

DESTINATION ♦ UNITED STATES



Perfect powder on the slope at Vail Resort (main); the cozy interior of The Sebastian (below left); and the village of Vail at night

PICTURES: SUPPLIE

THE BIG WHITE QUIET

Silence is golden in the ultimate mountain resort town of Vail

BRENDEN HILLS

There's nothing quite like the silence when you first hit powder snow at high speed. It's a sudden quiet that's so rarely experienced it's unexpectedly loud.

I'm not even five minutes into my first run atop the Vail Mountain Ski Resort when I get to experience the sensation – a contrast that every skier and snowboarder loves.

Before you hit it, your ears have become accustomed to the rhythmic scratching and scraping of your board's metal edge cutting a line through the snow. It's all you hear. But at the same time, you don't hear it. Like the sound of your car on the highway: it's loud, but you don't notice it until you stop.

I'm with private snowboarding guide Kylie Dwyer, an Aussie who has spent the past 11 seasons in Vail and she knows the mountain like the back of her hand.

"Follow me, there's powder snow over this way," she calls as she directs me to turn left through a thin corridor of trees on to a run called Expresso.

Then it happens: the silence. We go from a thin covering of snow to ploughing through thigh-deep powder. I am now gliding, seemingly weightless, through the thick snow. The scraping sound of my snowboard's rail vanishes.

In its place, the sound of my own breathing and thud of my heartbeat are revealed. They're both surprisingly fast.

I stop. Partly because I'm too excited about the quality of the snow, but mainly because I need a moment to take it in. There's no one here but me and Kylie. Not a breath of wind and no sound of traffic. We're about 3000m above sea level, and when the two of us stop talking about the snow quality, the only thing I can hear is the ringing in my own ears.

There had been a 23cm dump of snow overnight. By the time I finished my trip to Vail, Colorado, the place had received more snow than it had seen in 50 years.

There's a reason why Vail is among the most famous ski destinations in

the world. It has more than 2100ha of ski and snowboard terrain, seven back bowls that stretch for 11km and they claim to have the most groomed terrain on Earth.

And as an Australian, there has never been a better time to go there, because since Vail Resorts bought Perisher in NSW in 2015 for \$177 million, you can now use a Perisher season pass to ski in Vail and other Vail-owned US resorts.

The short of it is that you can ski Perisher for all the Australian winter before travelling to the US at the end of the year for an epic road trip or settling in at one of the resorts. If you ski for a about a week, then the pass has already paid for itself. And with single day adult lift passes at Vail going for about \$US120 (\$A157), it's a good option.

There are other bonuses such as the EpicMix smartphone app, an easy-to-access map of the mountain that works in conjunction with your ski pass.

Every time you scan it at a chairlift, it uses your check-ins to compile stats on how many runs you have done and how fast you went.

Professional photographers roam around the mountain. They take your photo, scan your pass and you can buy the pic on the app when you log in.

FLOTUS FAME

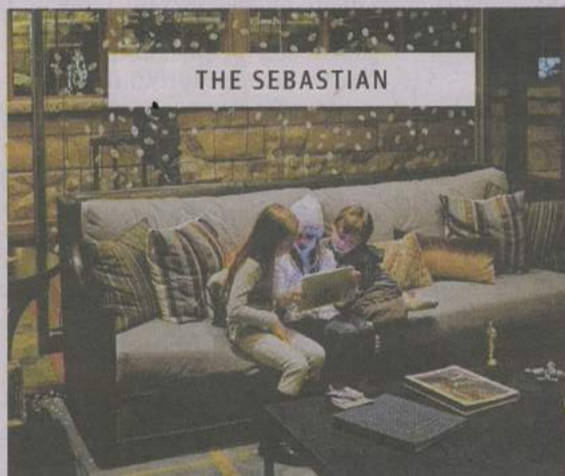
The easiest way to explain the opulence of The Sebastian is to say that Michelle Obama has stayed there. It's impressive from the second you walk through the front door and lay eyes on the soaring atrium decorated with wall-to-wall handcrafted woodwork and velvet.

