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THREE PERFECT DAYS COLORADO ROCKIES

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY **SAM POLCER**

SINCE FOLKS BEGAN DELVING INTO THE ROCKIES FOR GOLD BACK IN THE MID-1800S, THIS EXTRAVAGANTLY BEAUTIFUL PART OF THE UNITED STATES HAS BEEN DOTTED WITH BOOMTOWNS, EACH OF THEM A MAGNET FOR ADVENTURERS AND ROMANTICS. WHILE THE ADVENTURERS REMAIN, PICKAXES HAVE BEEN REPLACED BY SKI POLES, AND THE RICHES ARE ASSOCIATED WITH EXPERIENCES RATHER THAN MATERIAL WEALTH.

TODAY, TOWNS LIKE BRECKENRIDGE, VAIL AND ASPEN BRIM WITH FIVE-STAR HOTELS, SOPHISTICATED EATERIES, WORLD-CLASS MUSEUMS AND BUZZING NIGHTCLUBS. BUT MAKE NO MISTAKE, THE BIGGEST DRAW OF ALL IS THE MOUNTAINS—AND THE UNPARALLELED THRILL OF HURLING DOWN THEM. THE REAL TREASURE, IT TURNS OUT, WAS ON THE SURFACE ALL ALONG.



*Skiers hiking above the
Kensho SuperChair to the top
of Breckenridge's Peak 6,
12,573 feet above sea level*

DAY ONE

In which Sam goes to Breckenridge to test his lung capacity and cry over the beer at Broken Compass

I T'S ALWAYS A GOOD IDEA to make note of what's outside your hotel window. This fact occurs to me shortly after I awake in my room at One Ski Hill Place, the sprawling, bustling lodge at the base of Breckenridge's Peak 8. When I raise the blinds, majestic mountains grazed by the morning sun are revealed, as well as a passing chairlift occupied by ski-schoolers of an impressionable age. Which reminds me, I've booked a lesson with Breckenridge Ski & Ride instructor Lee Sky (yes, his real name).

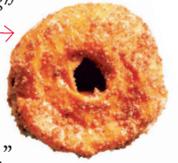
Over eggs Benedict with smoked trout in the hotel's Living Room Restaurant and Bar, the Aussie ski instructor dismisses my puppy dog enthusiasm at the conditions outside: azure skies, several inches of powder atop a solid base. "Typical Colorado," Sky says with a nonchalant chew. Still, I'm a little breathless at the prospect of getting out there. Or maybe it's the altitude. Breckenridge is one of Colorado's highest ski resorts—9,600 feet at the base. Up here, climbing a flight of stairs feels like an ascent of Everest.

"I'VE LIVED IN EUROPE. I'VE LIVED IN BIG CITIES. I LOVE NEW YORK. I LOVE PARIS. BUT TO RECHARGE AND TO BE WHO I AM, I WANT TO BE WITH OTHER PEOPLE WHO WANT TO RIDE THEIR BIKES AND SKI AND PULL A COMMUNITY TOGETHER."

SHANNON GALPIN
National Geographic
Adventurer of the Year and
women's rights activist



A sugar cinnamon crumble doughnut from Sweet ColoraDough



Four turns into the first run of the day, I wonder aloud how common it is for Sky's clients to holler with glee, which is what I do while following him down an untouched run on Peak 8. "Pretty typical," he says, smiling. It's been a while since I've skied, but one thing I remember, aside from how euphoric those first turns on a perfectly groomed trail can feel, is that hardcore skiers often appear to have life's mysteries figured out.

Sky decides to test my limits by leading me to the top of recently expanded Peak 6 to hit a trail marked with a black diamond or two. He nods to a group trudging up higher than the Kensho SuperChair allows. Their progress is slow—half the party seems to be lying down. "Shall we?" Within minutes, I too have collapsed onto the snow for a breather. When we finally summit, I get why the nearby bowl is named "Serenity"—up here, at 12,573 feet, the Rockies spread out before me like an Albert Bierstadt painting. A peek at the vertigo-inducing slope of the bowl below, however, dispels any romantic feelings. Pointing my skis downward at the gentlest entry available, I dip in, and pretty soon I'm whooping again, all the way down. Typical Colorado.

