

An epic ski experience at Park City



Park City is now the country's largest ski resort.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

Publisher's note: *This is one in a series of stories about Park City, Utah.*

By Susan Wood

PARK CITY, Utah – It's a new PC world where "The Greatest Snow on Earth" meets the largest ski company in the United States.

Vail Resorts, which owns Northstar, Heavenly and Kirkwood mountain resorts, expanded its reach and portfolio by opening Park City with the advertising tagline: "There is only one." The marketing reference signifies the Broomfield, Colo.-based ski company's purchase of the Park City Mountain Resort in 2014 for \$182.5 million upon Powdr Corp.'s miscalculation and coerced selling of the Wasatch Mountain flagship ski area next door to Vail's formerly-named Canyons resort.

What was Powdr Corp.'s misfortune may turn out to represent a fortune for Vail.



Orange Bubble Express is a unique experience with the cover. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Vail being Vail – the ski company didn't waste any time investing in the combined Park City-Canyons resort. A little less than half of Vail's \$50 million commitment went into the eight-person Quicksilver gondola at mid-mountain that combines the two ski areas. The linking lift, which opened in December, provides skiers with 300 trails served by 41 lifts on 7,300 skiable acres. The connection makes Park City the largest resort in the United States.

Take it from this reporter who through the years has spent five weeks skiing Utah – this is massive, exciting and full of potential.

Park City and Canyons have historically been different worlds. Now Vail has the best of both. Park City has runs like Widowmaker, which a skier and boarder can eye from the extremely convenient town lift, and Jupiter Bowl with Volkswagen-sized moguls that can humble an experienced skier. A few decades ago, tourists flocked to Park City because it was the “in” thing and the groomers had their way on powder days. The Canyons ski area has been known as Wolf Mountain and Park City West – where a relatively inexpensive ski experience awaited. If one wanted untouched powder on many runs, this is where you graced the slopes.

Then came a 180-degree turn. The atmosphere evolved under Vail’s wing when Canyons was bought in 2013. In a few years, Canyons became the swank skier experience, with a mini upscale village anchored by Grand Summit timeshare units at the base.



Aspects of Park City's mining history is scattered about the mountain. Photo/Kathryn Reed

While Canyons has catered to snow bunnies and Sundance types in recent years, Park City Mountain Resort managed to keep its just-here-to-ski-and-bask-in-Olympic-glory feel. The giant slalom and snowboard halfpipe events were staged there during the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics.

Now Vail hopes to extend its touch to the Park City side after Powdr Corp. forgot to renew its bargain-basement 20-year lease at \$150,000 annually with Talisker Land Holdings, the Canadian corporation that owns the land upon which Park City operates. To illustrate the small world of the ski industry, Talisker bought the old Canyons resort from the New England-based American Skiing Company and brought on Powdr Corp. to manage it. ASC once owned Heavenly before its stock was delisted from the New York Stock Exchange.

The high finance, chess-type negotiations have some die-hard Park City old-time skiers either whole-heartedly enthusiastic

or cautiously optimistic about the infrastructure possibilities and transformation.

Jim Hadden – a 44-year Park City resident – remains in a wait-and-see mode.



Miners Camp's design is a replica of the lodges at Heavenly and Northstar in California. Photo/Kathryn Reed

"I didn't want Vail to come in (at first). I wanted to leave the mountain the way it was," Hadden told *Lake Tahoe News* while riding the Crescent Express chairlift. The lift offers access to some sweeping views from the Wasatch looking toward town and on a weekday, wide-open black runs.

Now retired, Hadden showed up straight out of college as an authentic ski bum. He fondly remembers the days when "really good skiers" would cover the mountain.

"Now I've noticed more beginners with Epic," Hadden said of Vail's multi-resort pass. "The ski schools should be full,"

mocking the inability of those who now ski at Park City.

He's open to having more runs and lifts with Vail's reputation of investing in its ski areas. But like old-timers in other ski areas, he's concerned Park City will lose its unique character. What's more, he's adamant about not paying for parking.

To that, Chief Operating Officer Bill Rock – who ran Tahoe's Northstar before being tapped by Vail corporate for this large assignment – told *Lake Tahoe News* no plans are in place to expand paid parking beyond its two paid lots at the Sundial resort at Canyons and the underground lot in Park City. Most of Vail's resorts have some sort of exclusive paid parking for those who opt into it.

Hadden is not alone in the parking demand.

"They better keep it free," Josh Salberg of Salt Lake City, who has been coming to the Canyons side for 20 years, said while buckling up his board at the top of the Saddleback Express chairlift. The high-speed quad is tucked away behind the front ridge and represents a best-kept secret on the Canyons side with the ever-lasting long Snow Dancer run off the high ground.



The mid-mountain gondola links Park City to what was Canyons. Photo/Kathryn Reed

There are other best-kept secrets. Salberg takes the Cabriolet lift from the Canyons side lower parking lot to the mountain base. The unique, stand-up, flatbed lift is open at the top, offering 360-degree views.

To accommodate a perceived influx of skiers and boarders at the combined resort, Rock pointed to the efficient Park City transit system that with Vail encourages “people to not get in their vehicles, to park and take the shuttle from the (Salt Lake City) airport.”

