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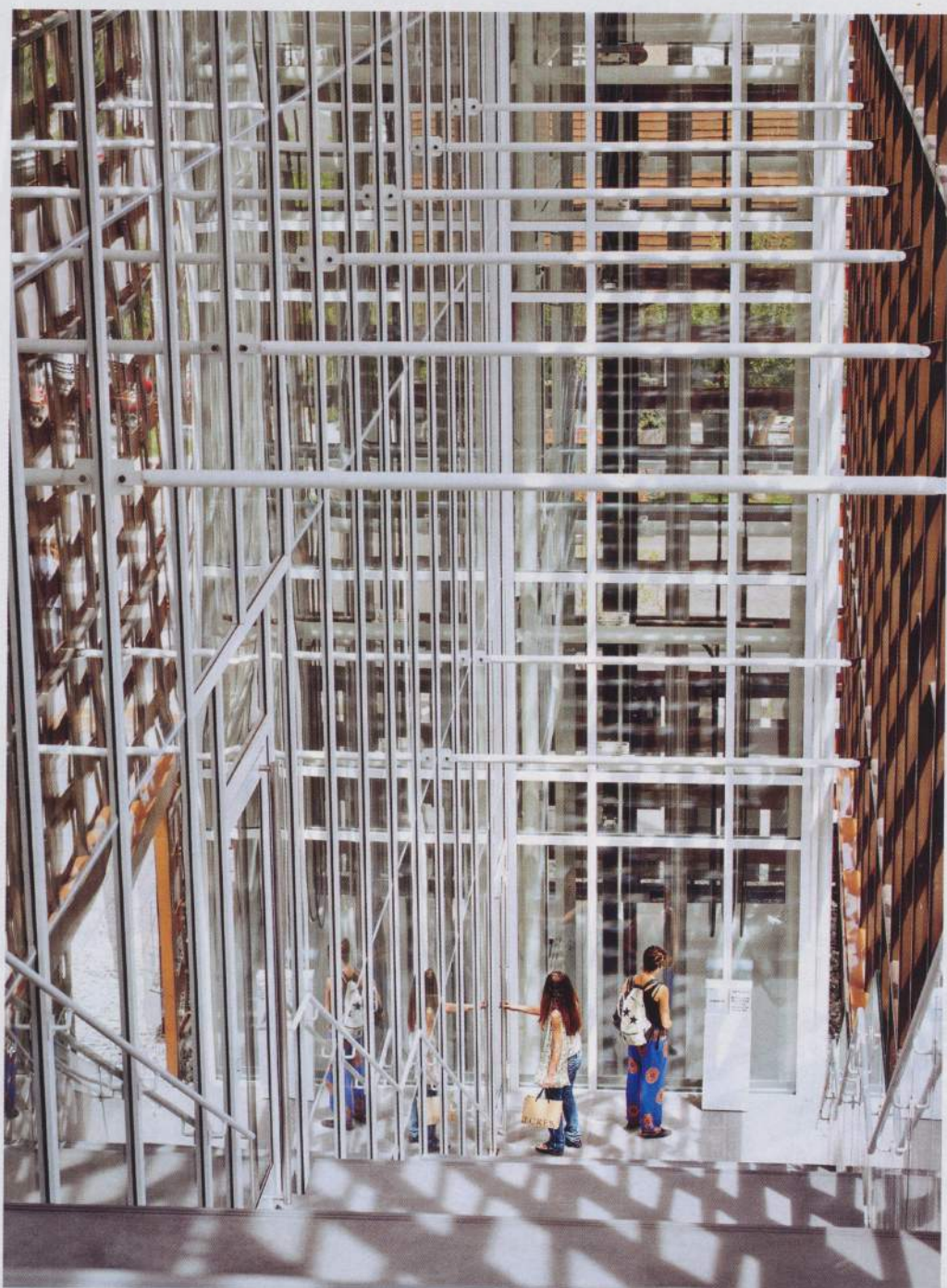
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THE 2014 READERS' CHOICE AWARDS

Above It All

Aspen has been a famously exclusive getaway since the 1950s. But are the same rarefied charms that draw so many people here—natural beauty, high culture, and big money—creating too much of a good thing? By Stephen Orr

Photographs by Gabriela Herman







WHAT DO you think of the place?" I asked the woman sitting next to me on the grandly modern outdoor staircase of the Aspen Art Museum on its opening day. I had

noticed her, a stranger in a crowd of strangers, because of her quintessentially local look: an outdoorsy beauty with a clear, tan complexion, tousled sun-bleached hair, and a sensible if expensive layered outfit, one that would allow her to hike up nearby Ajax Mountain at a moment's notice. "I love it," she said as we listened to the angular melody of a dissonant musical performance in the foyer of the museum. "I tried to get some of my friends to come with me, but none of them would because of all the controversy—Aspen people hate new."