I part ways with Sky at the base, but not before receiving some final words of wisdom: "Look down the mountain, moving forward into the future, not back to the past." Which, I'm fairly sure, is code for "Don't be a wuss." In any event, I see lunch in my future. So, after dropping off my equipment with the hotel's ski valet, I cut through the lobby, ignoring the crash of pins in the property's two-lane bowling alley, and shuttle into town.

I'm eating at Downstairs at Eric's, a kitschy neighborhood beer-and-burger joint that doubles as an arcade. Waiting for me when I arrive is Shannon Galpin, a renowned activist and adventurer, and longtime Breckenridge resident. I order a plate of nachos the size of my head and a side of wings, washing them down with a Breck IPA. Over the din of skee ball, a couple of versions of Pac-Man and several dozen TVs tuned to every manner of sporting event, I tell her about my morning on the slopes. "There's such diversity of terrain here," she says. "And we've got incredible back bowls that are lift-accessible, which is insane—as you found out."

After lunch, I pass on Galpin's offer of a skee ball match, assuming I'll need my energy for our scheduled fat bike tour. A fat bike, for the uninitiated, is essentially a mountain bike with comically large, knobby tires designed to tackle mud, sand and snow—the monster truck of bicycles.

Soon, we're following Nick Truitt, co-owner of Breck Bike Guides, through wooded trails also used by snowshoers, cross-country skiers and anyone with superhuman lung capacity. It's hard work, but Galpin is unfazed. "Fat biking is just giggly," she says. "You can't help but keep laughing." As I topple into a snowbank for the fifth time, she adds, "the downhill is super-fun but sketchy." Falling into the snow is quickly becoming my preferred Rocky Mountain pastime.

→
*A fat bike tour
with Breck
Bike Guides*





On our way back into town, we pass through Wellington, a quaint neighborhood of colorful Victorian cottages housing a preponderance of Olympic athletes. “A lot of people feel driven to these mountains,” Galpin says as we pass a trio of huffing cross-country skiers. “I think it’s partly the fact that you can train right outside your door. Like, Denver and Boulder are optimal Ironman conditions, at 5,000 feet, but it’s urban running until you get to the trails. Here, to be able to wake up and look at the mountains every morning and know that that’s where you’re going to play on your lunch break—that’s irreplaceable.”

We’ve earned an après drink, so we drive 10 minutes north to the repurposed chairlift benches at Broken Compass Brewing, where Chicago-born co-founder David “Ax” Axelrod brings out a flight of samples that skew to the hearty end of the microbrew spectrum. Running a brewery at this altitude has its challenges, Ax says, but he seems to have managed. Every pour is outstanding, and after a pint or three I’m nearly brought to tears to hear that their brews, including a glorious rum barrel-aged coconut porter, are draft-only, so I won’t be finding them in the fridge at my local bodega anytime soon.

If brewing up here is a challenge, so is drinking. With our need for food approaching crisis proportions, we cab it back to the town center for dinner at the sleek, low-lit eatery Relish, where chef-owner Matt Fackler’s Colorado-inspired cuisine has been earning accolades for a decade. As I tuck

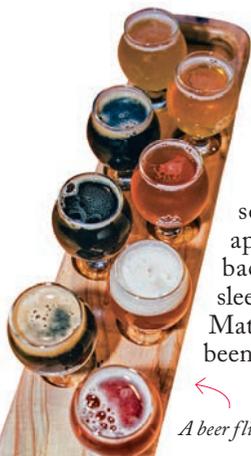
into an Asian-inflected dish of lavender snapper crusted with wasabi peas and nori, I remark how this is the sort of place generally associated with upscale Aspen. “Oh, Breckenridge has the amenities,” Galpin says with a laugh. “Just not the attitude.”

Right now, the amenity I’m most interested in comes with pillows and a Do Not Disturb sign, so I hop into my private shuttle to Vail. An hour later, I check into the Sebastian under cover of darkness, retire to my room and hit the hay, but not before taking a quick look out my window at the shadowy peaks looming beyond the chalet rooftops.

DAY TWO

In which Sam goes to Vail and earns a massage by skiing Blue Sky Basin and fly-fishing the Colorado River

I AM A LITTLE disoriented when I awake. It turns out the designers at the Sebastian, a recently renovated boutique hotel in Vail Village, deviated from the lodge and chalet playbooks, which deem that each guestroom must meet the minimum requirements of one antler chandelier, one vintage ski competition poster and one moose photograph or cowboy watercolor. Here, they’ve gone so far as to incorporate blue—*blue!*—into the decor, and I’ve nearly forgotten what I came for.



