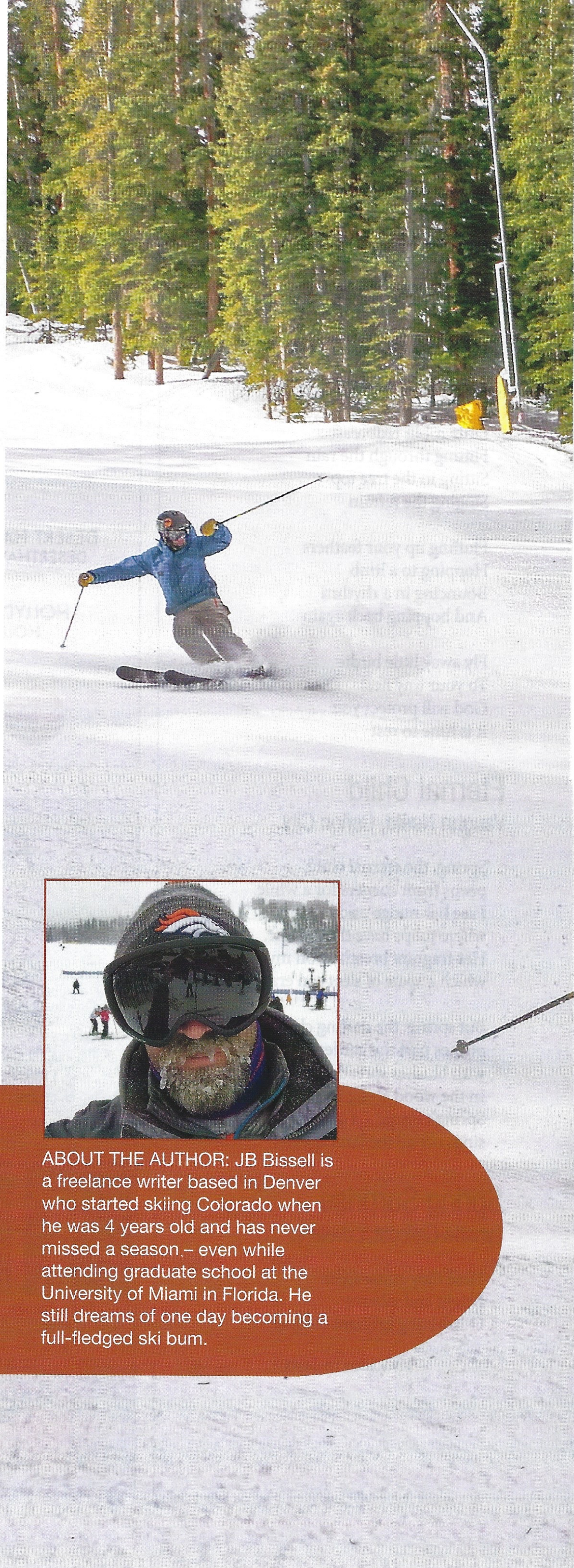



SKI BUMS

**Father and sons
tackle 28 slopes
in single season**

story and photographs by JB BISSELL



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: JB Bissell is a freelance writer based in Denver who started skiing Colorado when he was 4 years old and has never missed a season— even while attending graduate school at the University of Miami in Florida. He still dreams of one day becoming a full-fledged ski bum.



Father-and-sons trio Dade, JB and Roan Bissell, clockwise from top left, hit some late-season powder at Copper Mountain on their quest to ski all 28 of Colorado's ski areas in a single season.

FOR A WHILE I thought the winter family adventure I had dreamed up might be finished almost as soon as we had started. The plan was for my two boys – Dade and Roan, then ages 13 and 12, respectively – and me to ski at least one day at every Centennial State snow-riding operation during the 2015-2016 season. We dubbed it the Ski All Colorado odyssey and put together a list of 28 places we planned to visit.

But we were only on No. 2 when Dade lost his ski at the base of a 15-foot-high cliff, and now we were sitting in the lodge trying to figure out our next move. My good friend Ted and his two kids, Peter and Sasha, were at the table, too. He took the final bite of a turkey sandwich and said, “If you want to go back up to look for it, let’s go.”

I didn’t, but I really didn’t want to buy a new pair of skis, either. “OK,” I said. “Let’s give it a shot.”

TWO HOURS EARLIER, we had been standing at the top of Wolf Creek’s Knife Ridge Chutes. To get to that spot, you have to ride the Alberta Lift and then climb a metal staircase that’s bolted into the side of the mountain – and looks as though it probably sends the blood pressure of visiting attorneys into the stratosphere. Naturally, we decided we needed to check it out.