They certainly appear to. In my ten years of visiting the town, I've often heard people grumble about the rapid pace of change in Aspen and the surrounding Roaring Fork Valley. They complain about the tide of new money that each year flows further and further downriver to towns like Basalt, Carbondale, El Jebel, and Glenwood Springs; the increasingly clogged traffic on Highway 82 (the only major road that connects the various valley communities); the swarms of private jets at the airport; the ever-climbing housing prices. Aspen, like other centers of wealth and power (the Hamptons, Napa Valley, Nantucket), fiercely resists development and does its best to stay small and quaint. Yet modern Aspen is a fairly recent invention and has always prided itself on being forward-looking.

To find the origins of the place Aspen is today, you need to go back only to the middle of the last century, when the once-tiny town of about 700 people began its greatest transformation. In the following decades, more and more people discovered this rarefied Shangri-la: The intellectuals arrived in the 1950s, the countercultural hippies in the 1960s, the ski bums in the 1970s, the celebrities in the 1980s, and the super-rich in the 1990s. Together they combined to create a sui generis culture, one defined as much by its growing wealth as by its improbability. But now, the appearance of this major new museum right in the middle of downtown is provoking a sort of identity crisis in the valley: Will Aspen's very specialness also be its undoing?

JUST 20 miles west of the Continental Divide and surrounded by high peaks on every side, Aspen's dramatic landscape, deep winter snowfall, and isolation create one of those pockets that guidebooks grandly refer to as an "enclave." But the settlement that first emerged in the 1880s as a silver ore boomtown was, by the 1940s when Chicago industrialists Walter and Elizabeth Paepcke

first visited it, almost a ghost town. The German-American couple selected it as the setting for their Goethe Bicentennial Convocation and Music Festival, in 1949, a celebration of the humanist poet that was meant to rehabilitate Germany's reputation in the United States after World War II. The three-week event featured an impressive lineup of intellectuals, among them Albert Schweitzer, Thornton Wilder, Stephen Spender, and Arthur Rubinstein. Concerts and lectures were held in a tented amphitheater designed by Eero Saarinen. Bauhaus artist/designer Herbert Bayer created an accompanying campus of 98 hotel rooms (now called the Aspen Meadows Resort) with modernist sculptures and early examples of sculptural earthworks. Those first seminars developed over the years into the influential Aspen Institute and the Aspen Music Festival and School and established the town as a high-culture retreat.

But the Paepckes weren't just interested in enlightenment: In an effort to foster what they considered the utopian, and very German, humanist ideal of a highly physical culture that nourishes the mind as well as the body, they joined forces with Friedl Pfeifer, an Austrian-American ski instructor who had previously identified the valley's exceptional ski potential, to build Aspen's first ski lift—the longest in the country at the time. Aspen Ski Corporation was founded in 1946, launching the valley as an international skiing destination.

On a fundamental level, it's no mystery why this town of just three and a half square miles has drawn such a diverse crowd of converts. Unlike some ski towns, Aspen (population: 6,607) banks on its summer weather, which is almost unnaturally bright and clear with zero humidity. It swells with attendees of its well-choreographed sequence of festivals: the Jazz Festival, the Food and Wine Classic, the Aspen Ideas Festival, and the Aspen Music Festival. And while the population of stratospherically rich summer residents (David and Charles Koch, Sid and Ed Bass, Leonard Lauder, David Geffen, Mort Zuckerman, several members of the Pritzker family) continues to grow, it also manages to blend seamlessly with the seasonally employed hiking guides.

The Paepckes' founding principle of a haven that would rejuvenate both body and mind still holds true. Many features of the town and its impressive setting remain as they were decades ago. Lined with restored Victorian brick buildings and often nondescript ski lodges, Aspen's quiet streets invite a stroll over to the concert halls at Aspen Meadows to hear a Mahler symphony—where lawn seating outside the tent is free—or, since almost every street ends in nearly pristine, flower-filled nature, a hike. The traditional social nexus for the town has long been the J-Bar at the Hotel Jerome, where John Wayne, Gary Cooper, and Hunter S.

