

SAMPLING STEAM BOAT SPRINGS

By Andrea Jehn Kennedy

LOADED WITH ACCESSIBLE ADVENTURES THIS HISTORIC COLORADO TOWN OFFERS PRISTINE MOUNTAIN VIEWS, FINE DINING, BUBBLING HOT SPRINGS, AND MEMORIES TO LAST A LIFETIME.



Fish Creek Falls



Photographs taken at the Access Anything Powder Ski Camp, where attendees use specially designed equipment to shoot down the snowy slopes. At center, the accessible Silver Bullet Gondolas at the Steamboat Ski Area.

TUCKED

away in the northwest corner of Colorado, Steamboat Springs is one of those tourist destinations you don't just stumble across. Six hours east of Salt Lake City, and three hours northwest of Denver, there aren't many other stops along the way—which makes this historic town a lost treasure just waiting to be found.

Steamboat Springs has welcomed its share of tourists over the years. It was a quarry and a hunting and healing stop for the Ute Indians for centuries before the "white man" arrived, and its hot springs were the focal point for settlers in the late 1800s. Olympian ski-jumper Carl Howelsen put it on the map for his sport in 1913, around the time of the first Winter Carnival west of the Mississippi, and today Howelsen Hill is still used for world-class ski jumping, cross country skiing, and downhill skiing late into the winter evenings. Cattle and sheep herders followed into the area over the next half-century. In fact, Routt County is now home

to tens of thousands head of cattle, proudly feeding beef to a large portion of our nation. Yet another era was born when the 1960s welcomed what's now called the Steamboat Ski Area, which would eventually be expanded to nearly 3,000 acres of some of the best skiing—and perhaps the driest “champagne powder”—in the world. Steamboat Springs might be known best for its skiing, since “Ski Town USA” has cranked out more Olympic skiers than any other town in the United States, although summers in the Yampa Valley are just as popular as the winters.

Active and Accessible

With this much history—and snow, for that matter—many visitors with disabilities are daunted by the idea that “old” means “inaccessible.” Steamboat boasts quite the contrary. The ski area’s adaptive sports program, Steamboat Adaptive, has been around since the early 1970s, and although it has remained a relatively small program for those 40 years, the recent growth in the adaptive travel industry has even spread to this small town of 10,000. Steamboat Adaptive saw a 25 percent increase in bookings from the 2006-07 season to the next.

Although the 350 average inches of snowfall are managed well both in town and at the ski base as far as accessibility and snow removal are concerned, the summer months are more inviting for wheelers and people with disabilities, and the town has made many advancements

in accessibility that are worthy of mention.

In 2004 the City of Steamboat Springs purchased a SoloRider golf cart for its beautiful municipal links course, the Haymaker, bringing adaptive golf to the long list of accessible adventure in the area. In 2005 the Steamboat Ski Area installed a wider accessible cabin with folding seats for its Silver Bullet Gondola, which moves tourists up the hill for hiking and biking in the summer months in addition to skiing in winter. There are two short accessible trails and accessible eating options along with magnificent views atop the 8,500-foot Thunderhead peak that the gondola climbs to.

In addition, local wheelchair users have taught many activity companies how to adapt their services for people with disabilities. Those activities include hot air ballooning, rafting, wagon rides, and fishing in the summer months, as well as dog sledding and snow-mobiling in the wintertime. Although Steamboat’s rustic Strawberry Park Hot Springs retreat on Buffalo Mountain has a dozen or more steps leading to its main soaking pools, a couple of its private pools and cabins are doable for manual wheelchairs. An alternative to Strawberry Park lies in the town’s recreation center, Old Town Hot Springs, which is open to the public and has two natural hot tubs, two larger pools, and two waterslides, all fed by the Heart Spring—the town’s original hot spring for tourism. Steamboat is also home to a NARHA (North American Riding for the Handicapped Association)

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Rolling around the town to see the local attractions is a breeze. The seven-mile accessible bike path will take you past the accessible Botanical Gardens, through downtown, and past the Hot Springs Walking Tour featuring half a dozen other hot springs—including the Heart Spring—that bubble, foam, and waft funny smells along the river's edge on the west end of downtown.

A must-see highlight of Steamboat is the Fish Creek Falls Recreation Area. This 290-foot waterfall has a half-mile accessible paved trail to the falls' observation area, as well as a steep but doable packed trail to the bridge at the base, where the raging falls will spray your face in the spring months. A Golden Access Parks pass will get you into this State Recreation Area for free, while all others pay \$5.

Accessible camping flanks the valley on both ends, with Stagecoach State Park to the south of town and Steamboat Lake State Park to the north. Both areas offer accessible trails, fishing, and camping options for visitors with disabilities.

Lodging for Wheelers

Steamboat more than doubles its population in the higher-capacity months for tourism, and with no shortage of options for travelers with disabilities. At the high end of lodging are the posh Steamboat Grand Resort Hotel and the Sheraton Steamboat Resort, both at the base of the ski area and with magnificent views of the mountain and valley. The Grand's accessible options offer five of their condo units (studio or two bedroom) with full kitchens, and 21 king or queen room options as well. As of 2008 the Sheraton will be undergoing a major remodeling, involving changing its current hotel room configuration to condo units, but until that is complete there are at least two hotel units with roll-in showers.