As for the cliff, I admit seeing the warning sign. I just didn’t believe the warning sign. We were perched on a cornice, and while the terrain immediately beneath us was quite steep, I certainly didn’t see any exposed rock faces, so I figured maybe the advisory was referring to an outcropping that had already surrendered to the heavy early-season snowfall.

“Right here looks good,” I said.

“Are you sure?” Ted asked. “What about that sign?”

“Nah. We’re already here, and this looks fun.”

Twelve-year-old Sasha was on board with my plan, but she thought a little more advance scouting was probably in order. “Mr. JB, you go first to be sure we can get all the way down from here,” she suggested.

Fair enough. I dropped off the cornice and made a series of pedal hop turns while whooping with joy as snow splashed waist high. This is my spiritual place. Not Wolf Creek exclusively, but skiing. And specifically, skiing when all of my physical energy

A photograph of two skiers standing in a snowy forest. The skier on the left is wearing a brown jacket and orange pants, while the skier on the right is wearing a blue jacket and tan pants. They are surrounded by tall, thin trees with snow-covered ground.

Roan and Dade enjoy a moment of serenity in Mad Dog Glade at Powderhorn, near Grand Junction, where the lack of big crowds means there's still fresh powder to ski several days after a blizzard.

Colorado Ski Super Stats

COLORADO GETS 13 million skier-days each year — about a million more than runners-up Utah and California combined. Here are a few of our other statistical standouts.

Size Vail is Colorado's largest resort, with 5,289 acres of skiable terrain, more than 150 times the size of the smallest ski area on our list, 35-acre Kendall Mountain in Silverton. Silverton Mountain has the highest peak elevation at 13,487 feet, but Telluride has the most vertical drop: It's 4,425 feet from top to bottom.

Lifts Breckenridge has Colorado's highest lift, the Imperial Express Superchair, which goes up to 12,840 feet. Measuring 10,732 feet, Sunshine Express at Telluride is the state's longest lift. Looking Glass, installed at Winter Park in 1965, is Colorado's oldest operating lift.

Snow Wolf Creek gets an annual average of 430 inches of snow, making it our snowiest ski area. Keystone has the most snowmaking in Colorado (662 acres). Colorado's earliest opening day was Loveland (Oct. 7, 2009); the latest closing day was at Arapahoe Basin (Aug. 10, 1995).

Difficulty With 35 percent of its terrain rated beginner, Aspen's Buttermilk Ski Area is the state's most novice-friendly resort. Meanwhile, 100 percent of Silverton's terrain is rated expert. Crested Butte's 50-degree Rambo is Colorado's steepest tree-cut run. — *Eric Peterson*

and mental vigor are working in unison to achieve a common goal. In this case: not catching an edge and tumbling into a snowy abyss punctuated with pine trees. It's being fully in the moment. When I'm on the mountain, I'm not trying to solve work problems or fretting about my kids' grades. It's peace.

And then, all of a sudden, there's the cliff. No problem, though. I simply stopped and turned uphill to holler back at the group.

"OK, there really is a cliff here. You better go more skier's right before you come down!" is exactly what I should have said. Instead, for some reason I still don't fully comprehend (perhaps I was a little lightheaded with euphoria after my Knife Ridge descent), I yelled up something along the lines of, "All's well, come on down," and one by one they carved turns to my position.

Ted was last to arrive, and when he did, he looked at me with the most what-in-the-world-were-you-thinking expression I've ever seen in my life. "Now what?" he screamed.

THE "NOW WHAT" turned out to be clicking out of our skis and hugging granite while shimmying along a snow-covered scar that cut diagonally across the precipice. Where that crack ended provided a more reasonable spot from which to jump into more favorable thigh-deep powder. I went first, and then Ted proceeded to hurl the gear in my general direction (read: at me) and assist the kids — "Dig your toes into the snow!" "Keep your legs straight!" "Hold on!" — until we and our stuff were all off the ledge, safe and accounted for.

Except one of Dade's planks, which I lost sight of beneath the frozen surface while eluding Ted's barrage. We spent an hour poking the snow with our poles and walking grid patterns until I called off the search and decided we needed to get something to eat — and drink.



When Ted and I returned to the scene, another 30 minutes ticked by before I heard my friend screaming again – “That’s it! I quit!” – and saw him throwing one more ski at me (I mean, in my general direction) with a victorious grin spreading across his face.