Previous page, from left: Shigeru Ban's new Aspen Art Museum, with its modernist exterior staircase, has proven a source of controversy in a town resistant to development; hillsides of aspens change color in the fall, signaling the end of the summer festivals and the beginning of the winter sports season. **Right, clockwise from top:** The interior glass cube of the Aspen Art Museum is enclosed in a basket weave of wood veneer; Penny Hot Springs, where swimsuits are officially mandatory but not always worn, becomes an ersatz summer day spa for drivers and hikers alongside the icy-cold Crystal River, near Carbondale; Bauhaus artist Herbert Bayer designed the campus of the Aspen Institute, populating the grounds with his sculptures, such as *Kaleidoscreen* (1957).

STAY

Aspen Meadows Resort, Aspen Institute

845 MEADOWS RD., ASPEN; 970-925-4240; aspenmeadows.com; doubles from \$200.

Hotel Jerome

330 E. MAIN ST., ASPEN; 970-920-1000; hoteljerome.aubergeresorts.com; doubles from \$250.

EAT & DRINK

Matsuhisa

303 E. MAIN ST., ASPEN; 970-544-6628; matsuhisaaspen.com; entrées from \$29.

Prospect and J-Bar
Both in the Hotel Jerome; see above.

The Pullman

330 SEVENTH ST., GLENWOOD SPRINGS; 970-230-9234; thepullmangws.com; entrées from \$13.

Señor Taco Show

46 N. FOURTH ST., CARBONDALE; 970-510-5363.

Slope & Hatch

208 SEVENTH ST., GLENWOOD SPRINGS; 970-230-9652; slopeandhatchgws.com; dishes from \$7.

Steakhouse No. 316

316 E. HOPKINS AVE., ASPEN; 970-920-1893; steakhouse316.com; entrées from \$23.

Town

348 MAIN ST., CARBONDALE; 970-963-6328; towncarbondale.com; entrées from \$12.

DO

Anderson Ranch Arts Center

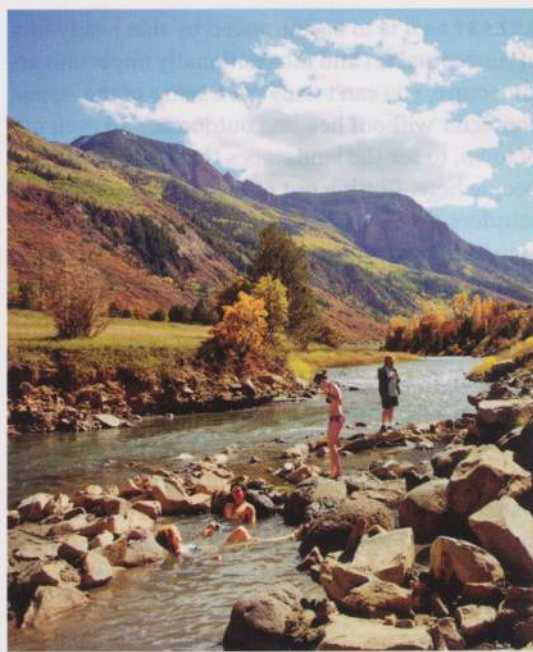
5263 OWL CREEK RD., SNOWMASS VILLAGE; 970-923-3181; andersonranch.org.

Aspen Art Museum

590 N. MILL ST., ASPEN; 970-925-8050; aspenartmuseum.org.

Harris Concert Hall, Aspen Meadows

960 N. THIRD ST., ASPEN; 970-925-3254; aspenmusicfestival.com.



Thompson swapped stories with the locals. After a stylish renovation, the hotel, which formerly felt dated and mumsy, is again a prime gathering place.

BUT THIS past August, a new brand of new came to town, inciting conversations about the community that have yet to be resolved. That's when the formerly space-restricted Aspen Art Museum moved from its quarters in a former hydroelectric plant a few blocks outside town to a dynamic new building by Pritzker Prize-winning Japanese architect Shigeru Ban. In one sense, it was a natural outgrowth of having a culturally advanced, like-minded (and generous) donor base—even the part-time residents wanted the town's cultural projects to reflect their own sophistication. But the

building's construction and the ambitious plans of the museum's CEO and chief curator, Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson, have proven terrifically controversial, especially among year-round Aspenites. This is an unusual kind of building for the town, but it's also one that feels completely uplifting, both visually and spiritually. The simple four-story glass cube is airy and enclosed in a woven basket of wood veneer. And at 47 feet high, with 33,000 square feet of space, it still manages to fit in with the low-rise east downtown neighborhood of '70s ski lodges and condos without attempting to top the tallest building in town, the nearby 1890s-era Wheeler Opera House. When I visited, there was a thought-provoking show of paintings, sculptures, and photography by Yves Klein and David

