



So how much will the ultimate Aspen experience cost you? Exactly nothing, writes Ben Groundwater.

This is a privilege. It's 8am at Aspen Mountain, and it's cold. Our excited breaths billow into the morning air. We're front and centre at the Silver Queen Gondola, about to become some of the lucky few to get an early-morning ride up the mountain, and an early-morning ski down untouched slopes.

We scan our passes and climb into the carriage. Behind, the gates will soon be closed, locking off the mountain to the Average Joes, those mere nobodies left behind at the bottom, for another hour. The place is ours.

How much do you have to pay for

a privilege like this, you might ask? How much does it cost to have an almost private ski down one of the world's most famous mountains, to have its slopes all to yourself for an hour? The answer: nothing. Zero dollars. Zilch.

To get first tracks at Aspen Mountain you simply have to have a valid lift pass and sign up at the ski school the day before, or have your hotel do it for you. There are limited numbers allowed up on the gondola at 8am, but you don't have to be one of Aspen's famed celebrity visitors to secure your spot – it's first in, best dressed (or admittedly, in the case of some of Aspen's wealthier, fur-covered clients, worst dressed).

The surprise isn't just that this opportunity comes free in Aspen – the surprise is that anything comes free in Aspen. This Colorado resort is known as a playground for the stars, a favourite of the Mariah

Careys and Rihannas of the world.

The town's airport is lined with parallel-parked private jets. Its chalets house limousines. You don't expect to get something for nothing.

But Aspen is far more than a haunt for the rich and famous. It's possible to do this place on a tight budget, to see and experience most of the great things Aspen has to offer without needing to remortgage the house.

The buzz of first tracks isn't the only on-mountain bonus. Those who need a break from the slopes can enjoy a yoga session at the Sundeck restaurant four days a week – free. Those who'd rather be carving turns can take a guided ski tour of the mountain any day of the week. Again, free.

Over at Highlands, one of the four mountains covered by an Aspen ski pass, Wednesdays are "Highlands Guest Appreciation"



days, when parking at the base is free, guided ski tours of the infamous Highlands Bowl are free, and hotdogs cooked up by some very enthusiastic chairlift operators are free.

So far, so budget-friendly. But what about off-snow activities?

If you still don't want to break out any green-backs, first place to visit is the Aspen Art Museum, which features works by local and international contemporary artists. Entry is, of course, free. Down by Hallam Lake Nature Preserve, the Aspen Centre for Environmental Studies team offer educational walks around the area,

sometimes including snow-shoeing, sometimes watching beavers building dams, and always getting up close with the local golden eagle. Entry? Free.

Come lunchtime, however, you'll find the old saying that there's no such thing as a free lunch holds true even in Aspen – though there are ways to keep the budget under control while still enjoying good food. If you're staying at the Limelight Hotel, or at the cosy St Moritz, there are kitchen facilities on hand to whip up your own meals.

In town, meanwhile, keep an eye out for restaurants such as Kenichi, L'Hostaria and Cache Cache, all of which are fine-diners that offer a pared-back, cheaper version of their menu if you're prepared to eat at the bar. Jimmy's is another of these establishments, a favourite of the locals who like to order a few cold beers and Jimmy's jalapeno macaroni and cheese.

Back out on the street, it's time to go shopping. Window-shopping, of course, is free, and will certainly be some people's idea of a good time when there are stores like Ralph Lauren, Dior and Louis Vuitton to check out. But you're on a budget, right? You can't afford

Ralph Lauren, Dior and Louis Vuitton. Although maybe you can: just down the street at the Thrift Shop of Aspen. Remember all those celebrities and high-flyers Aspen is known for? Most of their cast-off clothes seem to end up at the Thrift Shop, where luxury labels – the same ones you've just seen while window-shopping –

tend to walk out of the door at basement prices.

As night falls in Aspen, you could reasonably expect that the budget will be blown. After all, most visitors to ski towns are chasing a champagne lifestyle on a beer budget – but soon you realise you can't even get a beer lifestyle on a beer budget. Aspen, however, has got you covered. Grab a drink at Zane's Tavern, a "dive bar" with cold beer on tap and live sport on TV. Or check out Takah Sushi restaurant for "Takah Tuesdays", when local bands play live. Entry? Of course, it's free. **T**

The writer travelled as a guest of Aspen Snowmass and Qantas.

TRIP NOTES

MORE INFORMATION
aspensnowmass.com.

GETTING THERE

Qantas operates double daily A380 services from Sydney and Melbourne to Los Angeles, with daily connections on American Airlines to Aspen. Return economy fares start from \$1912. See qantas.com.

STAYING THERE

The centrally located Limelight Hotel has seven-night holiday packages that include accommodation, Aspen Snowmass lift passes, breakfast and apres-ski wine and cheese, for \$1034 twin share. See limelighthotel.com.



World at your feet: (Clockwise from main) Aspen from above; nightlife on the slopes; a skier's paradise.