A beer flight from Breckenridge’s Broken Compass Brewing

↑
The inviting living room at the Hotel Jerome, in Aspen

→
A charcuterie plate from Meat & Cheese, in Aspen

The sensation continues as I head downstairs: Over-size contemporary paintings, metallic sculptures and art books clutter the cathedral-ceilinged seating areas off the rustic-chic lobby. Ambient music pulses softly from hidden speakers. Every other guest is speaking Spanish or Russian.

Breakfast is a two-minute stroll away, in the glassed-in terrace of Ludwig's, at the chalet-themed Sonnenalp Hotel, which has more than enough exposed timber to reset my compass. I'm seated across a table from Chris Anthony, a longtime pro skier and star of many Warren Miller ski films, who's agreed to give me a few pointers for my stay in Vail, starting with the meal at hand. "This place isn't publicized a lot," he says. "But the buffet is spectacular."

Three spectacularly stacked plates later, Anthony tells me that Vail is "a big resort with the personality of a small village." As a waitress in lederhosen checks on us, he elaborates: "It's easy to get lost in the Disneyland effect, but there are these families who live here and own businesses, and they'll take you to another level of service. You create a bond with them. This place, the Sonnenalp, is owner-operated. The key is to seek out those special places. Find out who's really invested."

I consider filling another plate, but I'm supposed to be hitting the mountain, not trying to look like one. And what a mountain it is, topping out at 11,570 feet, with more than 5,200 acres of skiable terrain. I zigzag to the top, hurtle down toward the ant-size skiers on China Bowl and settle into a tuck all the way to the Skyline Express lift, which takes me up to the glades and secret powder stashes of the outlying Blue Sky Basin. At the top of the basin is Belle's Camp, where burgers and brats are thrown onto gas grills amid expansive vistas of the Sawatch Mountains and the Ten Mile Range. One of



CHRIS ANTHONY
Professional skier;
host, Warren Miller
films; founder, Youth
Initiative Project

"OUR KIDS ARE GETTING DROWNED IN THE TECHNOLOGY OF ENTERTAINMENT RATHER THAN PLAYING IN THE REAL WORLD. BEING PHYSICAL. WHEN YOU GO OUTDOORS, YOUR BODY HAS TO ADAPT, YOUR MIND HAS TO ADAPT. AND WHAT BETTER WAY TO DO THAT THAN PUTTING ON A PAIR OF SKIS?"

the greatest views in Colorado, I've been told. It is a fine view, but I'm having difficulty tearing my eyes away from the plates in front of the feasting families around me. Time to head down to Vail, where lunch awaits.

Once I've managed to pry my feet from my ski boots at the Sebastian's Base Camp valet service, I walk a couple of blocks to Mountain Standard, the casual offshoot of legendary eatery Sweet Basil, which sits above. Any regrets I may have had about missing the high-altitude barbecue go up in the smoke rising from the open wood fire. I quickly dispatch a platter of wild king salmon, the froth of an Upslope Brewing Company stout on my upper lip. It's a burly scene—men with beards and tattoos tend the flames; bartenders in flannel shirts pour tumblers of whiskey—but the fish is delicate and juicy, served with avocado puree, watercress, pickled vegetables, mustard seed and radish.

I'm picked up outside by another hardy-looking type, this one decked out in waders and an unironic trucker hat. His name is Mike Geisler, and he's a guide for Gore Creek Fly Fisherman. It's time to go fishin'—which doubles as an opportunity to enjoy the Rockies without gasping for breath.

An hour's drive northwest brings us to our launch point in Rancho Del Rio, or, as Geisler quips, "a sunny spot for shady people." Geisler tells me he ended up in Vail because, years ago, that's where his truck broke down. Now he has a family and, when he's not teaching people how to read a stream, he runs a restaurant with his wife in the nearby town of Red Cliff.

