

Jackson Hole, Wyoming

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Editors: This piece is now history. Contact cmwalter@claire-walter.com for a version updated for the 2006-07 ski season.



After gliding through snowstorms, fog and sunshine, Jackson Hole’s legendary tram retires at the end of the Summer 2006 tourist season after 40 years of faithful service. (Claire Walter photo)

Last Hurrah for a Legendary Lift

Forty-year-old tram to be retired after the summer 2006 season.

By Claire Walter

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One of Western skiing’s great rituals is Jackson Hole’s “first tram.” Even though the lifts don’t open until 9:00, skiers and snowboarders start lining up at 7:30 to snare fresh

powder. Every 12 minutes thereafter, just 52 people disembark at the top of Rendezvous Peak and descend 4,139 continuous vertical feet, the country's greatest.

But after 40 years and 9 million winter and summer riders, the iconic tram will be retired after the summer 2006. Apr. 2 is the final day of scheduled winter operations. Since the announcement of the last tram, locals have been contemplating what it means. Most plan tram laps both to celebrate four decades of riding and sliding and to mourn the end of an era. Bottom line is: Ride it while you can.

Next winter, a sturdy double chairlift reached via lower-mountain lifts will replace the tram to the top. And "something" – either a higher-capacity tram or a state-of-the-art bi-cable gondola -- will eventually replace it for summer and winter operations.

In this era of political correctness and stellar skiers and snowboarders of both genders, it's risky to describe a mountain as masculine, but that's just the way beefy, brawny, broad-shouldered Rendezvous Peak looks and feels. The crowd on the tram dock exudes testosterone, but the spirit is reverentially man-against-mountain rather than back-slapping, frat-boy braggadocio, for this mountain commands respect.

Weather can be capricious: stern snowstorms, soft-falling flakes, low clouds, brilliant sunshine or calm at the base and gale-force winds at the 10,450-foot summit – or a combination. The snow that generously plasters mountaintop bowls, broad trails, chutes and glades can blanket the slopes the finest Rocky Mountain powder, harden into windslab or melt into goo, even on the same day.

Some years back, when the ski area undertook summer slope contouring and winter snow grooming to tame the monster mountain to levels more skiers find comfortable, local vehicles sprouted bumper stickers reading, "Stop The Brutal Grooming." The ski company responded by expanding intermediate terrain elsewhere. Truth be told, most of Rendezvous Peak is simply too steep to groom.

Except for a handful of high-intermediate mid-mountain runs and one long road that snakes its way down the mountain face, Rendezvous is all about challenge. Of the seven mountaintop bowls, steep, steadily pitched Rendezvous Bowl just below the tram's top station is best known. Other bowls, ridges and chutes all wear one or two black diamonds, indicating the resort's "most challenging" terrain.

Fabled Corbet's Couloir is steep as an elevator shaft and not much wider. Entry requires a leap and a mid-air turn between two rock walls and eventually "flattens" into a 50-degree slope. Most people stop on a traverse below the chute, gawk and move on.

Jackson Hole's milder side comprises a deep valley called Casper Bowl and Apres-Vous, the mountain beyond that. Remember thought that a green-circle novice slope at Jackson Hole is like a blue-square intermediate run at most other mountains, a blue square equals a black diamond elsewhere, and black-diamond turf is off the charts at most other ski areas.

Located in northwestern Wyoming, adjacent to Grand Teton National Park and less than 60 miles south of Yellowstone National Park, Jackson Hole slots perfectly into a popular Rocky Mountain road trip. The word "spectacular" might seem overused when it comes to views, but it applies to the summit panoramas. The Teton Range and Grand Teton National Park stretch to the north. The Snake Range is off to the south. To the west is Idaho. To the east, the town of Jackson, the Snake River Valley and the Gros Ventre Range beyond.

Whether you go to ski or snowboard during what remains of winter, or ride the tram to hike or sightsee in summer, remember that 2006 marks Jackson Hole's last tram.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Last season of tram operations at Jackson Hole, Wyo.

WHERE: Northwestern Wyoming, 370 miles from Boulder.

WHEN: Before Apr. 2 to ski or snowboard.

COST: Through Mar. 19, adult (ages 22-64), \$70 for 1 day, \$202 for 3 out of 4 days, \$268 for 4 out of 6 days, \$390 for 6 out of 8 days. From Mar. 20, adult rates drop to \$50 per day, with no discount for multi-day purchases. Young adults (15-21), children (14 and under) and seniors (65 and over) pay less.

WHAT ELSE?: Jackson Hole Mountain Festival (Mar. 24 through Apr. 2) with special events, music, entertainment and of course, the last tram.

CONTACT: Jackson Hole Mountain Resort, 888-DEEP-SNO (333-7776);
www.jacksonhole.com. Jackson Hole Chamber of Commerce, 307-733-3316,
www.jacksonholechamber.com.

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