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SKI REPORT

Valet? Seat by the Fire? Join the Club

By ALLEN BEST

THE country club has long been an American archetype of upscale social networking, white-glove amenities and, oh, yes, golf. Enter the ski club, in which a growing number of winter resorts are using the club model to attract members who prefer first tracks to tee times at sunrise. Think of them as country clubs with vast stretches of white powder instead of putting greens.

When Andy Unanue began his Colorado ski vacation earlier this month, for example, he drove to a parking garage right next to the lifts at Vail in the heart of the resort village, picked up his freshly sharpened skis and, with just a few more steps, boarded the lift.

Mr. Unanue, who lives in Manhattan, believes the perks provided by the Vail Mountain Club will be well worth the \$275,000 membership initiation fee plus annual dues of \$6,000. Those amenities include a free breakfast, access to a spa and fitness center and a ski valet.

"I like the idea of having a ski valet, and just being able to get to the base of the ski mountain, and having everything there," said Mr. Unanue, who is 40 and says he manages his family's equity investments. The membership also gives him two lifetime ski passes, he added, which he said he hoped to use for at least 40 more years. And, unlike with a country club, Mr. Unanue doesn't have to worry about his hook or his slice.

Vail Mountain Club, which opened in November, is the newest and most expensive of the ski clubs. The Vail area now has five such private clubs, including one that is not operated by Vail Resorts. Slopeside ski-based clubs

are also found at nearby Beaver Creek, and at Telluride, Colo.; Deer Valley, Utah; Northstar, Calif.; and Stratton, Vt.

There are now about 20 such clubs nationwide, ski industry executives say, most of them in the West. That's roughly three times the number that existed 10 years ago. These are slopeside clubs that sit on private land next to or within public ski areas. The clubs reflect resort operators' attempt to accommodate what seemed like an endless stream of the newly rich as well as the recently retired.

Such clubs are typically populated by part-time residents. At Telluride's club, 80 percent of the members are local second-home owners. "I think so many of the members who are here for just five or six weeks a year, they want to enjoy Telluride to the max," said Rachael Shaw Bowers, director of club membership for the Telluride Ski & Golf Club. Her club, where initiation fees are \$55,000 to \$125,000, tries to fill in the blanks and connect the dots.

Beth Howard, vice president of the Vail and Beaver Creek Clubs for Vail Resorts, says all of the company's eight clubs — there are four at Beaver Creek (one of them just for golf) — are sold out and have waiting lists, though those lists aren't quite as long as they once were. When asked if she has seen evidence of the economic downturn, she said, "We really haven't."

Members at Vail Mountain Club average 54 years old, Ms. Howard said, and represent a broad range of backgrounds and primary residences. The club has strong representation from Colorado, New York and Florida, but also from China, Britain, Mexico and Italy.

The clubs are also attracting an increasing number of semi-retirees, like Bob Nolan, a former auto industry executive. He spends more than half of each year near Vail in a gated community called Arrowhead, which sits at the base of the Beaver Creek ski area. Much of Mr. Nolan's time there is funneled through the Arrowhead Alpine Club, which has 600 family memberships and a waiting period of about a year for new members.

The Alpine Club has ski lockers, an exercise room, personal trainers available for hire and comfortable settings in front of fireplaces where members can sip

their morning coffee while reading the latest local, regional and national newspapers. For many members, the club headquarters serves as a living room.

Mr. Nolan skis 40 days each winter, but the club offers him more than skiing. There are, for example, snowshoe hikes, bicycle trips and the popular wine-and-cheese mixers each Monday night.

Some members also play at Arrowhead's golf course, but golfing is not central to the club — nor even skiing. Instead, the club serves as a focus for relationships and broader community involvement. The Alpine Club, for example, helps get members involved in Habitat for Humanity home building and highway cleanups.

For those who can afford it, the clubs become a gathering place for people who share interests. “You don't find people that are hanging onto their battle ribbons or their achievements from the past,” Mr. Nolan said. “You know, in corporate America, everybody was always talking about their accomplishments. We are talking about what we are going to do.”

Jerry Jones, a member of the Arrowhead Alpine Club and a ski industry veteran — he isn't the Jerry Jones who owns the Dallas Cowboys — agrees about the lack of ego. “They drop the ‘doctor,’ and they drop the ‘president,’ ” he said, “and they are just John and Suzy, and Jimmy and Sally.”

But Mr. Jones, who in 1956 began working at Sun Valley in Idaho and who, in the 1980s, helped create a club at Beaver Creek, believes that exclusivity is important to members. “It definitely separates them from the rest of the skiing public,” he said.

Some people would argue that the clubs, with their pampering and privilege, exemplify what has gone wrong with skiing. But David Corbin, director of planning for Aspen Skiing Company, disagrees. “I don't think the clubs themselves have fundamentally changed the resorts,” said Mr. Corbin, who in previous jobs helped create clubs at Vail and Northstar. “They are part and parcel of that wave of very affluent people that have come to the resorts and these communities in the last 20 years.”

The clubs, he says, quickly build social connections. “Granted, not everybody can pay to participate,” he said. “But among those who can pay to participate, it’s a social unifier.”

As evidenced by their profusion at Vail, the clubs are also profitable. Even in a bear economy, Vail Resorts has sold all of the 200 social memberships at its Vail Mountain Club, which include initiation deposits of \$150,000. And it has sold 185 memberships that include parking privileges, the kind Mr. Unanue has.

The clubs also funnel customers to Vail’s core business, skiing. For example, club members are candidates for ski school lessons, a significant revenue source for the resort. In some clubs, ownership of real estate in the local development is required for membership. In those in which it is not, members are potential buyers of condominiums and other homes, which is often another source of income for operators of ski areas.

Vail Resorts has clubs at only two of its five ski areas so far, but company executives say they are considering them for its other ski areas: Breckenridge and Keystone, also in Colorado, and Heavenly, which is part of the Lake Tahoe resorts on the California-Nevada border.