

## TELLURIDE VS. ASPEN

These two famous U.S. resorts offer deep-snow skiing at prices that are near par with our dollar. Either would be a great destination for a snowy March Break getaway, but they each have very different attitudes and crowds.

*Margaret Swaine* puts them side by side to see whose slopes are tops



### GETTING THERE

Telluride is a bit of a schlep. First you fly to Denver, then take a small regional plane to Montrose. (Telluride has its own airport but it's a pilot's challenge — the highest-altitude commercial airport in the U.S. with frequent bad weather and scarily rugged mountain terrain. I'd give it a pass.) From Montrose you drive 70 miles to Telluride.

Aspen has a perfectly adequate small airport just 10 minutes from town that is well served by free buses. **One point to Aspen**

### ACCOMMODATIONS

Telluride's come a long way in a decade. **Inn at Lost Creek**, and newly opened ultra-deluxe hotels, such as the **Capella** and **Lumière**, have introduced accommodation every bit as luxurious as the best in Aspen. **It's a tough call but Telluride had bigger rooms at lower cost**

Aspen has the famous **Little Nell**, with recently renovated rooms designed with high-tech contemporary flare, and its largest hotel, the venerable **St. Regis** (opened in 1991 as a Ritz), with its popular lobby bar.

No franchises, no Starbucks. Locals love to point out that Butch Cassidy robbed his first bank here; the San Miguel Valley Bank is now an eyeglass shop where you can view the vault from which Cassidy took the cash. A free gondola ride that runs until midnight daily takes you from the mountain resort village to the heart of the perfectly preserved Old Town in a box canyon below. **One point to Telluride**

Aspen is also a former mining town, named after the abundance of aspen trees in the area. It's much busier, with lots of upscale shops, restaurants and hotels, and offers free bus service. It's got more glam but less charm, with a lot of bedroom communities on the outskirts.

DINING

In Telluride's resort village, **Onyx** in the Capella Telluride hotel not only has imaginative dishes but offers "petite" dishes (enough for the average Canadian) at about half price. At the end of the meal, kids will love the complimentary candy bar — a smorgasbord of candy apples, jujubes, candy bars, mints, red hots and more. **9545 Restaurant**, named for its elevation above sea level, has flavourful Southwest- and Latin-inspired dishes. On the slopes each eatery is different; **Alpino Vino's** a wine bar, **Gorrono Ranch** is a rustic wood lodge with hearty American food, **Hop Garden's** a slopeside grill with craft beers and so on.

Some of Aspen's more than a dozen on-slope eateries are so large (**Sundeck**, for example) that they will put you in mind of cafeterias. But the food is tasty good. The intimate **Lynn Britt Cabin**, partway down the slopes of Snowmass, is a replica of what you'd find in Europe, with table service, set menus and fine wines (**Cloud Nine** on Aspen Highland is Chef Andreas Fischerbacher's other Austrian-style spot). In Aspen proper, **Ute City** is a hot new dining spot. **It's a draw**

WILDEST WINTER ACTIVITIES

I took a snow-bike lesson in Telluride and it was a hoot. You sit on a bike on skis (no wheels) with your feet locked into mini skis and hit the slopes — I'd recommend the bunny ones. A non-skier could do this without fear. Telluride is also the home of Colorado's only heli-ski operation, covering 250 square miles of terrain. Snowmobile tours take people to ghost towns and natural hot springs. And then there's frozen waterfall climbing (beginner ice-climbing lessons available). **One point to Telluride**

Aspen offers paragliding, which is wild, and more tame activities like hot-air ballooning, snowmobiles tours, snowshoe hikes and sleigh rides.

SKIING

Telluride gives big mountain experience. The highest lift reaches an altitude of 12,255 feet. Prospect Bowl, which opened in 2003, has many new trails and runs. While most famous for its black diamond and double black challenges, Telluride has a large terrain for beginners who even get to ride the big chairs with the views while staying on easy-rider slopes. **It's a draw**

Aspen has four mountains: Aspen Mountain, Aspen Highlands, Buttermilk and Snowmass. The three smallest of Aspen's would fit into Telluride. The variety and options for all skier abilities are endless. However Telluride is all there in one location: Step out of your hotel and that's it. Plus, lift lineups are non-existent. Locals joke "we're not friendly, we're just lonely." **It's a draw**

SPAS

**Capella** spa in Telluride is intimate, with a lovely couple's therapy room with hydrotherapy tub, two-person steam room and fireplace. You can book the room for a "self spa" treatment that includes a mud bar and jelly bath. The maximum moisture treatment, which includes a maple sugar scrub and shea butter wrap, is great for countering the dry air.

The stunning new **Viceroy** hotel at Aspen's Snowmass Mountain has a coolly designed statement spa, but the **Remede** in Aspen's St. Regis leaves all others in the dust. Its steamrooms, jacuzzi, cold-plunge pools, co-ed waterfall pool and pampering relaxation oxygen room (where you can get hooked up to oxygen machines post treatment and sip sparkling wine) is bonus bliss to anyone who books a treatment. **One point to Aspen**

KIDS' PROGRAMS

Telluride has a great kid's ski programs (age three and up) and adventure evenings but can't match Aspen's centre.

Aspen's **Treehouse Kids' Adventure Centre** at Snowmass provides an interactive environment, supervised by experienced staff, for children eight weeks to four years. The Cubs on Skis program accommodates kids not yet potty trained. Group ski lessons are offered for children from two and a half. Pipe and Park, in Terrain Park, will appeal to skiers and boarders from 10 to 17 who want to perfect their moves. **One point to Aspen**

THE WILD CARD

Telluride had a Wild West bad-boy image until recently. In the 1980s, it gained notoriety as a drop point for Mexican drug smugglers and was featured in the hit song *Smuggler's Blues* by Glenn Fry. ("They move it through Miami and sell it in L.A. They hide it up in Telluride. I mean it's here to stay.") Its reputation has been burnished somewhat since then, but there's still a twinkle in the eyes of the 2,300 Telluride locals. Some talk of a mystical energy vortex here that stirs the soul. Telluride sure stirred mine. **Final point and win to Telluride.**

■ The best deals can be found through agencies that sell ski packages to the area. Some examples: Merit Ski Vacations (meritskivacations.com), The Loading Company (skihills.com), Voyages Gendron (voyagesgendron.com) and SkiCan (skican.com). Margaret Swaine was a guest of Aspen Snowmass Skiing Co. and Telluride Ski Resort.