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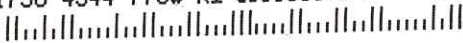
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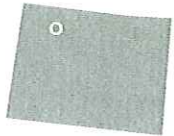
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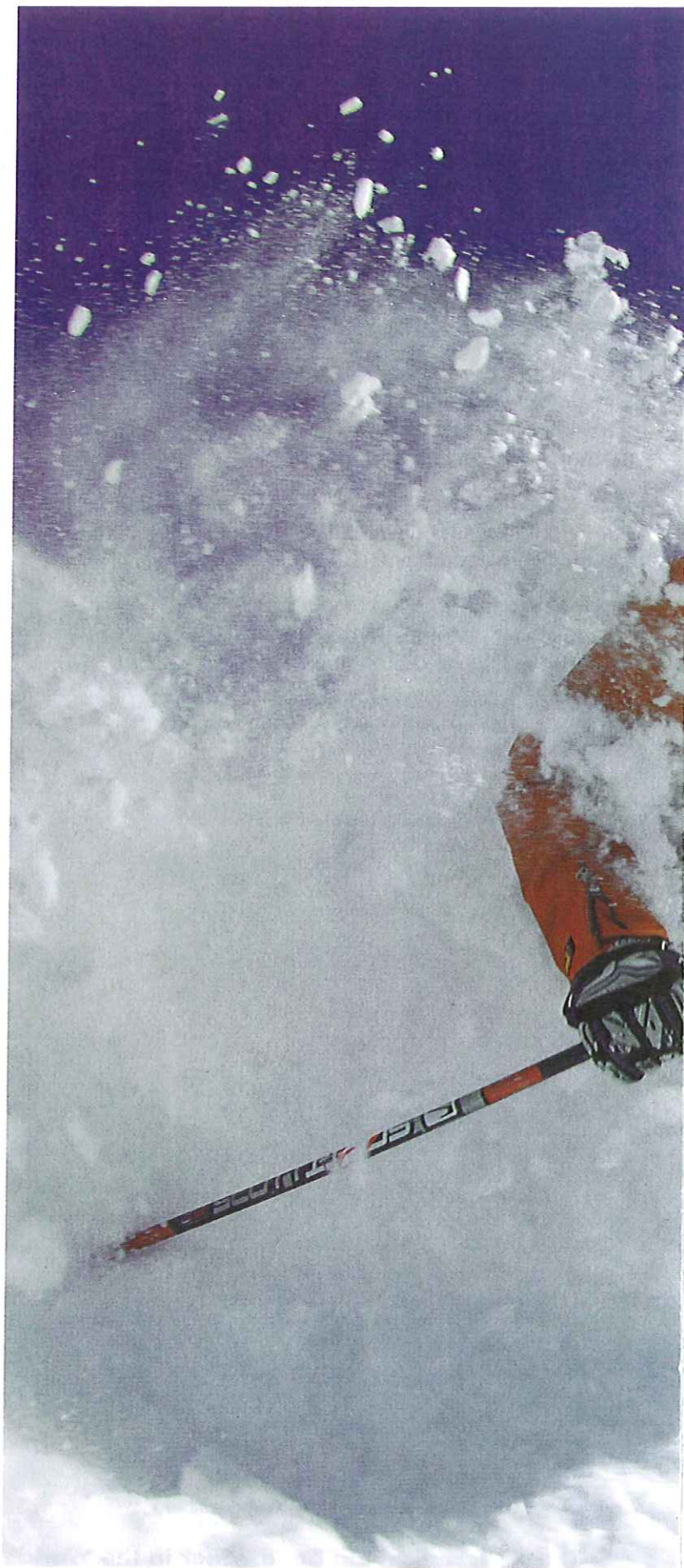
Steamboat, Colo.