The cliff and the missing-and-then-found equipment proved to be the perfect way to begin our Ski All Colorado journey. Part of the goal was to have an adventure. Don’t get me wrong, I know we weren’t tackling Everest or kayaking the length of the Amazon, but attempting to call on 28 ski hills, all scattered across the state from the southern San Juans to Steamboat and Eldora to Grand Junction, in a single season comes with its own set of obstacles.

In fact, I made sure of it. One of the rules I implemented was that I didn’t want the boys to miss any classroom time in order to complete our crusade. That proclamation alone had me poring over maps and school calendars for hours trying to figure out how best to combine extra days off (thank you, teacher conferences) with far-flung destinations such as Crested Butte and Telluride.

Secondly, the boys and I agreed that we were going to ski everywhere, not just show up. We didn’t put an exact timeframe or number of runs on this statute, but the point was that we’d ski until we truly had a sense for the topography and vibe of each operation. Without this addendum, it would have been easy to check off major chunks of our list in just a couple of weekends.

Think about it. If your criteria consisted only of catching a chair up and swooshing your way down at each place, you could knock out all four Aspen mountains in a single day and still have time for an apres cocktail: Wake up, bomb the Cirque Headwall at Snowmass, hustle over to Buttermilk to ride the terrain park, hike Highlands Bowl, and then wrap the day with a marathon top-to-bottom burner at Ajax before grabbing a burger and beer at the Red Onion. Easy.

But we didn’t want easy. We wanted an adventure. We had one at Wolf Creek, and thanks to Ted’s snow-recon skills, now we were ready to move on to the next one.

WE SKIED ALMOST every weekend in January. Over on the Western Slope, we caught Powderhorn 48 hours after a modest 7-inch snow flurry. For people who typically ski the bigger resorts, I know that doesn’t sound impressive, but let me tell you what I learned about small-town skiing: At a place like Powderhorn, 7 inches goes a long way, because there aren’t thousands of people all storming the same powder stashes as soon as the lifts open.

That’s the exception, of course. The rule is that if you want to make first tracks in big snow, you better be lucky enough to



Roan, JB and Dade Bissell take a breather at Copper Mountain. Above, Dade flies off the ski area’s Onion Roll.

show up the morning after Old Man Winter cuts loose. The boys and I happened to be just that lucky a few weeks later when we wrapped up a Saturday tour at Ski Granby Ranch and then drove south to stay the night at Beaver Creek.

When we woke up, there was more than a foot of quintessential, dry Colorado white stuff waiting. Roan looked out the window and said, “Dad, what we have here is an old-fashioned powder day.”

“You’re absolutely right,” I said. (And yes, I do recognize the absurdity of a 12-year-old telling me anything is old-fashioned, but this is a ski story, not a parenting comedy of errors, and the truth of the matter is that he was spot on.) “Boys, finish your breakfast, we gotta go.”

Beaver Creek’s Birds of Prey route is easily the resort’s most famous attribute. But its best feature, bar none, is a small section of mountain that most people barely know exists called Upper Stone Creek Chutes. It’s gate-access only and hardly mentioned on the map – and I could exhaust a list of first-class adjectives describing how the lack of notoriety combined with 13 inches of overnight snow makes this collection of tight runs set between naked crags and dense pine trees one of my most favorite places on earth.

HAPPILY, I FOUND a favorite place at all 28 mountains we visited. When I was Dade and Roan's ages, I supplemented my ski days with Warren Miller films. All the incredible tricks and epic runs and funny flops were enjoyable to watch, but Mr. Miller taught me something more important than all that stuff. When asked where was his favorite place to ski, he replied – and I'm paraphrasing here – “Wherever I am that day.”

If you ask me or Dade or Roan the same question, you'll get the same answer. And it's important to understand that it's a truthful response. We love to ski. And we love to do it anywhere.

Now, if you want to know what was our favorite day of the entire Ski All Colorado journey, that's a different story, with a definite answer: Silverton Mountain. Hands down. No question about it.

Perhaps you've heard of Silverton. The mountain with one lift and thousands of acres – and no clear-cut runs. It's not a resort. It's a place for people who still love to ski for skiing's sake (and, admittedly, can ski well), without all the pomp and circumstance that often accompanies snow recreation these days.

The best way to begin to understand what Silverton is all about is to know the requirements for riding here: Everyone must carry an avalanche beacon, shovel and probe in a backcountry pack. In addition, riders are organized into groups of eight and assigned a guide who is a certified ski patroller and licensed avalanche authority. (There are a handful of unguided days available throughout the season.) Finally, while there is some skiable terrain right from the top of the single lift, the best stuff is a 10- to 60-minute trek farther up the hill.