He's also extremely patient. In cold water like this, the trout we're after meander along the bottom, their metabolisms slowed, wary of the bugs that appear out of nowhere in the dead of winter. Bites are hard to come by—and that's before you factor in the complete lack of skill I've brought to the river, despite a few casting lessons from Geisler. The next hour or so goes like this:

Geisler [urgently, pleadingly, pointing at the bobbing bobber attached to my line]: "There!"



Me [yanking on the rod, too late]: “Whuh?”

But catching fish isn't really the point, or at least not the whole point. We're standing in this peaceful place, surrounded by snowy pines and amber brush, the river's rippled surface vivid in the light of the low-hanging sun. “Still, I have to tell folks not to talk politics sometimes,” Geisler says. “It's like, ‘Come on, we're fishing!’” Just then I stumble, and he gives me a wink: “This is the Colorado River, bruh—you fall in here, we'll pick you up at the Grand Canyon.”

As exciting as that sounds, it's time to pack it in, get back to the hotel for a change of clothes and pop over to the village of Lion's-head for something even more relaxing than being outwitted by fish: the “Sports Enthusiast Body Recovery” treatment at the Arrabelle at Vail Square spa. My casting arm (and skiing quads and biking calves) needs tending to. I'm subsequently exfoliated, heated, stretched and kneaded to the edge of unconsciousness. I might need a recovery from my recovery.

I leave the spa and wobble uncertainly toward dinner. I'm eating at the Game Creek Restaurant, located midmountain and requiring a gondola and snowcat ride

to access. Night is falling, along with a fair amount of snow, which, whipped by the wind and seen in the 'cat's headlights, lends the journey a suspenseful edge. Upon arrival, I enter a cavernous, glowing red dining room. The place has a ceremonial feel to it, and I'm tempted to ask the waiter where I can pick up my robe. Instead, I order the tasting menu: a sculptural arrangement of chicory, apple, walnut, blue cheese and duck confit; tender, slow-cooked elk with achote, hominy grits and maitake mushroom; and a lingonberry bavaois for dessert.

Back down the hill, there's time to meet up with Chris Anthony for a mudslide at the Sonnenalp's Bully Ranch. Sitting beneath an elk-antler chandelier, I notice that there are “truffle tots” on the menu and wonder if maybe I should order some—but it's late, I'm full of elk, lingonberries and vodka, and I have an early start tomorrow. I ramble back to the Sebastian, passing a party of Argentines gathered in the lobby, about to start their night out. I tell them there's a spot up the street that serves tater tots sprinkled with truffle oil. “Yes,” says one of them, looking mildly alarmed. “Goodnight!”