Hammons, which set a high bar for future shows. And a floor devoted to Ban's innovative humanitarian and disaster-relief housing structures made of reusable materials—the yin to his yang of big-budget private and civic commissions—was difficult for even the most ardent naysayer to disapprove of. However, a rooftop installation of three animal-rescue tortoises with iPads epoxied to their backs may have been a misstep in a town with a large share of animal lovers. The letters to the editor of the *Aspen Times* and the *Aspen Daily News* blazed for weeks with public venting from all parts of the valley about “turtle torture.” The tortoises were removed several weeks early from the show over concerns for their health. Even with the controversy, the end game most certainly will be won by the museum (and, by association, the town), since Aspen now possesses a world-class art institution tucked into a district of architecturally unremarkable condos and mixed-used commercial buildings that was in need of a boost.

AS EASY as it is to be entranced by this heady mix of conceptual art and internationally important architecture, you can't truly get a sense of the Aspen character without heading outdoors, and even out of town, to see the landscapes that originally drew people here. Getting out of town also provides reminders that it's not just Aspen that's changing. Heading “down valley” to these once sleepy communities that now find themselves roused awake by an influx of outside investors and new residents means encountering increased traffic and stoplights. In Basalt, which sits at the confluence of the Roaring Fork and the Fryingpan rivers, fly-fishing is another kind of artistic endeavor. The town retains a rustic charm, with groups of fishermen in waders smoking and comparing notes in a parking lot across the way from a riverside plot filled with construction equipment—signs of housing developments to come.

Nine miles northwest, under the looming landmark of Mount Sopris, the cyclist hub of Carbondale has a much more authentically Western atmosphere. By keeping itself low-key and not as

society-oriented as Aspen, this town is less about luxury boutiques and more about traditional mom-and-pop enterprises served with a side of New Age hipsterism. The main street is usually quiet except for the occasional blowout of a mountain bike tire or the *slap-slap-slap* of flip-flops as someone rushes to a yoga class. It's one of those places that might make you wonder over a morning latte, “Could I live here?” (You wouldn't be the first to ask that question. Carbondale's population has nearly doubled in the past few decades, to just under 7,000.)

Farther up a side valley is historic Redstone, a former coal-mining town where the original coke ovens still emerge from a hillside like hive-shaped hobbit homes. Back north, down the main highway, the larger town of Glenwood Springs seems a great distance away from the sleek polish of Aspen, just 40 miles south. The town, located where the Roaring Fork merges with the Colorado River, is best known for its historic thermal pool, which some visitors find offensively sulfurous while others swear by its reputed healing and restorative properties. Even with the emergence of Slope & Hatch, Glenwood Springs's first ampersand-titled restaurant, it earns its reputation as a more budget-conscious, family-oriented destination, complete with mountaintop caverns and a theme park.

As with other places people move to in droves, the rush-hour congestion stretches out longer and longer each year as more people commute greater distances for work. As one local lamented, the high cost of valley living might mean the end of the ski bum economy—a prized element of Aspen's unplugged reputation since the 1970s.

Toward the end of her life, Elizabeth Paepcke herself had grown disillusioned with the idyllic tourist mecca that she had helped to create. At the opening session of an Aspen Institute conference in 1987, she asked the crowd before her, “Are we going to kill the golden goose by feeding the animal until its liver becomes distended and we produce a pâté which is so rich that none of us can digest it anymore? What price glory?” It's that invisible goal line that so many sought-after communities strive for and then reach—and quickly regret. How can a high-priced resort area remain vital without falling victim to its own uniqueness and shutting the gates to new residents and new ideas? We should applaud communities for taking radical steps toward modernity instead of ossifying into mere museums of historic preservation, be they whaling- or mining-themed. Is it even possible to resist change and fend off all the newcomers who want a piece of heaven for themselves—and who gets to say that the newcomers shouldn't have it too? Aspen, though founded on a love of new ideas, is still searching for those answers (which it may never find). But at least for now, we can all visit. ♦

The recently redesigned interiors of the historic Hotel Jerome, including the atrium lobby, have the look of a mansion decorated by an eccentric collector with a love of the American West.