Given all these details ... no, there's no need to build suspense here. Simply put, this was one of the best all-around days of my life, skiing or otherwise.

And Courtney, our guide, made it clear that's exactly what we were going to have right from the start. After our first post-chair-lift hike, he gave this pre-run briefing: “This is called Nightmare,” he explained. “It's a good starter trail. The beginning is sort of an hourglass chute. When you get into the open space, head to that clump of trees just above the road. We'll meet there. The chute is the spicy entrance. Or we can walk around this boulder and it's more mellow. Anybody want spicy?”

I'm proud to say that the three people featured in this story put their hands up with no hesitation. “Great!” Courtney said. “Why don't you lead us off, JB. Take it to the road.”

The road, a snow-packed path leading out of the box canyon, was off in the distance. Way off in the distance. I looked at Courtney. “You want me to ski all the way to the road?”

“Yep. Just take it to the road.”

This was one of those times in life when you either do it or you don't. I did. I dropped into the chute without saying another word or even looking at the boys. Roan's description of that moment is the best.

“My dad went first and disappeared around the rocks. There's nobody else skiing anywhere so we were just waiting for him to come out. It was kind of weird. But then he did and Courtney sent Dade. And then we saw my dad fall, which was pretty funny, and Courtney said, ‘Oh yeah, don't go where JB just went. There's a lot of avalanche debris through there. Real tough to ski on.’”

Yeah, that particular patch – with the crud and ice chunks – was a little tough. But, man, what an adventure. We did three more



After a 50-minute hike, Roan is ready to drop into the Rope Dee Dope #4 run at experts-only Silverton Mountain.

runs (about average for a full day at Silverton) and then toasted the experience with apres beers in the yurt that serves as the operation's “lodge.”

EVEN THOUGH WE still had seven mountains to shred, once Silverton was in the books, I was confident we'd be able to complete our Ski All Colorado mission (we did), so plans shifted to the end-of-the-season fete. And since Arapahoe Basin typically remains open throughout the spring months, it was slated as our final stop.

Honestly, I didn't plan to make many turns that day. Heather, a good friend and kindred ski spirit, had reserved prime real estate for us in the area's famed “Beach” parking lot. I figured we'd spend most of our time there high-fiving and hanging out. We parked, set up our tailgate paraphernalia, and then the boys and I boarded the Black Mountain Express chairlift for the official culmination to our five-month-long quest.

When we got back to the car, though, some friends had started to arrive. They wanted to do a celebratory run with us. We obliged. When we returned from that, more friends had shown up. This cycle repeated until about noon, when I announced I was making my last trip up and down.

Twenty or so people set their beverages in the snow, clicked into their planks or boards, and joined us for one final gang ski from the top of A Basin to the Beach. In the end, we still had plenty of time for high fives and hanging out – and to contemplate the inevitable question: “Will you do it again?”

I still don't have a definite answer. It was a lot of time, and a lot of money. But it was a lot of fun, too. And I do know that when we pulled out of the parking lot to head home that day, I didn't feel a massive sense of relief that we were done. Instead, I was sort of sad that it had all actually come to an end.

Until next season, at least. 🍂

The List

Before father and sons could check any Colorado ski areas off their list, they first had to create the list. Drawing on multiple sources, they determined these are the 28 resorts, hills and mountains that constituted the complete Colorado ski catalog.

- | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| ▲ 1 Arapahoe Basin | ▲ 15 Loveland |
| ▲ 2 Aspen Highlands | ▲ 16 Monarch |
| ▲ 3 Aspen Mountain | ▲ 17 Powderhorn |
| ▲ 4 Beaver Creek | ▲ 18 Purgatory |
| ▲ 5 Breckenridge | ▲ 19 Silverton |
| ▲ 6 Buttermilk | ▲ 20 Ski Cooper |
| ▲ 7 Copper Mountain | ▲ 21 Ski Granby Ranch |
| ▲ 8 Crested Butte | ▲ 22 Snowmass |
| ▲ 9 Echo Mountain | ▲ 23 Steamboat |
| ▲ 10 Eldora | ▲ 24 Sunlight |
| ▲ 11 Hesperus | ▲ 25 Telluride |
| ▲ 12 Howelsen Hill | ▲ 26 Vail |
| ▲ 13 Kendall Mountain | ▲ 27 Winter Park |
| ▲ 14 Keystone | ▲ 28 Wolf Creek |

Sunlight's Heathen run proves that even while trying to ski every operation in Colorado, it's always worth taking some time to enjoy the view.