.

C2PHOTOGRAPHY

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: FERENC BERKÓ(2), ASPEN CHAMBER RESORT ASSOCIATION, DAN BAYER



ADVENTURE TOWN

The mountains surrounding Aspen contain some of the country's best hikes.

dozens of programs with foci that range from policy, leadership, strategy, and youth to the arts and more, the institute also hosts the annual summer Ideas Festival. Attendees pay \$3,600 for a three-and-a-half-day pass. Logan says the institute also delivers abundant low-cost public talks and roundtables to ensure the exchange of ideas isn't relegated only to wealthy participants. The institute also fosters international partnerships and launches new programs every year; in 2017 this included The Bridge, a program on race, cultural identity, and inclusion, and the Future of Artificial Intelligence, a roundtable series.

"Our world needs places of stubborn civility, where leaders are compelled to have difficult conversations with people they don't agree with," says Logan. Encouraging dialogue is a common theme up and down the entire Roaring Fork Valley, even at for-profit businesses, like Backbone Media, a public relations company in Carbondale, about 20 miles north of Aspen. Backbone, often named a "Best Place to Work" by popular magazines, is also something of an unofficial diplomat on matters of environmental protection including climate change and public lands conservation. Backbone managing partner Nate Simmons

has been working behind the scenes to help forge alliances between outdoor gear companies, perceived to be traditional "tree-hugger" types, and hunting groups to better advocate for public lands protection. Most recently, he mediated a meeting between a hunting advocacy group and the environmental team of a powerful outdoor apparel company to brainstorm how they could join forces to lobby politicians and create an influential voter base in favor of public lands protection.

"Right now conservative politicians cater to the 'hook and bullet' group, and ignore the environmentalists," says Simmons. "To many politicians, environmentalists and sportsmen are divided constituents. So, if we can get left- and right-leaning voters to prioritize that conservation vote, then suddenly we become a very powerful voice. We see tremendous political power in bridging that gap." Simmons says the Aspen Institute model of engagement and mutual respect drives the approach. And though there are no specific legislative victories (yet), he is heartened by the openness and commitment of all involved to use their joint economic and political power to advocate for the environment.

EMILY CHAPLIN

There's always been plenty to do in Aspen for the body, another element of the Aspen Idea triumvirate. In 1950, Aspen hosted the FIS Alpine World Ski Championships; it was the first American destination to wrest the revered races from European slopes. That "put Aspen on the map and established our legacy in ski racing and as a top ski resort in the world," says Mike Kaplan, President and CEO of Aspen Ski Company. Today there's a lot more than ski racing in the winter. Skiers and snowboarders flock to all of Ski Co's four ski resorts (Ajax, Buttermilk, Aspen Highlands, and Snowmass), and backcountry skiers and snowshoers explore the surrounding wilderness on snow from November through late May. Some travel to the state's storied 10th Mountain Division huts, remote backcountry lodges accessible by human power; others climb one of the area's myriad "14ers," mountains with elevations at or above 14,000 feet; or cross-country ski. When the snow melts, wildflowers explode, providing a colorful and fragrant background for the trail runners, mountain bikers, hikers, birders, and hunters. Aspen and the surrounding environs also draw mountaineers and rock climbers, kayakers, and stand-up paddleboarders. Fly-fishing here is world-class, and even just taking a walk on the trails around town constitutes immersion in one of the world's most beautiful places.

"Aspen is small enough that you see people doing great things and get inspired to push yourself," says Christy Mahon, the first woman to ski all 54 of Colorado's 14ers. Mahon is also the Development Director at the Aspen Center for Environmental Science (ACES), another legacy institution created

by the Paepckes. "And there's a big emphasis on mentorship and inclusion. We cheer each other on in Aspen."

Part of that enthusiasm manifests every spring after the ski resorts close and the 5Point Adventure Film Festival starts. Now in its 11th year, 5Point curates long and short adventure films and has become one of the most popular cultural events of the spring. Tickets sell out in days, and filmmakers from around the world vie for slots on the big screen, says executive director Meaghan Lynch. In many ways, the festival represents what Aspen is to so many visitors and residents, she says. "Aspen has the heart of a city and the soul of a ski town. You have the cosmopolitan with the grit, everything from duct tape to diamonds."

Aspen's music, arts, and literature offerings are among the best in the world, and yet another enduring aspect of the Paepcke legacy, with a modern twist. Many of the valley's full- and part-time residents support the non-profit organizations running the Aspen Music Festival and School, Aspen Art Museum, and Aspen Words, a year-round literary organization that runs a prestigious writers' conference in the summer and hosts

authors and readings year-round.

With 630 students from 40 different countries, the Aspen Music Festival and School is the largest classical teaching festival in the world, according to festival president and CEO Alan Fletcher. Renowned faculty members return annually, and when a teaching position opens, rather than advertise the position, the board determines who the greatest musician in that particular field is (who isn't yet teaching at Aspen) and approaches them with an opportunity. "Every single time, we get our first choice," says Fletcher.

Here promising high school musicians meet professors from universities they're considering, graduate students do the same, and young professionals can make a name for themselves and launch prolific careers as classical musicians. The audience is sophisticated and the programming multi-faceted. With five orchestras running and playing every day of the festival, "we put on as many shows in eight weeks as the New York Philharmonic does in a year," says Fletcher.

