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Alternative Adventures in Aspen Colorado

BY JEFFREY BRADFORD

When you typically think of the luxury ski-town of Aspen nestled in the Colorado Mountains your thoughts immediately turn to the ski opportunities of the four resorts within easy reach of the town - Aspen, Highlands, Buttermilk and Snowmass. The four resorts offer a comprehensive experience for skiers and snowboarders of all ages and capabilities. Alternatively, you can think about the apres nightlife, restaurants and high-end boutique shopping scene in the town.

However, should skiing or snowboarding not be your interest, or a combination of age and injury are putting you off spending a full-trip racing down the piste there are many alternative activities to pursue which you may not have immediately considered or indeed associated with a trip to Aspen. For example have you thought about a snowshoeing trip through an abandoned mining town on the outskirts of Aspen? How about a serious clay target session with expert instruction? Alternatively have you considered the merits of fly fishing in winter? Not least what of the potential for cross-country skiing across some 80 miles of trails between Aspen and Snowmass? One organisation which is well geared to meet the needs of a visitor to Aspen seeking a more rounded wintersports experience.

Located in a discrete corner of the ground floor of the St. Regis Hotel Aspen lies the Aspen Outfitting Company run by founder Jon Hollinger, his son Jarrod and a team of expert guides and friendly staff. Canadian born, Jon has spent his life in the outdoors and came to Aspen many years ago. He started various businesses, acquired a fishing business and remains after many years experience one of the top gun-fitters in North America after a long period with gunsmith E.J. Churchill. The process of gun-fitting at its simplest is about adjusting the stock of the shotgun or rifle to meet the physiology of the user. Obviously the reality is far more complex. Classic guns bought at auction for example can still potentially have a long life though

depending on the previous owner could be very difficult to use effectively. The process of gun-fitting today remains highly specialized and very much a word-of-mouth industry. Jon for example works with specialists who have developed the equipment and techniques to successfully get the job done.

An example of one element of the task is the bending of a wooden stock, which can be done through clamping the gun to a vice and pouring hot oil into the stock until it reaches near saturation point, when the shape can be adapted and then specially dried to ensure the stock retains its strength for the new owner. Surprisingly Clients are not just the very wealthy with fine guns to adapt for use. Jon cited examples of local clients who had a modestly priced rifle or shotgun and simply invested to enjoy their sport to the highest level they can - dispelling the notions of custom fitting that cling to menswear for example. Turning to the Clay target shooting experience, Aspen Outfitters has exclusive access to a well developed range about 15 minutes driving time from the St. Regis.

There, against the clear skies and Rocky Mountains expert instructors start with a patterning plate - a large steel plate with a clay target shaped hole at the center. There the shooter can work with the instructor to identify the dominant eye plus any habits around using the shotgun. Despite it seeming a beginners activity, many experienced shooter relish and value the time they get using the pattern plate to evaluate any changes in their approach to

shooting posture. The range itself has a proper skeet and clay target layout providing a range of challenges for the visitor. Fly-fishing on the other hand, uses a different range of skills.

As a newcomer to the sport, when standing thigh deep in a very cold river on a clear winters day really brings home the attractions of the sport. Understanding how the river water flows, how the fish interact with river and the types and patterns of potential food sources which the fly-fisher seeks to mimic using 'lures' at the end of his fishing rod imparts a real appreciation of nature and the ecosystem. Colorado maintains a 'catch and release' policy so when you have caught a fish and taken a celebratory moment or photograph the fish is returned to its home. These two activities are illustrative and merely scrape the surface of some of the adventures which you can undertake in Aspen without strapping on a pair of skis.

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