

# CALL OF THE WILD

A COWBOY-TOWN BASE CAMP FROM WHICH TO EXPLORE  
YELLOWSTONE IN THE SUMMER, COME WINTER WYOMING'S  
SALOON-STUDED JACKSON HOLE OFFERS SOME OF THE  
BEST SLOPE ACTION IN THE UNITED STATES

Words: **Nick Savage**

It's one of the most infamous inbound runs in North America. After a 10-foot vertical drop, you're met with a rock-hard 45-degree pitch. The snow is low in the hourglass-shaped chute today, making the prospect of running Corbet's Couloir all that bit hairier. Two skiers have just successfully made the drop, before pulling big, easy 360s over a riser – testament to the sort of skill you need in your locker to take on the legendary run.

There's a murmur of apprehension in the crowd as another skier sidles up to Corbett's lip. He hesitates, sizing up his approach, then jumps. He hangs in the air for a moment before touching ground, where he fails to stick the landing. At first it happens slowly, then escalates quickly. His limbs flail wildly as he gains momentum down the slope. The crowd collectively gasps as he rolls over an outcrop of black boulders. You can almost hear his ribs popping.

He snowballs downhill for another hundred feet or so before coming to a stop, then gets up, limps and laughs. "So, I guess I'm the Jerry of the day," he shouts back to the group peering down at him from the top of the cauldron. Respect. My own desire to drop into Corbet's Couloir has, however, been whipped away in the breeze.

While Jackson Hole, Wyoming, may be renowned for its expert terrain, in reality it's a mountain that's accessible to everyone, from bunny-slope neophytes to veteran steepers skiers. The resort mountain features 133 named trails, 2,500 acres of slopes and 4,139 feet of vertical rise from base to peak. It's said that about 50 per cent of the ski area caters to beginners and intermediates. There's also some 3,000 acres of gated backcountry terrain.

I dip into this briefly after sampling a Jackson Hole staple – the excellent bacon and peanut butter waffle sandwich at Corbet's Cabin at the upper terminus of the aerial tram, best enjoyed in

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the rarefied air at 10,450 feet. With the proper ballast sticking to the ribs, we exit through the gate into the Rendezvous Bowl searching for some good, old-fashioned cowboy powder. It's a warm day and the conditions are a little risky, but we have an excellent time linking turns in perfectly-distanced glades of blue spruce and ponderosa pine.

I'm splitting my stay between two towns: Teton Village, located slope-side at the foot of the mountain; and Jackson Hole, a 20-minute drive away. Apparently, both are busier in the summer when tourists from across the globe use it as a base for discovering Yellowstone National Park, as well as hiking, fly-fishing, mountain-biking and other outdoor pursuits.

In recent years, Jackson Hole in particular has become a zeitgeisty redoubt for American movers and shakers, especially tech mavens from Silicon Valley, due as much to the pristine nature of the town (97 per cent of almost 4 million acres in Teton County are federally owned or state managed) as to Wyoming's tax friendliness – here, you won't pay income, estate, inheritance or excise tax.

Dick Cheney has a place near Jackson Hole, so too does Kanye West, who famously purchased Monster Lake Ranch in neighbouring Cody (although he's now in the process of selling it). Less controversial celebrity inhabitants include Harrison Ford, Sandra Bullock, Travis Rice and Julia Louis-Dreyfus.

My ski guide regales me with a story about Lil Wayne. The rapper had arrived by private jet at the resort, purchasing boots, bindings, snowboards and top-end winter sports apparel for himself and his entourage. He was taken to the top of the mountain and completed just the one run, then gave the entirety of the equipment to the guide, alongside a \$5,000 tip, before jumping back on his aircraft.

The appeal of Jackson Hole, for powder hounds, is a ski bum ►

► culture that has flourished since the 1970s. For others, the draw is the town's laid-back, Old-West atmosphere. It's an ambience that's personified in the Mangy Moose Restaurant and Saloon' in Teton Village, where we grab frosty pints of Jenny Lake Lager from local brewery Snake River as a live band hammers out tunes from the Grateful Dead.

Part of the reason I came to Jackson Hole was to avoid traffic jams, but the next morning I find myself mired in one nonetheless. At Eagle's Rest Cutoff, not far from our hotel, an immature moose calf has moseyed into a bottleneck at the base of the mountain where the groomed slope tightens to pass over a bridge. It sniffs the air and gazes lazily behind its shoulder at a handful of gormless onlookers. A skier pulls up into a hockey

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stop, the sound of ice and snow crashing through the still blue morning, then stares down the outsized animal.

A snowboarder notices too late and has crested the riser of the bridge. He removes his board and walks back up to the skier. There's a steady accretion of downhill sportspeople. As it turns into a pile-up, the moose remains patently unbothered. Finally, three brave skiers make a run for the left-hand side of the slope. The animal turns and, unhurriedly, lumbers off into a copse of evergreens. Later in the day, we find it sunbathing in a thicket of aspen.

After a night at the Terra Hotel – if you choose to stay elsewhere, at least pay a visit to the hotel's excellent Italian restaurant – we transfer to Hotel Jackson, situated just a stone's throw from the heavily-Instagram-ed elk arches of the town square on Glenwood Street.

The boutique hotel is owned by a Lebanese family, which is reflected in its tasty Middle Eastern restaurant FIGS. After an array of superb cocktails in the Sacajawea Library, I'm shown to my suite, which is faultless Wild West elegance. The rooms are clad in weathered grey timber, the bed is covered with a knit blanket, the headboard crafted from black leather, and small red flames kiss the glass of the in-room fireplace.

The sun is shining brightly on my last afternoon in Wyoming. I decide to go for a stroll and grab a drink. A motorcade courses its way through the belly of Jackson Hole. The Teton County ski team has emerged victorious from the ski races at Snow King Mountain, a local resort which looms imposingly above the town. Tousled teenagers lean out of the windows, bathing in victory-lap adulation.

I only just manage to make it into the anteroom of the world-famous Million Dollar Cowboy Bar. Dulcet tones escape from inside. Peering past the woman manning the souvenir shop, I can make out the stage, where Jennifer Nettles warms up her vocal cords alongside her band Sugarland. The shopkeeper informs me that she's been her favourite singer since she was 12.

Stetsons and mesh trucker hats abound in the nearby Silver Dollar Saloon, just around the corner from, and sharing the same ownership as, the Cowboy Bar. The bartender mixing gimlets has a black eye. Leather hanging art runs like a chryon above the bar, depicting Old West stereotypes: cattle drives; big-game hunting; fierce native Americans, banditry and other silver-screen tropes. An oil painting illustrates a snappily-dressed cowboy rubbing the legs of a crimson-bodied woman. Soaking it in, alongside the gin, it's impossible not to feel the thrill of the American West.

Jackson Hole is that rare place that confidently looks both to the future and the past. Though it is assuredly keeping up with the spirit of the age, it still holds tight to its western roots, offering visitors the true sense of adventure that has come to characterise the image of the western United States. Whether for its world-beating powder, Wild West romance or unvarnished luxury – there's a reason Jackson Hole enjoys a place at the top table of North American ski resorts. ■

*Return flights from London Heathrow to Jackson Hole (with a stopover in Denver) from £777 with United Airlines; The Hotel Jackson, from £283pp with breakfast, [hoteljackson.com](http://hoteljackson.com); The Terra Hotel, from £342 pp with breakfast, [hotellerrajacksonhole.com](http://hotellerrajacksonhole.com); [jacksonhole.com](http://jacksonhole.com)*

