

WINTER WONDERLAND
This page and opposite:
views of Jackson Hole,
including the Amangani
hotel (bottom right),
the National Elk Refuge
(top left), an archway of
elk antlers in the town
square, and Teton Village
(bottom middle)



In the frozen landscape, you can hear coyotes calling to each other, the mournful sound mixing with the bugle of the male elk



Into the great wide open

America's Wild West is a luxe winter mecca for adrenalin junkies, with its pristine powder, epic views and ultra-hip hotels.

BY LYDIA BELL
PHOTOGRAPHS BY KEN KOCHÉY

Kevin and I are weaving through the snow-dusted trees together. It's my first time skiing proper powder, but it's as soft as fairy dust, and knee-high. His whoop echoes through the empty terrain. 'Go, Londonnnn! You're rippin' through that powder!' he yells. Kevin (who has taken to addressing me by my place of birth) is a classic Jackson skier: he flies off cliffs and down couloirs for fun, just like the bearded boarder bums do – the ones whose cheers and cries of 'great air, dude!' can be heard through the trees from the chair lift as they fly over the big jumps. From here, the view gives you goose bumps: it's a deathly drop to the vast, pancake-flat valley snaked with rivers below.

High in the Rockies, on the doorstep of Yellowstone National Park, the jagged peaks of Wyoming's Teton Range rise abruptly out of the snow-caked valley. This is the bucolic backdrop of Westerns. Here, there are moose among the willows, elk on the high mountain passes, bears in the forests. In winter, there are free-roaming bison, wolves and mountain lions. In the frozen landscape, you can hear coyotes calling to each other, the mournful sound mixing with the bugle of the male elk.

The people who live here are pathologically outdoorsy. Winter's deep

ESCAPE DESTINATION

snows mean that if they're not skiing or boarding, they're snowshoeing, mushing a dog sled or ice-skating. In summer, they join the hikers, bikers, kayakers and fishermen at nearby Yellowstone.

Jackson Hole Mountain Resort perches on the eastern face of one of the saw-toothed Teton peaks. It has gained a cult following thanks to its pristine snow (400 inches every season) and 1,200 hectares of back country that, in European-speak, is off-piste heaven – only about half of the runs are 'groomers'. This season, a 4,139-foot aerial tramway will give powder enthusiasts even more options.

Jackson Hole claims to cater for skiers of all abilities – but the harsh truth is that if you are even remotely lily-livered, these slopes may leave you breathless with anxiety. Their names alone are enough to make the pulse quicken: Break Neck, Meet Your Maker, Once is Enough, Paradise Lost. I persuade Kevin to stick to the more homely-sounding Elk Alley, Dick's Ditch, Beaver Tooth and Buffalo Bowl.

Adrenalin rules out here. The Steep and Deep camp, which offers instruction on how to master the back country (motto: 'To be the best, you have to ski the best'), is packed out. During après at the Mangy Moose Restaurant and Saloon – where said stuffed beast presides over copious mountain paraphernalia – gnarly ski types, some in cowboy hats, regale newcomers with tales of perilous patrolling missions and near-death experiences in hair-thin gullies. The most mythologised run is Corbet's Couloir, which can only be accessed by a 10- to 20-foot jump over a cornice. If you survive this, you are eligible for a free drink at the Moose.

It is not surprising, then, that in this environment, men outnumber women. Gondolas are packed full of powder boys from across the States, and guides have their hometown and state stitched on to their breast pocket. Many complain about the uneven gender ratio. 'I don't come here for the women,' Kevin tells me, 'but if I was a gay dude, I'd be freakin' happy. Down in the Million Dollar Cowboy Bar there are 50 men to four women, and two of them will have beards.' It's a little unfair of Kevin; there are cute powder girls here too, just not enough of them.