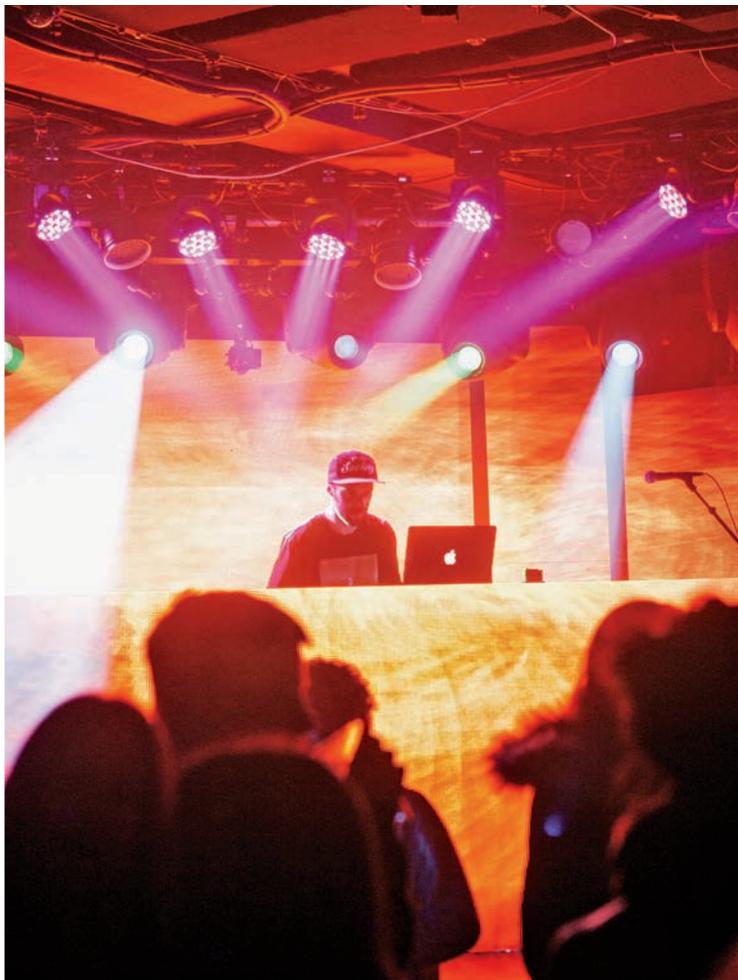


Clockwise from top left: a great horned owl at Hallam Lake; a skier carves up Aspen; the dance floor at Aspen's Belly Up; ski guide Lee Sky takes a breather in Breckenridge



Mike Geisler of Gore Creek Fly Fisherman casts into the Colorado River





DAY THREE

In which Sam goes to Aspen, eats three breakfasts and thaws out at the Hotel Jerome

I AM HALF-DOZING in the passenger seat of a shuttle, headed to Aspen, a hundred miles southwest. The striated walls of Glenwood Canyon, glowing softly in the predawn light, tower over the highway and the Colorado River below. At the town of Glenwood Springs, we stop at Sweet ColoraDough for a sugar cinnamon crumble doughnut, then turn south to follow the Roaring Fork River. Mountains crowd in, then open up to a valley dotted with well-tended horse ranches and, in the distance, the twinkling lights of civilization.

We pull into Aspen's smart downtown grid as the sun rises. It's a walking town, so I polish off the rest of my doughnut, hand my luggage to a cowboy-hatted bellman at the Hotel Jerome and stroll a block to stare up at the rust-colored, cubic Aspen Art Museum, designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architect Shigeru Ban. Sheathing its 47-foot-tall exterior is a striking wood lattice. In a state crawling with daredevil climbers, I wonder, has anyone given this thing a go?

The museum's director and chief curator, Heidi Zuckerman, is waiting for me in its airy top-floor café. She's dressed in an all-black boho-chic getup, having just come from yoga. "You should have the matcha latte," she tells me. "I've already had one today. Please forgive me—I'm kind of known for matcha proselytizing." I order one, along with a kale Waldorf salad (an attempt to seek redress for my breakfast of fried dough).

"I overheard something this morning," I say, chewing my superfood, "that in Aspen, the millionaires have been chased away by the billionaires."

"Well, people are bemoaning that everywhere these days, not just here," she replies. "That said, one of the reasons I agreed to move here was that we have a Prada store. We have, like, 150 restaurants. So while it is a small town,

"WE'RE AT SUCH A HIGH ELEVATION THAT THE COLOR OF THE SKY IS REALLY DIFFERENT THAN ANYWHERE I HAD EVER BEEN BEFORE. IT'S GOT THIS REAL PURPLY, DEEP BLUE COLOR. WHEN I FIRST GOT HERE, I WAS REALLY STRUCK BY A CLARITY OF VISION, BEING ABLE TO SEE EVERYTHING AGAINST THAT BLUE."

HEIDI ZUCKERMAN
Aspen Art
Museum director
and chief curator



SHRINE ON Skiers take to the woods in search of Aspen's quirkiest on-mountain features



Q. What do Fenway Park, Hunter S. Thompson, Elvis Presley and Snoopy all have in common?

A: All have shrines dedicated to them (along with 90 others, give or take) tucked into secret spots among the slopes of Aspen.

Consisting mostly of laminated pictures and other memorabilia (license plates, beads, newspaper clippings), the shrines are installed and maintained by anonymous locals. Locations are not indicated on trail maps, so word of mouth or a tour from a resident is a visitor's best bet for finding them.

"You can be within 10 yards of one and not know it's there," says David Wood, author of *Sanctuaries in the Snow*, the definitive book on the subject.

Who lays claim to the first shrine is unclear—some say it's Elvis, others Jerry Garcia—but mystery is a big part of what these odd little monuments are all about. "Locals want something they can call their own," Wood says. "Something they can have to themselves."



Diners clink glasses under an elk-antler chandelier at Bully Ranch, in Vail



*Skiers ride a chairlift
at snow-covered
Breckenridge*

it's also profoundly cosmopolitan. I'll walk through the museum, and I'll hear four or five languages in 10 minutes."

