

Taking the kids: To rustic Crested Butte

- Story Highlights
- The resort is more difficult to get to than many mountain resorts
- Uncrowded slopes and a relaxed atmosphere keep visitors coming back
- New owners have begun plowing \$200 million into the resort

By Eileen Ogintz

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(Tribune Media Services) -- There are memories everywhere I look.



Most of Crested Butte's downtown area is on the [National Register of Historic Places](#).

We were just married -- no kids yet -- when friends from Texas introduced us to Crested Butte Mountain Resort. A gem of a mountain (no lift lines here!) just minutes on a free, festively painted shuttle bus from the tiny (less than 2,500 people) town of Crested Butte, so steeped in mining history that most of the downtown area, with its wooden, multicolored, 19th-century buildings, is on the National Register of Historic Places. (Ever see a two-story outhouse?)

We've been back many times since with our kids, cousins and various other relatives and everyone has as much affection for this place as we do, even though its location in southwestern Colorado (about a half-hour from Gunnison

County Airport) makes it tougher to get to than many mountain resorts.

"That's our blessing and our curse," observes longtime local Joe Fitzpatrick, town manager of Mt. Crested Butte. "You have to really want to come here," he says, "But once you get here, you're really rewarded."

"You can't get any deeper in the mountains than here, away from the traffic and the crowds" adds former Olympian Wendy Fisher, who teaches aspiring snow athletes at [Crested Butte Academy](#), which offers new ski and snowboard camps for kids and teens, and serves on the Mt. Crested Butte town council. She's also the mom of two young boys. Locals, she adds, embrace visiting families. "You feel so good showing this place off," she says.

No wonder visiting families like mine return again and again. I smile remembering 6-year-old Melanie snowboarding

one season -- as if to prove to her skiing family that she could chart her own path. (Now 17, she skis competitively.) I recall not being able to breath watching 16-year-old Reggie compete in a junior extreme skiing competition, racing down impossibly steep slopes, dodging rocks. (She came in third!) There's Matt, a middle-schooler, jubilantly beating his dad down the mountain.

There were Christmases when Santa somehow found us in a rented condo, Scrabble games, chili suppers in front of a fire, and more recently, toasting the end of another successful ski trip at the Ice Bar (yes, it's really made out of ice) on the mountain. We've introduced Eva Weinberg, the daughter of non-skiing cousins, to the sport here (she can now easily keep up with the rest of the gang on expert slopes) and our California nephew and niece, Lauren and Chris Yemma, to the joys of uncrowded slopes. (Check <http://www.skicb.com/> and save as much as 30 percent when you book a package.)

This trip, we watch the newest skiers in our family -- 5-year-old Ethan Sitzman and his 3-year-old sister, Hannah -- hone their skills at Crested Butte's Kid's World (no worries about gigantic classes here.) Ethan already loves racing his older cousins -- and his instructor (who remembered him from last season) down the slope.

"I think what we try to have here is a more personal touch," says Ellen Osterling, the 19-year veteran who oversees Kid's World and wasn't at all surprised Ethan's instructor recognized him a year later. (Mention "Taking the Kids" and get a 25 percent discount on an adult ski lesson when you've enrolled a child in ski school.)

This year, there is so much snow (more than 26 feet so far this season) that it's piled up to the roofs of some buildings -- ironically at the time when Crested Butte has been designated one of the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Dozen Distinctive Destinations. But the fun doesn't stop when the snow melts. "People come here for the winter, but they stay for the summer," says Joe Fitzpatrick.

Crested Butte is known for its spectacular wildflowers, mountain biking and hiking. (The hike from Crested Butte to Aspen is particularly popular, www.gunnisoncrestedbutte.com.) " All year round, the [Adaptive Sports Center](#) enables those with disabilities and their families, including wounded veterans, to share outdoor adventures.

But for all Crested Butte's virtues -- the heart-stopping beauty, some of the steepest lift-served terrain in North America, the 30-plus restaurants that won't bust the budget (the all-you-can-eat fried chicken and mashed potatoes at Slogar that are guaranteed to make you forget your diet), the friendly locals ("We're not putting it on," insists Noel Adam, who has been a shop owner here for 36 years. "Everyone is just nice."), the excellent ski school -- the mountain resort was looking a little tired.

Enter New Englanders Tim and Diane Mueller, the owners of Okemo Mountain Resort in Vermont and Mount Sunapee Resort in New Hampshire. They bought Crested Butte a few years ago and have begun plowing \$200 million into the place. It's a family business. Son Ethan, a new dad himself, is a resort executive.

This season, there's the new upscale Lodge at Mountaineer Square with its own courtyard and fire pit; the stylish Elevation Hotel, transformed from Club Med (a big spa is coming). There's a resort concierge to help you plan your on-slope and off-slope activities (sleigh ride dinner or snowshoe anyone?), better grooming and snowmaking. Plans are under way for state-of-the-art terrain parks, new mountain restaurants, another slope-side luxury complex and a controversial development a mile away that the Muellers hope will become a new community center for Mt. Crested Butte and a model for sustainable development.

While some in town aren't convinced, the Muellers say they are determined to preserve what makes Crested Butte so special and unique. They don't want to turn into an Aspen or a Vail, they say. But what they hope is to attract those families who could easily afford Aspen or Vail, but are seeking something different -- a more intimate experience away from the crowds. "Upscale but unpretentious," says Tim Mueller. "Driving a Hummer wouldn't be a cool thing."

Neither are fur coats or fancy ski duds. "I don't feel like I need to wear them here," says Adelaide Biggs, a Houston grandmother and local homeowner who jokes that she's got a closet full of "Aspen clothes." "This mountain is a wonderful place to be with children," she adds, nodding at her 12-year-old granddaughter. "It's homey and safe." You can feel comfortable letting your tweens or teens head out on the mountain on their own or into town for pizza at The Secret Stash, or a Pita in Paradise or a turn on the ice rink at the [Crested Butte Nordic Center](#).

"It's much less expensive than Vail or Aspen, and much more relaxed," adds Michaelyn Drury, who is from the Dallas suburbs and grew up skiing at Aspen. But don't expect to rub shoulders with celebrities, she adds, or shop till you drop at designer boutiques.

Let's hope it stays that way.

(For more Taking the Kids, visit www.takingthekids.com, where Eileen Ogintz welcomes your questions and comments.)

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