



# Open Boundaries

## Steamboat, Colorado

Backcountry, USA

Text by Susan Schnier

Photos by Aryeh Copa

*Scott "Squirrel" Bradley knows the "if" side of the equation.*

Long time locals are quick to admit that Steamboat, Colorado is not known for steep, exposed terrain. They proudly claim that the mountain doesn't offer too many tight chutes or technical lines. They also don't hesitate to confess that it's a destination resort that gets flooded with tourists that have trouble transporting their skis from the hotel to the lift, let alone gracefully and skillfully riding the terrain. Steamboat is also off the beaten path, so visitors sacrifice proximity to Colorado's I-70 corridor resorts by driving or flying out to cowboy country where Steamboat's Directory of Skiing, World Champion and Olympic medallist, Billy Kidd still sports his trademark lid. Since the locals don't exactly paint a glowing picture of Steamboat's traditional terrain, why have so many die-hard skiers and riders moved out to Steamboat to set up shop for good?

For one thing, there's the snow. Steamboat gets about 350 inches of snow each year, and the stuff is so light and dry, that it's where the term "Champagne Powder" originated. And then there's the backcountry. Over the past fifteen years, Steamboat has put up seven access points where skiers and riders can legally leave the resort and enter Forest Service land. Because the terrain isn't excessively steep, avalanche danger in the backcountry is relatively low, so if you know your way around, you can find and take advantage of all that untouched, feather-light snow.

Locals emphasize the "if" part of the equation. Regular users of Steamboat's gates are some of the most protective backcountry skiers and riders around. Because the mountain becomes so overrun with tourists, its easy-access backcountry is Steamboat's hidden gem, a collection of secret stashes where real skiers and riders can take refuge from the masses. "We're really fortunate because we have so many gates to access the Forest Service backcountry from the resort," says Cathy Wiedemer of Mountain Hardwear. "You can do car shuttles, short trips, or long trips." And since the ski area faces mostly southwest, the north-facing backcountry is the place to go for soft, untracked snow several days after a storm. Former Steamboat Courtesy Ski Patroller, Drew Hyde says, "Steamboat's not the steepest place, but the snow is unparalleled. It's a family-oriented, destination resort so when it does get crowded there are lots of outlets to get away from the crowds."

When you go to Steamboat, try to hook up with locals. Show them that you're competent, and they may decide you're worthy and show you what Steamboat offers beyond its boundaries. If



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*Scott “Squirrel” Bradley exploiting some untracked secrets.*

you stop by the brand new tuning shop, Edge Werks, ask for Win Park. The 20-year Steamboat resident's ski days are down from the 100+ seasons he used to get, but Win still skis a not-too-shabby 70 days each year, with half of those in the backcountry. One of his favorite areas is The Toutes, comprised of different lines like the Nostril, Endless Gully, and Granola Bowl. It's an area that many locals treasure as their secret. "It's a hard entrance to find," says Win, "I've been going back there for the past 20 years, and sometimes I can't find it. You need to know the right tree."

Steamboat Patrol Director, John Kohnke, warns, "Unlike above treeline skiing, there are hundreds of drainages that lead to nowhere. It reminds me a little of a corn maze. About the time you think you know where you are...you don't. If you get injured or lost out there, and need assistance, the price can be very, very expensive." If you decide to venture out into Steamboat's backcountry, as always, go with a friend, be aware of your limits and understand terrain and avalanche hazards. Oh yeah, don't forget to have fun!

For intermediate skiers or backcountry rookies, The Golf Course is a good start. To access it, ride the Pony Express Lift and go out the gate at the top. Called Sundown, Steamboat's south side offers up lower-angle backcountry areas, like Wally World and Storm King. You can also access this terrain off Morningside Lift with a short hike to the top of the weather station and Gate D. Because of the southern exposure, Sundown has great corn skiing in the spring.