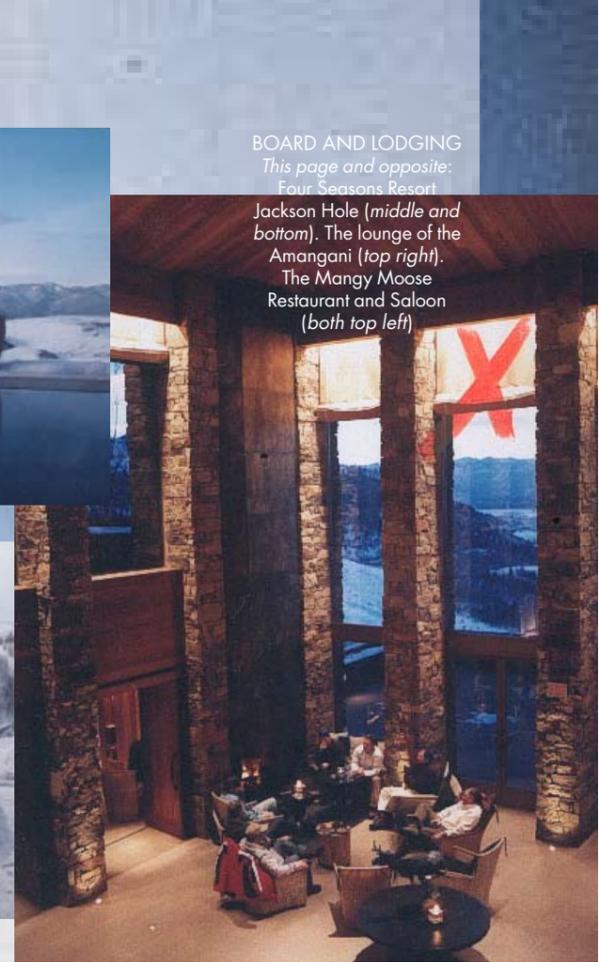
Most people here are solely obsessed with snow sports, so anyone expecting the social scene of the Colorado resorts will be disappointed. But old wealth runs deep in this valley. Despite the Wild West's

unpretentious, warm character, Jackson is monied and bourgeois, a Democrat haven surrounded by otherwise Republican Wyomingites, where the Clintons like to linger on Presidential campaigns. Local 'ranchers' include Dick Cheney and Harrison Ford, and the town and its resort are truffled with top-notch restaurants and sushi bars, luxe spas and cocooning hotels. A-listers such as Uma Thurman, Sandra Bullock and Russell Crowe are regulars, but are generally ignored; Jackson is all about giving people their freedoms – this is the West, after all.

About 7,000 years ago, Native Indians used this valley for hunting, gathering and fishing. Fur trappers, traders and mountain men joined them in the 1800s, followed by cattle ranchers attracted by the rich grazing. After the ranchers came the holidaying landed gentry, the Rockefellers among them, seduced by tales of Yellowstone's beauty. These days, second-homers are still attracted, not least by the lack of state income tax and the good-life mentality.

Off the road between Teton Village – where the ski slopes are – and Jackson, there are vast, log-built homes with interiors that would make Ralph Lauren blanch with envy. On the slopes, smart hotels, like the ski-in, ski-out alpine convenience palace that is the Four Seasons Resort Jackson Hole, the eco-chic new Hotel Terra, and the modern country-club-style Snake River Lodge & Spa, attest to the destination's move into the mainstream. On the plus side for the Jackson old school, the area's location in a national park means that its awesome natural beauty remains intact. Amangani, a supermodel among hotels, hidden away in its own secret valley en route to the slopes, offers spectacular views of this pristine landscape. In the early evening, the white world turns bluey-pink, and the stark mountain peaks pierce the sunset. The perfect vantage point is in the hotel's chic lounge, an almost melancholy exercise in alpine minimalist beauty, with vast sandstone columns and roaring fires; or beside the toasty outdoor pool, which billows steam into the freezing air.

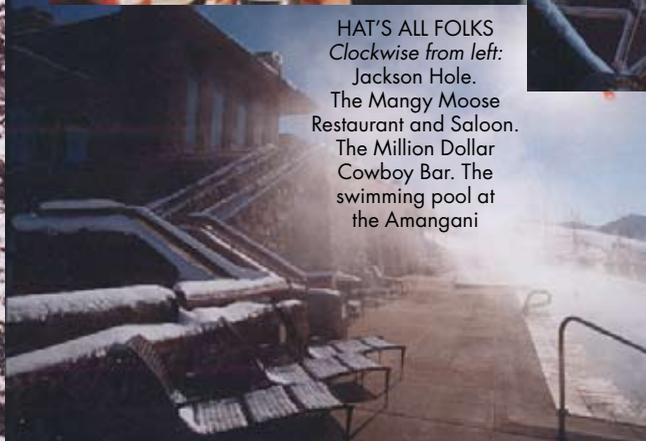
The homely-chic boutique hotels of Jackson, with its wooden boardwalks and saloon bars, offer a cosier Western ambience. At some of the good-ol'-boy haunts, like the Million Dollar Cowboy Bar, or the Stagecoach, you'll see people dancing the Texas two-step, and any female with a pulse will not leave un-chatted-up. The spit-and-sawdust feel