“One thing as a local that bothers me with Vail is they’ve

taken away the local discounts,” Salberg said. He used to enjoy getting free buddy tickets with a pass.

“Now they’re half off, which isn’t bad,” he said.

He also has a 5-year-old child and therefore wants Vail to bring back the kids’ ski free program.

To that, Rock told *LTN* that the Epic pass combining both resorts represents “a huge deal” with no need to now buy two passes at Park City and Canyons. Also in Utah, there’s a kindergarten-to-fifth-grade pass that provides five days of free skiing, one lesson and rental equipment.

“I love that they combined the mountain and upgraded,” Salberg said. But in the same breath, he admitted the jury is still out on how good Vail taking over the dual resort is if it means everything goes upscale, prices go up, tourists rule and many of the ski area workers he knows can’t afford to live in Park City.



The old Canyons side is much more developed than the Park City base. Photo/Kathryn Reed

The Cairns family from Australia offered a different perspective from the top of Tombstone Express. The high-speed six-pack offers an ideal middle ground for skiers and boarders wanting a connection between the steeps at Super Condor Express where an extreme rider may walk up Murdock Peak and the blue-run land near the new gondola.

Lisa Cairns said she likes being able to have family members use the Epic pass since Vail just bought the Perisher resort, which is within driving distance from their home in the Blue Mountains. And the Cairns feel at home in Park City. Father Hayden used to be a ski instructor at Deer Valley, and with that, 17-year-old Zac declared he was born in PC and agreed with mom that he likes “the Vail influence” despite initial reluctance.

“That means we can ski the Australian winter,” the family matriarch said of the opposite seasons from the States to the land Down Under. It’s summer there now.

“I can’t believe how many Australians are here,” she said.

Within minutes of the clan skiing off, another Aussie family skied by.

Jeff Throm of New Orleans got out of the Orange Bubble Express lift on the Canyons side ecstatic about the possibilities of where to go, insisting he had just scratched the surface one recent sunny Park City morning. The Orange Bubble high-speed quad comes equipped with an orange cover that shields riders from the elements.

“I like that they combined the resort, but I’d like to see more lifts for more connections,” he said.

Chairlifts cost a lot of money and can turn even the most

tucked away ski area into a hot spot where overpriced food and lodging as well as paid parking may bring in more out-of-towners, but can scare away those who call the region home.

And once again, there lies the delicate balance between appeasing locals and increasing visitation.



With the vast amount terrain, it would be hard to ski everything at Park City in one day. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Ski areas are like people

How does a ski industry corporation raise or raze a resort that adapts to its ideals while embracing its unique fingerprint and footprint?

That appears to be the challenge. A Tahoe resident need only look at Vail's Kirkwood and Heavenly to see the genuine differences.

A skier or boarder might ponder this as they visit Vail day-use lodges. Take Northstar's Zephyr Lodge and Heavenly's Tamarack Lodge. Both look strikingly similar to Park City's

brand-new Miners Camp. Miners Camp replaced a funky ski hut amid old mining shafts and aspen trees that dot the resort. Plus, the PC food offerings are vast with unique items such as vegetarian Moroccan stew and three-cheese potatoes, but one can still get a \$7 beer there. Despite the homogenous architecture, Vail embraced the lodge's past by mounting miner axes on the wall at the bar.

While Canyons has grown up on the newer side of the Park City region, the PC old-town side has the feel of an old ski town. Many of the historic landmarks exist, and the ski area has embraced the history with a tour designed to share it.

"I always like to learn," skier and retired college Professor Jeanne Pankanin said while on the historic tour with guide Chic Carlucci. She enjoyed hearing about the history of the Olympics at the top of the Eagle lift where the giant slalom race was staged.

At the top of McConkey's Express, the snow is as light as a feather and the bowls as treacherous as the waves at Mavericks. The tour group peered down on Soldier's Hollow, the setting for the Games' cross country ski events.

For the most part, Carlucci provided a wealth of background information on the history of Park City mining. More than 1,200 miles of tunnels with up to 1,700-foot drops connected to 70 mines represented a \$450 million industry sparked in the 1800s. The resort has even maintained its ore bins for historic reasons, Carlucci said. In some cases, workers have had to prop up dilapidated buildings.

One 1,300 tunnel built to transport water was constructed so well a miner "could see the end of it," Carlucci declared.

"They built the railroad in four months on just human labor. Normally that would take three years," the New York guide said at the top of the Crescent chairlift.

Many who ski and board the Wasatch ski area seem hopeful Vail will make infrastructure improvements – especially when it comes to putting in connecting runs and lifts. Some who worked there have already seen the potential. At the top of the Bonanza Express six-pack, one can ski the long ridgetop Jonesy's run and forget about the everyday working world.

Even Heavenly's former COO, Blaise Carrig, – who ran Vail mountain resort operations before retiring – has a run named after him. Blaise's Way runs adjacent to the new gondola at the mid-point stop, smack dab between the old Park City resort and the Canyons side, the ski area Carrig ran before he worked for Vail.

"It looks like the only way," one skier said of Blaise's Run, before heading down to the lower mountain from the gondola.

Perhaps the only way for Vail Resorts is progression and innovation. The challenge at Park City may involve harnessing that new growth and creativity without forgetting the ski area's colorful past.