If you're primarily looking for roll-in showers, the Comfort Inn, Fairfield Inn, the Celebrity Resorts Hilltop, and the Sheraton are your best options for hotel rooms, and in addition there are two condo units in town with roll-in showers; one at the Sheraton Morningside Suites, and another at the Meadows, which is operated by Resort Quest Steamboat. Both have been designed for their private owners.

But if you can lodge without roll-in showers, your condo options are much wider, ranging from expensive ski-base lodging at the Dulany in a two-bed, two-bath condo, to the more-affordable Rockies Condos (managed by Mountain Resorts) with either one- or two-bed configurations and an accessible pool. Be in the heart of the fun in the summer months and stay downtown at the Residences of Old Town in an accessible one-bed condo off Yampa between 7th and 8th Street (operated by Pioneer Ridge Management). The "Bed and Breakfast" category is the only one where Steamboat lacks in accessibility, but within rolling distance of the Residences you'll find the famous Winona's Café on Lincoln Avenue, with award-winning hot cinnamon buns and a mouthwatering breakfast and lunch menu.

Fine Dining Abounds

One thing Steamboat doesn't lack is options for dining. Breakfast, lunch, dinner, happy hour, hiking snacks; you name it, Steamboat's got it. With over 90 dining venues—not including those inside the hotels—this town shares talented chefs, creative menus, and plenty



A golfer swings for the horizon in a SoloRider cart at the Haymaker Golf Course, opposite page, and a guest enjoys the cooling spray at the Access Anything Waterski Camp, above.

of outdoor eating at the ski-area base, by the river, and with views of the surrounding mountains. What's better is that nearly all of them are accessible. Here's a look at some favorites, but pick up a dining guide at the town's Chamber office if there isn't one already waiting in your hotel room.

Start with breakfast at Freshies, midway between the mountain and downtown, or at Creekside Café on 11th St. Both are fully accessible, including the restrooms. The best Bloody Marys and huevos rancheros are at Freshies, and the best eggs benedict are found at Creekside, but it's a tough call as to who offers the best breakfast burrito. For the old-standby go to The Egg and I, which is tucked behind Starbucks in the Sundance Plaza. It is also accessible,

and it's among the most spacious dining in town if you've got a power chair.

Have lunch outside on the patio of the Yacht Club, listening to the sounds of the river while cracking jet-fresh oysters from the East Coast or sampling their tasty clam chowder. Roll in through the front door and they'll lead you through the galley to get out onto the deck in order to avoid the steps. It's a town classic, for sure, but lacking in yachts.

Happy hour at the Mahogany Ridge Brewery can't be beat, with \$1 tapas and homemade beer. There aren't any lowered bar tables, but the food and brew is worth it, and the restroom is accessible. Eat here for dinner, too; their dinner menu is divine, and outdoor seating is available in the summer. You can also stick around for late-night live music.

For top-notch dining, it's your choice of three favorites: Café Diva, on the mountain with Chef Kate's hand-picked menu, a wine list to die for, and a staff that's the best in town; Three Peaks, in the middle between the mountain and downtown, with an oyster bar that's downright sinful, a menu that'll be hard to choose from, and the most spacious seating in town; or the Cottonwood Grill for fine Pacific Rim dining that's delectable and outside seating along the bustling Yampa River.

If you're looking for Mexican head for the hidden Fiesta Jalisco in the very back of Sundance Plaza for truly authentic cuisine in a fun atmosphere. But Steamboat's got

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Craig Kennedy and his canine—or should that be ursine?—companions on the trails.

no shortage of this cuisine for certain, so if you're making the rounds for Margaritas, bar-crawl (or roll) from the Cantina, to the Rio Grande, and finish up at Tequilas. But remember to take an accessible taxi home!

Worthwhile Wandering

Getting to Steamboat might be an adventure in itself, but it's well worth the trip. Some fly into Denver and take I-70 to Silverthorne, about 90 minutes from Denver and a nice stop for lunch and some outlet shopping among the staggering peaks of six surrounding ski areas. Then take Route 9 to Kremmling and pick up CO

Hwy 40 to Steamboat. The drive is gorgeous, through two mountain passes, and with rivers, wildlife, and snowcapped mountain views any time of year.

But the easiest trip by far is straight to the Yampa Valley Regional Airport (HDN), either by a jumbo jet on several different airlines in the winter months or by a connector flight from Denver on United or Salt Lake City on Delta in the summer. Yampa Valley Regional is only 25 miles west of Steamboat, and it is one unbeatable flight for views of the mountain and the valley if you don't mind the small planes or slightly higher prices. Last June Steamboat's marketing team announced that they plan to make flying into Steamboat as affordable as possible, despite the rise in gas prices, so look for competing flights into this area—even over Denver. If you're coming from the West Coast, Delta has been offering reasonable Steamboat prices as well.

Accessible shuttles from the airport on Storm Mt. Express or Alpine taxi make flying an affordable option if you're passing on the rental car and gas bill of driving six hours roundtrip to Denver. Steamboat also boasts a fully-accessible free bus system around town during all seasons, with lifts on all buses since 2003.

Whether you're choosing a late summer stop or a ski vacation for this winter, let me assure you that Steamboat Springs is a prime choice for travelers with disabilities. *✍*

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