

Beaver Creek, Colorado

This short feature appeared in the *Denver Post* in Spring 2001.

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Photos are available.

Snowshoeing with a Taste of Class

Beaver Creek's gourmet lunch tour offers more than just snow and scenery.

By Claire Walter

Tuck your snowshoes under your arm, board Beaver Creek's Strawberry Express lift and soar quickly to one of the most beguiling snowshoeing venues in Colorado. The lift ride shortcuts access to the McCoy Park trail system, boasting 20 miles of some of the sweetest snowshoeing and cross-country skiing routes around.

Speaking of sweet, a scrumptious dessert caps off the opulent lunch that some view as the highlight of the resort's Ultimate Snowshoe Tour and others view as a just a necessary break in the full-day program. Bring your own snowshoes or rent a pair of Atlas shoes at the cross-country and snowshoeing center in Beaver Creek Village and meet your guide for the ride toward the sky.

McCoy Park, located at just under 9,900 feet, was named for John F. McCoy, who homesteaded there. This high, wooded valley has also seen mining and logging activity, and you can still see remnants along many of the routes. In spring, when days are mild and often sunny, you probably won't be stopping in the warming hut at the top of the lift, but you can be sure that snowshoers and cross-country skiers appreciated it after a nippy lift ride on cold midwinter days.

The lunch tour is paced according the desires and ability of the group, but typically, it will involve five to six miles of snowshoe hiking. Several easy to moderate trails reach out from the top of the chairlift. Along the way, the guide will share with you the history, geology, flora and fauna of the area – knowledge that you'll surely tap into when snowshoeing elsewhere on your own. You'll learn that porcupines nibble on pine bark during the winter, that elk cows chew on aspen trees during calving season to ease birth pains, and that squirrels, ermine, snowshoe hare and coyotes live in this high forest.

The highlight of the tour is Discovery Overlook, which presents an eye-popping vista to the south, toward Mt. Jackson, New York Mountain, Castle Peak, Gold Dust Mountain and the soaring Sawatch Range beyond. Look over one shoulder toward the Gore Range and toward the other toward the Flattop Wilderness. From few such easily accessible places is there such a magnificent panorama.

On warm days, lunch is delivered by snowmobile to the overlook, where picnic tables have been placed to snare the best views. If it's snowy, windy or cold, the group dines in a heated yurt. Joe Keegan, formerly a chef at Beano's Cabin, the resort's first on-

mountain gourmet restaurant, caters the lunches. He is famous for his soups, including incredible carrot-ginger and lentil-vegetable-mushroom concoctions. A course of salad or pasta is followed by to-die-for desserts. Because the meal is snowmobiled in and fragile pies and pastries won't do, Keegan prepares outrageous brownies, luscious lemon bars and other sturdy sweets.

The Ultimate Snowshoe Tour costs \$88 per person, including lift ride and snowshoe rentals. It is offered every Wednesday and any other day four or more people have reserved (reservations are required and two-day notice is strongly recommended). Call (970) 845-5313.

Snowshoe Shuffle

Beaver Creek's lunch tour isn't the only snowshoeing game in the Vail Valley. In addition to tours and snowshoeing trails, Vail hosts the eighth annual Snowshoe Shuffle on March 31. This huge event, a fundraiser for women's cancer detection and treatment, attracts thousands of participants who compete in competitive 5K and 10K races at the top of Vail Mountain, as well as non-competitive 5K and one-mile distances. For information, (970) 926-7485.

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