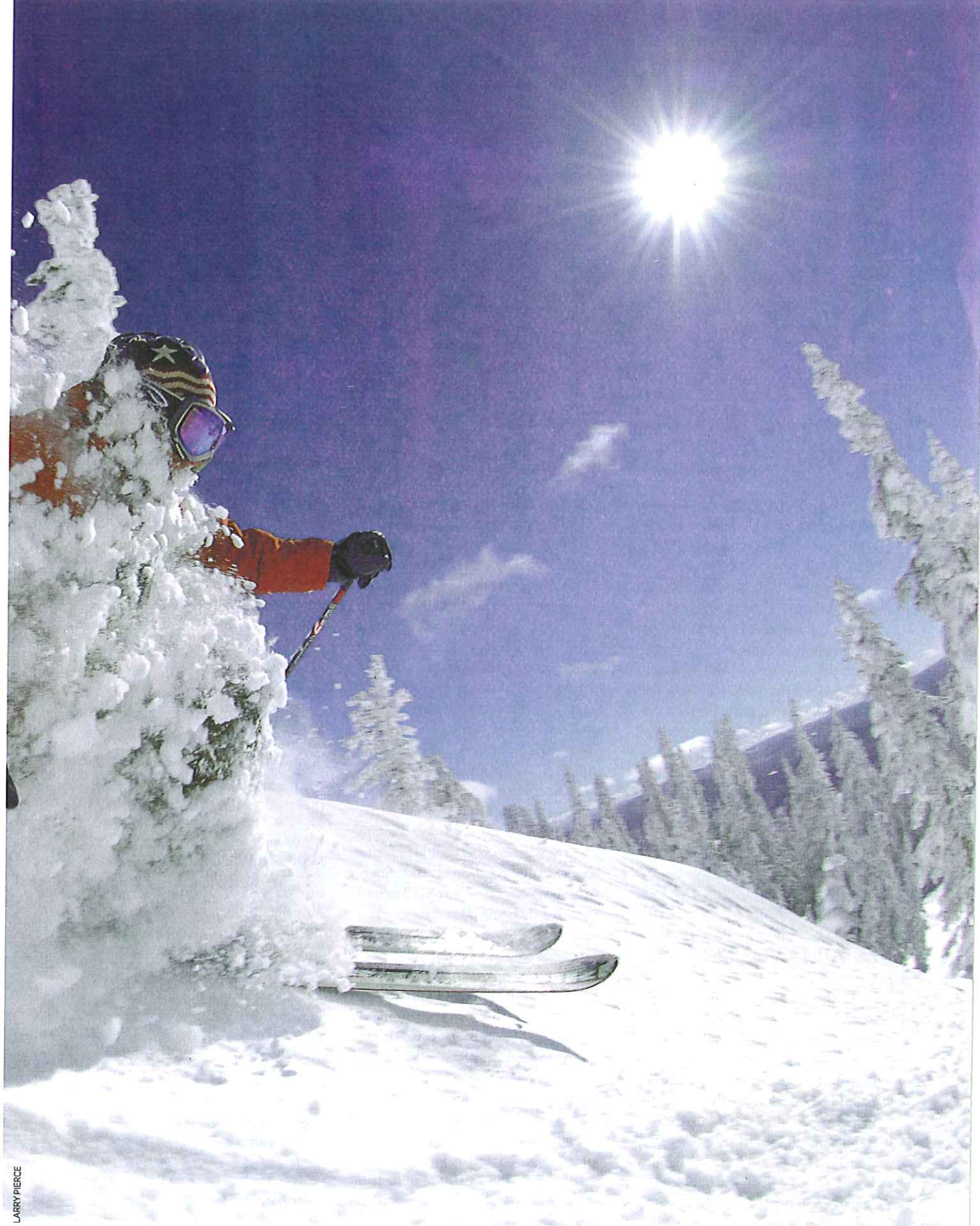
As a cow town primps for its tightest close-up in decades, resort loyalists hope its Old West character stays intact. By Paul Tolme

There's always been much to recommend Steamboat, Colo. as a ski destination: excellent gladed terrain, great snow, a stellar reputation for family programs and, notably, a classic Western town that's managed to maintain an appealing—and admirable—authenticity. Even so, the resort has long had one Achilles' heel: its dated, poorly designed base village, a baffling and charmless concrete labyrinth perhaps best improved by a fleet of bulldozers. And now, finally, they're coming—as part of a slate of planned enhancements that will amount to the biggest upgrades in Steamboat's history.

Indeed, Canadian resort conglomerate Intrawest, which bought the mountain from the flagging American Skiing Company for \$265 million last winter, has big plans. Coming improvements, in addition to the base village, include new lifts, upgrades to the regional airport and more than a dozen new real-estate developments. And while, as is the case throughout the West, locals remain wary

KEEP THE CHANGE On-mountain upgrades to look forward to at Steamboat this season include a new high-speed quad aimed at easing skier traffic on the gondola.