The visual arts also thrive in Aspen, as the Aspen Art Museum, a non-collecting contemporary art institution (it presents art on loan from other institutions or private collectors) demonstrates. The museum's annual fundraiser, ArtCrush, routinely raises millions of dollars for the museum, which is housed in a \$45 million, 17,000-square-foot building designed by Pritzker Prize-winning

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Japanese architect Shigeru Ban. Fundraising for the museum and its construction was controversial, with some residents decrying the influx of exorbitant galas as elitist and anti-community and others welcoming an institution they said elevated Aspen's art scene and would draw international modern art connoisseurs.

"The new building changed the face of Aspen," says Heidi Zuckerman, the art museum's CEO. "And it's changed a generation of Aspenites. High school kids come and hang out in the museum because it's part of the fabric of the community." The impact of this casual immersion exposes residents and visitors to "things that might be confusing or uncomfortable, where they can encounter polarizing stuff," says Zuckerman. And that, she says, is a major reason why cultures need art.

"To have a community center where people can interact with people they're different from in a place that has no judgment whatsoever—we don't care about your socioeconomic status or your politics; just come with an open mind—is essential to a cultured society," Zuckerman says.

Encouraging open minds and dialogue is a primary objective of Aspen Words, and Adrienne Brodeur, executive director, has elevated the institution to national prominence since taking over in 2013. A former acquisitions editor at a New York publishing house and a published author, Brodeur envisioned an Aspen literary festival on par with the best juried writers conferences in the world, with workshops and lectures taught by preeminent contemporary writers. Under Brodeur's leadership, Aspen Words established 10 Emerging Writing Fellowships (full tuition and expenses to attend the writing conference), and residencies for published authors. The organization



THE ASPEN
IDEA

VIBRANT ARTS
The Benedict Music Tent, which seats more than 2,000 people, at the Aspen Music Festival.

recently launched the Aspen Words Literary Prize, an annual award of \$35,000 that celebrates a work of fiction which shines a spotlight on a social issue. Attracting literary luminaries in the publishing world has been easy, says Brodeur. “The town has a powerful draw and can make the rest of the world slip away,” she says.

But Aspen won’t rest on its laurels. “We never want to fall into the trap of just being a place to escape and play,” Kaplan says. Aspen Ski Company has taken meaningful efforts to reduce carbon emissions and slow global warming, including capturing leaking coal methane from a retired coal-fired powerplant. In addition to reducing the company’s overall emissions, Aspen Ski Company also lobbies politicians to heed the advice of climate scientists, and more. By sharing their initiatives, the company is likely to reach CEOs of

other large companies on vacation in Aspen who could well be inspired to co-opt those initiatives and improve their businesses’ environmental footprint. And it’s not just Ski Co, Kaplan is quick to point out. The environmental, humanist ethos thrives across industries and populations in Aspen, he says.

“We see ourselves as stewards of Paepcke’s legacy,” Kaplan says. “We—Aspen—must be a place where people can come to discuss the most important and challenging issues of our time.”

And, if all goes well, help solve them. ❖

Rachel Walker is Inspirato’s Senior Editor. Her work also appears in The Washington Post.

INSPIRATO RECOMMENDS



Aspen

Members staying in Aspen can choose from nine opulent residences including Firelight (shown above) that feature four or five bedrooms and have walking access to ski lifts and the central dining and shopping districts in Aspen, Aspen Highlands, or Snowmass.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT INSPIRATO RESIDENCES IN ASPEN, PLEASE GO TO INSPIRATO.COM/DESTINATIONS.



Claire Eads’ picks
Inspirato On-Site Expert

ROLL WITH IT

The most famous scene in Colorado is of the **Maroon Bells**. Bike the closed road 11 miles uphill to the trailhead, then coast back down. For something mellow, take the bike path 8 miles down valley to **Woody Creek Tavern** for a famous margarita.

HAIL THE ULTIMATE TAXI

Since 1984, a 45-minute trip in **The Ultimate Taxi** has been the ultimate way to tour Aspen. Driver Jon Barnes has outfitted his Checker cab with a 3D laser show, dry ice, mirror ball, keyboard, hundreds of lights, and a booming sound system.

WATERING HOLES

Go classic at the **J Bar** in The Hotel Jerome, which has served libations since the town’s mining heyday. **Limelight Hotel** is the go-to après-ski spot with live music and a lively crowd. Locals out late head to **Hootch**, a craft cocktail lounge that bills itself as “Like your living room, only more fun!”

LOCAL EATS

Hit **Spring Café** for a delicious breakfast or lunch. Try their avocado smoothie. At the **White House Tavern**, order the chicken kale salad for a casual lunch or dinner. And the handmade pasta at **L’Hostaria** is worth a visit.

June 15–17, 2018

FOOD & WINE CLASSIC

Aspen’s biggest weekend of the year draws the nation’s top chefs and wine makers and thousands of foodies who love them.

July 4, 2018

4TH OF JULY

Kick off the day with an old-fashioned parade. Fireworks follow in the evening with live music in the streets.

August 31–September 2, 2018

JAZZ ASPEN SNOWMASS MUSIC FESTIVAL

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