Zuckerman continues in this vein as we explore the museum's six galleries, which host mainly contemporary exhibits, ranging from commentaries on consumerism (think 10-foot-tall enlargements of receipts) to Abstract Expressionist retrospectives. "It's an anomaly to have this kind of culture in the middle of nowhere," Zuckerman says, pausing before a statue depicting a demonic-looking Assyrian god, its tongue thrust out between fangs and a scowl on its face.

Culture box ticked, it's back to the hotel to grab some gear, followed by a short ride to the base of Aspen Mountain, one

of the four areas operated by the Aspen Skiing Company. Aspen is relatively small, as far as top-tier Colorado ski hills go, but a dense and diverse network of trails and ridges makes it feel larger. And, from the top, the view of Snowmass, the biggest of the four areas, reminds me that there's more to this operation than immediately meets the eye.

After a few more rolling groomers and a stop for my third half-meal of the day—an oversize oatmeal pancake at Bonnie's, a midmountain spot popular among those who are savvy enough to wait until after their first tracks for breakfast—I carve my way down Spar Gulch and descend into town.



Passing Gucci and Louis Vuitton stores, I walk to Hallam Lake, a nature reserve run by the Aspen Center for Environmental Studies, where marketing director Eliza Greenman leads me on a tour. A bird blind sits beside a lake. Animal tracks—coyote, fox, bear—extend in every direction. Downtown can't be more than a couple hundred feet away, but clusters of pine trees hide the streets from view. As beautiful as it is here, Greenman insists that I'm seeing only half the story. "There's a saying in Aspen," she says. "Come for the winter, stay for the summer. That's what happened to me."

It's feeding time for the curmudgeonly great horned owl, which involves a wriggling mouse being dropped into the

bird's waiting maw. The spectacle reminds me that I'm peckish myself, so I swing by the downtown restaurant and farm shop Meat & Cheese, to snack on a selection of cheeses and cured meats, highlighted by an exquisitely delicate and salty duck prosciutto.

I head back to the Hotel Jerome, where I claim a spot by a crackling fire in the lounge, an inviting and uncanny harmony of disparate design elements—Le Corbusier chairs, Art Deco sconces, a Navajo rug, black-lacquered columns. Hotel GM Tony DiLuca plies me with a Bourbon Banshee, a potent blend of Bulleit, crème de cassis, vanilla, rooibos tea, lemon and bitters. Glowing now, I browse the bookcase, then settle down on a plump sofa for a nice, relaxing read. *Zzzzzz.*

Next thing I know, it's dinnertime. My reservation is at the Pine Creek Cookhouse, but getting there isn't so simple: "Would you prefer to cross-country ski or take a horse-drawn sleigh ride to dinner, sir?" Feeling bold, I opt for the former.

Seated in the cabinlike restaurant beneath—yep—antler chandeliers and exposed beams, I'm rewarded for my strenuous uphill trek with wild-game Nepalese dumplings, known as *momos* (the restaurant's owner, expedition filmmaker John Wilcox, has a fondness for the Himalayas, so he hires Nepalese chefs), and a juicy slab of buffalo tenderloin with a decadent gruyere-and-bacon tartiflette.

Following an equally strenuous downhill trip, I'm back in Aspen, where I find Belly Up, a popular local club. A DJ commands a stage swirling with psychedelic projections. Beanie-hatted twenty-somethings bob about chugging cans of PBR. I sit at the bar near two men dressed in goofy orange-and-powder-blue tuxes, recalling the duo in the Aspen-set *Dumb and Dumber*. I ask a young woman clad in head-to-toe fluorescent yellow about the music we're listening to. "Dubstep, some tech house, breaks, trap," she says. "You know, that kind of thing." Oh-kay.

The party's raging, but a combination of exertion, overindulgence and mountain air has done me in. After downing a can of Pabst's finest, I step outside to find that a fresh snowfall has turned the town into a postcard. Streetlamps and holiday lights glaze the streets orange, but the moonlight is more

than enough to see me home. I shuffle on toward the hotel, making sure to fall into at least one snowbank on the way.

Sam Polcer, a writer, photographer and former editor at Hemispheres, knows that his Brooklyn apartment won't accommodate an antler chandelier, but he still wants one. **H**



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