For more rowdy terrain, Fish Creek, north of the ski area, is one of the most popular backcountry destinations. Both the Morning Side chair and the Pony Express lift—whose installation about five

years ago has resulted in more people making use of Steamboat's backcountry—allow access to Fish Creek from Mt. Werner's Gate D, which is past Chutes 1, 2 and 3, and Christmas Tree. Ski north and climb the hill for 10 minutes to the weather towers, a gathering place where people rest, have a snack and choose lines from the three visible pitches. The longest one takes you into the lower canyon, where excellent skiing requires a watchful eye for cliff bands.

Boulder Field presents one of the most challenging runs in Fish Creek; its hundreds of snow-covered round boulders make plentiful pillow drops, and are best hit early in the day. The area has a few different entrances—including one with a six-foot drop to enter—so be aware of which one you choose. Getting back to the resort from Fish Creek means 25 minutes on Whoopdee Ridge, a long, left-sided traverse named for its ever-present whoop-dee-dos.

"Watch out," says Win, "or you might be going 'whoopdee' into some Scrub Oak."

"A telltale sign of Steamboat backcountry skiers is a bigger left quad," explains Paddler Magazine editor, Eugene Buchanan. The Ridge runs into Burgess Creek, where you'll tackle 2,000 Steps up to Burgess Creek Skiway. Though it's only about 200 hundred steps before the skyway down to the Thunderhead Express lift, it can feel like 2,000 when your legs are warm from skiing and traversing the Ridge.

For a quick, easy, north-facing outing through trees and chutes, check out Northwoods. From the weather towers, ski the inbound Gate D (called First Pitch or East Face). Take the gate at the bottom, then ski Second Pitch to Northwoods. A trail called the Bob Trail takes you back into the resort in the Flying Z area, leaving more inbound skiing

to the bottom. This is one of the more popular trails, sometimes letting you follow tracks to get there and back. But beware, the ski patrol does countless searches each year for people who saw tracks, followed them, and got lost.

“Unfortunately some people see the gates and don’t understand that the terrain is unpatrolled,” says Drew. “Even though Steamboat isn’t that steep, you can get into some pretty unfamiliar and un-fun territory in Fish Creek. That’s happened to me and made me rethink who I go in the backcountry with and when and where I go.” Though the lines in Fish Creek are not that long, you can’t always see the bottom so you need to know where you’re going before you start down. Drew picks Endless Gully as his favorite Fish Creek line, one of the few that can be skied non-stop without losing your rhythm avoiding obstacles like trees or cliffs.

Drew discovered a new exit at the bottom of Fish Creek, which traverses following the contour line to skier’s left to Whoopdee Ridge. “For eight years I’ve been doing Whoopdee Ridge,” Drew explains, “then I was following some tracks and I dropped down into a lower drainage and discovered another way that’s a lot easier.” Drew’s new route hooks back into the Burgess Creek Skiway, though sometimes it ends at Burgess Creek Road, for a hike back to the lift.

To avoid the long and sometimes grueling traverse, some locals carry skins. “We’ll get the pitch and then do it again without going back to the lift,” says Eugene. If you’re out for a day of touring, head up to Fish Creek Falls, above Fish Creek.



## BETA:

*Photo by Larry Pierce*

Contact: [www.steamboat.com](http://www.steamboat.com), 970-879-6111 (info), 970-879-7300 (snow report).

### Directions:

From Denver, take I-70 West to the Silverthorne exit. Go North on US-40 for 52 miles. Or fly right into Steamboat Spring’s airport.

### Lodging:

The Super 8 (970-879-5230) or Rabbit Ears Motel (970-879-1150) for your budget, The Grand for convenience and the ultimate in mountain luxury. 877-237-2628 (central reservations).

### Après:

Come out of Fish Creek and go right to happy hour at Dos Amigos.

### Touring:

For steep skiing and a good multi-day tour, climb nearby Hahn’s Peak. The inactive volcano has a summit of 10,839 feet. Stay in Hahn’s Cabin for a cozy mid-mountain respite and killer backcountry meals.

**Ahhh:** Soak in the Strawberry Park Hot Springs, about 7 miles out of town.

**Season:** Late November through mid-April.

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