

Getting High In Vail, Colorado

By Don Mankin

At first, I wondered at the canisters of oxygen prominently displayed in racks outside the convenience stores, then smirked at the flavored options offered at the oxygen bar in the Sonnenalp (sonnenalp.com), the hotel hosting my recent two night stay. How “new age,” I smirked.

In the state that first legalized recreational marijuana use, it was ironic that “getting high” was a condition to be dealt with, not a condition to be achieved.

After walking around for a few minutes in the Village at over 8,000 feet altitude in Vail, Colorado, I got it. I was woozy and breathless. Maybe I needed one of those canisters or perhaps a moment or two at the oxygen bar. I quickly realized that the key to enjoying this high-altitude, high-end, open-air shopping mall/ski resort was to stay hydrated and take it easy until I was acclimated to the altitude.

The plan for my brief visit was to hike. Vail offers a number of good options but the one that was most appealing to me was to ride the ski gondola to the top of the main ski run, then hike along one of the many trails that head up from there. To avoid the potentially treacherous thunder and lightning storms that can pound the peaks in early afternoon during the summer, I decided to wait until the next morning and explore the Village instead.



Shopping mall doesn’t even come close to capturing the essence of the place. The three “villages” that make up Vail are intentionally-designed for visitors and tourists, rather than communities that have organically emerged from clusters of full time residents. The town was created to support the ski resort, rather than the other way around. Despite its artificiality, it is a pleasant place to stroll, shop and eat. Upscale boutiques, bars and restaurants line the meandering promenade in all directions.

For the rest of the afternoon, I wandered through and between Vail Village and Lionshead Village, the two main villages, less than a half mile apart, that comprise most of Vail. The people-watching was excellent, especially if you like gawking (discretely) at beautiful people. I live in Los Angeles, so not counting my wife, I see beautiful people (surgically-enhanced or otherwise) almost every

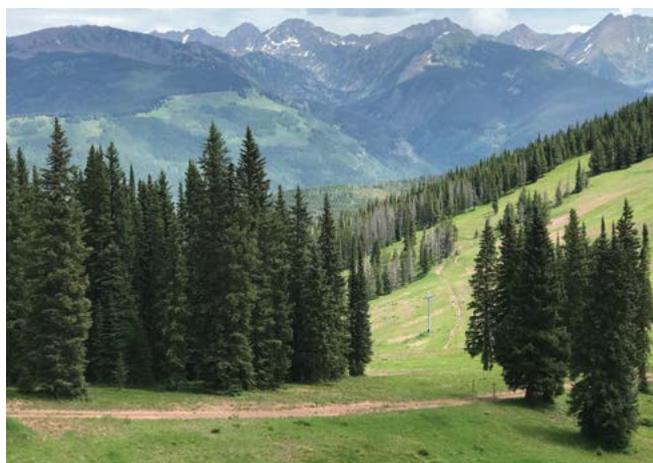
day. But Vail seems to attract more than its share. Or maybe I was just woozy from the lack of oxygen.

The next morning I caught the first gondola for an early start. There were a handful of people scattered around the buildings clustered at the top but no one else was on the trail I chose, the Kinnikinnick. The trail started at about 10,000 feet and snaked across meadow and through forest for slightly over a mile to a ridge at 11,000 feet.

Starting slowly, I breathed deeply with each step. I wasn’t in any hurry. It just felt good to be hiking and to look out over the mountains from on high. I soon settled into a measured but steady rhythm—step, breathe, look. I was surprised that I was doing as well as I was. My heart pounded and I breathed heavily of course, but I wasn’t gasping. “Not bad for a geezer,” I thought.

Almost before I knew it, I was on the ridge at the end of the trail. It took less than an hour to get there but it seemed like just a few minutes. By focusing on stepping and breathing, I had turned the hike into a meditation—time passed, I moved forward. I sat down on a log and just enjoyed the moment of calm and earned sweat before getting up and heading back down the trail.

By the time I reached the gondola, I was ready for some refreshment. The restaurant at the lodge had set up an outdoor cafeteria for lunch and was offering two beers for the price of one plus the usual Mexican fare so popular in ski resorts. Of course, I indulged and soon grasped the wisdom of the other trope for dealing with high altitude—drink moderately. I guess I didn't because by the time I headed down on the gondola, I was seriously buzzed.



Not a bad way to cap off a day of hiking, I thought, as I lit into the plate of baby back ribs in front of me.

For more information on Don Mankin, aka "The Adventure Geezer," visit his website and blog at adventuretransformations.com.



I was able to make my way back to the hotel without incident and was now ready for the second half of my brief hiking/spa experience. I passed on the massage and the oxygen bar and spent the rest of the day melting in a lounge chair and alternately dipping into the Jacuzzi and the indoor-outdoor pool.

By the time dinner rolled around, I was sober (sort of), relaxed and rubbery. I glided light-headed along the promenade to a restaurant with, get this, 10 lanes of bowling (bolvail.com). I passed on the bowling and chose to eat outside while watching a bunch of kids play soccer on the faux village green in front of the restaurant.

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