The hotel's owners are art

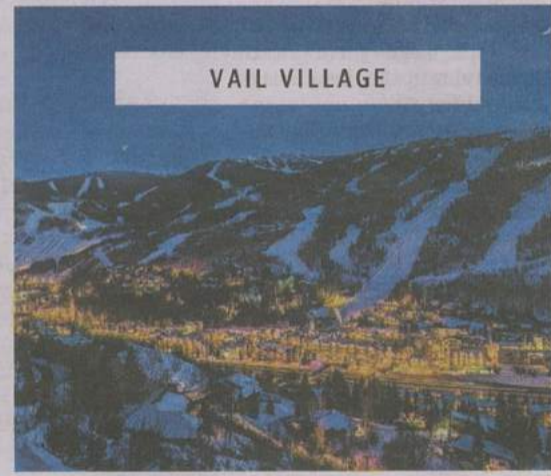
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THE SEBASTIAN



VAIL VILLAGE

aficionados and there is \$10 million worth of art on the walls. All the rooms have custom-designed furnishing.

The hotel's Frost Bar has your regular beers and cocktails, but is famous for its signature hot chocolates. To say they're elaborate – and popular – is an understatement. The hotel sold 600 of them in one month last ski season.

They have four different flavours that rotate. Our week was mocha, which includes Baileys marshmallows, espresso beans and caramel crunches.

The ingredients are contained in a handmade chocolate ball. They are then slowly revealed after hot chocolate is poured over the ball, melting it, and contents slowly float to the top of the mug.

THE VAIL VIBE

For most, local hangout bar Vendettas is the first stop after a day on the mountain. It's been there since 1983 and is packed by 4pm daily. The end of the bar is unofficially reserved for the mountain's ski patrol.

Memorable clientele range from celebrities such as Brad Pitt, who tried to sneak in for an under the radar beer and a 24-year-old local known only as "John" who has been known to do nude walks along the bar after too many \$4 Coors.

If a hipster-style wine bar is more

your style, the Root and Flower across the street specialises in top-shelf cocktails.

Down the street is the 10th Mountain Whiskey & Spirit Company. Named after a World War II army volunteer unit, it specialises in smooth-tasting whiskey, bourbon, vodka and moonshine for the brave.

WHERE TO EAT

A 20-minute open-air sleigh ride away is cosy Bean's Cabin, a fine-dining restaurant set in a traditional log cabin atop the ski fields at nearby Breckenridge. The Black Angus tenderloin will be one of the best you'll ever eat.

Matsuhisa is the 29th restaurant opened by Nobuyuki Matsuhisa, of Nobu fame. It specialises in traditional Japanese cuisine, does an impressive martini and has a touch of LA glam.

For an all-American steak experience, Flame restaurant in the Four Seasons Hotel, has a 16oz dry-aged bone-in bison ribeye steak that's a must.

At Mountain Standard, known for cooking its dishes over an open and wood fire, try the wood-grilled salmon with mushroom broth and potatoes.

THE WRITER WAS A GUEST OF VAIL RESORTS.

ESCAPE ROUTE

VAIL

GETTING THERE

We flew with Qantas from Sydney on 13-hour flight to Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas. From there it was a two-hour connecting flight to Colorado and the a two-hour drive up to the mountain qantas.com.au

STAYING THERE

The Sebastian Vail is within walking distance of the ski lifts. Rates start at \$US399 (\$A523) a night. thesebastianvail.com

SKIING THERE

The Epic Australia Pass, on sale now for \$789, provides year-round skiing and riding; unlimited, unrestricted access to Perisher in 2017 plus 10 total days at Whistler Blackcomb, Vail and/or Beaver Creek combined, access to Breckenridge, Keystone and Arapaho Basin in Colorado; and more during the 2017-18 ski season. epicaustraliapass.com.au

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