BOARD AND LODGING
This page and opposite:
Four Seasons Resort
Jackson Hole (middle and
bottom). The lounge of the
Amangani (top right).
The Mangy Moose
Restaurant and Saloon
(both top left)

*From here, the view down gives you goosebumps:
it's a deathly drop to the vast,
pancake-flat valley snaked with rivers below*





HAT'S ALL FOLKS
Clockwise from left:
Jackson Hole.
The Mangy Moose
Restaurant and Saloon.
The Million Dollar
Cowboy Bar. The
swimming pool at
the Amangani

of these places contrasts with the luxe quality of many of the town's restaurants, with their 'contemporary Western cuisine', and the stores, where the 'fashion' cowboys buy hats decorated with fossilised walrus teeth and rhinestones.

A framed quotation hangs in the downstairs bathroom at the Rusty Parrot Lodge & Spa in downtown Jackson: 'The freedom of the West and its wide-open spaces has become a symbol of our great country. As our lives become more regulated, and rules become more

numerous, we long for these places of freedom.' These are the romantic words of local artist Bob Coronato, whose paintings remember the ranch rodeos, log cabins and chuck wagons of the old frontier life. They seem at odds with the scene at the Rusty Parrot Lodge's restaurant, where you're more likely to meet a wealthy powder-lover ordering elk loin with a juniper and black pepper crust. But that's the pleasant paradox that is Jackson Hole. After the restaurant closes, we walk under the antler arches towards

the Million Dollar Cowboy Bar, with a late-night bourbon in mind. A cowboy steps out of the shadows. It takes me a minute to realise it's Kevin, bobble hat swapped for Stetson. 'Hey London,' he says. 'You comin' in?' I guess that's my two-step partner sorted. □

Seven nights at the Amangani in a suite, from £1,857 a person; and seven nights at the Four Seasons Resort Jackson Hole, from £1,296 a person, both including United Airlines flights and transfers; both with Ski Dream (0845 277 3333; www.skidream.com).

TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

STAY

Amangani (+1 307 734 7333; www.amanresorts.com). This cedar-and-sods suite-only hotel merges into its valley setting. Excellent restaurant and cosy spa.

Four Seasons Resort Jackson Hole (+1 307 732 5000; www.fourseasons.com/jacksonhole). Ski-in, ski-out, all-American luxe lodgings at the foot of the slopes.

SPA

The Solitude Spa at the Teton Mountain Lodge & Spa (+1 307 734 7111; www.tetonlodge.com). A slopeside spoiling den of post-skiing bathing rituals.

Spa at the Four Seasons Resort Jackson Hole (+1 307 732 5000; www.fourseasons.com).

[com/jacksonhole/spa](http://www.jacksonhole/spa)). This huge spa specialises in limb-melting treatments, such as a Native Stone Massage.

Chill Spa at the Hotel Terra (+1 307 739 4090; www.hotelterrajacksonhole.com). An eco-chic retreat, complete with rooftop hot-tub and massages with organic arnica.

Avanyu Spa at Snake River Lodge & Spa (+1 307 732 6000; www.snakeriverlodge.rockresorts.com). Luxurious treatments inspired by the Wild West.

EAT

Couloir (+1 307 739 2675; www.couloirrestaurant.com). At the top of the gondola, Couloir serves alpine comfort fare, from elk burgers to pheasant.

Wild Sage (+1 307 733 2000; www.rustyparrot.com). A Lapland-esque

boutique inn serving modern Western food at the Rusty Parrot Lodge & Spa in Jackson.

DRINK

Million Dollar Cowboy Bar (+1 307 733 2207; www.milliondollarcowboybar.com). Western memorabilia and cowboys aplenty.
Stagecoach Bar (+1 307 733 4407). Authentic Western ambience with live country music; popular with locals.

BE ACTIVE

Elk sledging (+1 307 733 9212; www.fws.gov/nationalelkrefuge). Sleighs leave regularly from the visitor centre in Jackson.
Steep and Deep Ski Camp (+1 307 739 2686; www.jacksonhole.com/info/ski.ac.steeptski.asp). Be prepared to leave your comfort zone; £550 including lift tickets.