LARRY PIERCE



MAIN STREET APPEAL Home to one of ski country's best downtowns, Steamboat's Old West persona will be complemented by a dozen tony real-estate developments over the next few years.

of unchecked growth, "Most Steamboat residents are pleased with the changes coming to town," says *Steamboat Pilot* City Editor Brent Boyer. "There's a sense of relief now that we have a company with some capital to spend," says Boyer.

Intrawest has already put its stamp on the mountain for the upcoming season with the new Christie Peak Express, a high-speed six-pack that will whisk skiers out of the base area, providing a much-needed alternative to the occasionally overcrowded gondola.

IMPROVEMENTS, IN ADDITION TO A NEW BASE AREA, INCLUDE NEW LIFTS, UPGRADES TO THE AIRPORT AND MORE THAN A DOZEN HIGH-END REAL-ESTATE DEVELOPMENTS.

The lift is still in the planning stages when I visit, but I want to see how it will affect ski traffic out of Gondola Square. I ride up the Headwall lift, ski down to the Christie III triple and ride it to its terminus. Then I ski down to the Thunderhead Express quad and ride to the top of Thunderhead Peak. The journey takes a good 15 minutes. The new Christie Peak Express—which will be able to move 3,200 people per hour—will cut the trip to less than five minutes.

The new lift is among \$16 million in on-mountain projects. On the lower mountain, beginners will appreciate the regrading of the Headwall, designed to make the terrain easier. Three small lifts made superfluous by the Christie Peak Express will be removed and five magic carpets will be realigned to eliminate the cluttered feel of the lower mountain.

"Cluttered" is also an apt word to describe Steamboat's outdated base area, where, at long last, a new promenade and plaza will open in 2009. The most significant single development will be One Steamboat Place, a 450,000-square-foot building housing residences and retail shops. Adjacent to the gondola building, it will be home to what should be Steamboat's premier ski-in/ski-out digs. Similarly, the resort's signature Ski Time Square, a shopping plaza distinguished by its circa-1960s clock tower, will be razed and redeveloped with modern condos and shops.

With signature events such as the Cowboy Downhill race and summertime rodeos, Steamboat is prized for its Old West aesthetic. But along with this building boom comes a push to ramp up the cow town's cultural cachet. The town's first modern art museum opened in 2006, and the library and community center might be next up for an overhaul.

But it's the shiny new \$18-million terminal at Yampa Valley Airport that will first impress air travelers. "The old

airport was like flying into a third-world country," joked one official at a ribbon-cutting ceremony unveiling the new building. Thanks to a lengthened runway and other infrastructural improvements, Yampa Valley now has one of Colorado's nicest regional airports.

And now that it's easier to get skiers here, the resort is working hard to keep them busy. It's dusk in Gondola Square, and 2,000 spectators dance and hoist plastic beer cups as jam band Big Head Todd and the Monsters plays a two-hour set. A short walk away, après-skiers fill the Tugboat, where a self-professed "drinking band" belts out rock classics. The scene is decidedly more upscale across the way at the Steamboat Grand hotel, where women in little black dresses and men in ties sip designer cocktails outside the ballroom. The occasion is a \$100-per-ticket fundraiser to benefit orphans in Africa. It's a scene you might expect to encounter in, say, Aspen, but Steamboat is unlikely to lose its healthy sense of balance.

"There is a concern about too much growth too quickly," says the *Steamboat Pilot's* Boyer. "But if you polled people in town, most would say 'This has been a long time coming.'" •

• SIGNPOST STEAMBOAT

2,965 skiable acres; 3,668 vertical feet; summit, 10,568 feet; 165 trails; 18 lifts. Tickets: \$85 adults, \$65 teens 13-17, \$52 kids 6-12.

LODGING The Steamboat Grand is a short walk from the slopes and features balcony rooms and suites (\$165-\$2,703; steamboatgrand.com; 877-269-2628).

DINING Steamboat Smokehouse serves mouth-watering Southern barbecue complemented by a selection of draft microbrews (steamboatssmokehouse.com; 970-879-7427). For cheap eats, Sunpies Bistro offers New Orleans' fare such as catfish poboys (970-870-3360).

APRÈS-SKI The Tugboat Grill & Pub is a popular base-area bar with live music and a large beer selection. Downtown, Mahogany Ridge Brewery serves up pints of handcrafted beer, including local favorite Alpenglow (970-879-3773).

DON'T MISS The 2008 NASTAR National Championships (nastar.com; dates TBA).

INFORMATION steamboat.com; 970-879-6111