

A double dose of exhilaration

Exploring Deep Temerity and Hanging Valley Wall in one day is oh, too thrilling

By David O. Williams, Special to the News
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ASPEN - If you were racing here during World Cup weekend Dec. 9-11, pulling a double meant skiing in both a speed event (super-giant slalom) and a tech event (slalom, giant slalom).

If you were part of the media horde covering the event in this hyped-up Olympic season, pulling a double meant après at Jimmy's followed by late night at the Red Onion.

For me, pulling a double was part of an exhaustive, and exhausting, research project designed to find out if *Aspen Extreme* is more than merely the title of a cheesy ski film.

My double took the form of a foray into the Hanging Valley Wall area of Snowmass, just opening for the season, and later that day an exploration of Aspen Highlands' new Deep Temerity expansion.

In between watching the fastest women on skis carve the ice of Ruthie's Run, I was on a quest to find the steeps that made one local scoff when I repeated the old axiom, "Aspen's got the town, but Vail's got the mountain."

I'm the first to admit my home hill of Vail, while epic in terms of size and diversity, sometimes lacks when it comes to steeps - like on a 2-foot powder day.

And while in the past I had sampled some of what two of Aspen's four mountains have to offer - charging hard at Highlands and on exploring Aspen's Bell Mountain on occasion - I had heard rumors of so much more.

My quest began shortly before 9 a.m. Dec. 10, at the Snowmass Village Mall, where I met Frank Shine, 31.

Shine is a self-professed ski bum, ski film producer, ski tuner and big-mountain skier (a term now part of the preferred nomenclature owing to the disfavor of anything "extreme," even though that label is permanently affixed to Aspen's signature event, the X Games).

On the chair ride up, I told Shine, who took second in the Snowmass Freeride Series last season, my impression of his home hill - it's a mountain I never had skied - as a wide-open, immaculately groomed playground for the rich and famous but not necessarily the most challenging of areas.

"That perception is out there, and it's correct because we have all those things, but it will be an interesting study today . . . after four or five hours, to see what your impression is," Shine said with a knowing smile.

"You're still going to have that impression but, hopefully, we can just add on top of that some icing for skiers who ski on skis over 100 millimeters under foot and like to jump off of rocks and make technical turns."

I glanced nervously at Shine's Volkl Sumos, the fattest of fats, and wondered what awaited in the Hanging Valley Wall area, which we had selected first instead of awaiting the rope drop at Highlands, where we anticipated a land rush for first turns in Temerity.

After a short, 10-minute hike from the top of the High Alpine lift, I found out what Shine was talking about. "The Wall," as the locals call it, is a steep, fluffy, natural terrain park loaded with rock bands, tree shots and plenty of places to become seriously airborne.

"Snowmass has the best terrain in the valley," said Pat Doyle, 38, who splits his ski days throughout the season a third each at Snowmass, Highlands and Aspen Mountain. "It's got more terrain features, more rocks, more undulations."

But Doyle also sings the praises of Highlands, particularly the Highland Bowl expansion that opened a few years back, which has been enhanced by the new Deep Temerity lift.

"Pretty much everything in the bowl is consistently over 40 degrees the entire way with rollovers I'm sure approaching 50 in spots, and that's legitimate, not like what they're claiming in the first top four feet at some of the places you ski," Doyle said.

"It's unique in that you can ski really fast, really big, almost Alaska-type turns in there if you choose to. You can't do that too many places in Colorado, at least when it's steep. You can do that (in the Back Bowls) at Vail, but it's pretty flat there."

Rather than take Doyle's word for it, my quest moved onto Highlands via Aspen's free shuttle service. There, I found most of the crowd had filled up on powder and moved to the deck at Iguana's to chase face shots with beers and tell tales of their exploits.

I dutifully headed up Exhibition to the Loge Peak lift and jumped into the super-steep Steeplechase area, which has doubled in length with the addition of the Deep Temerity lift, and while the freshies were long gone, the snow still was soft and the lines through the trees were long, steep and exhilarating.

I rejoined the crowd at Iguana's to tell my own tales and listen to theirs.

"It was like a whole new mountain," said Sheryl Barto, of nearby Basalt. "It feels totally different. To get to ski further down into the Steeplechase terrain and into Kessler's, Temerity, it was unbelievable."

Beth Mobilian, also of Basalt, echoed Barto's enthusiasm: "To be in your hometown and ski something brand new, it's exciting."

Rich Burkley, general manager of mountain operations for all four mountains, circulated among the crowd, assessing the overall opening-day mood: "The feeling here at the base was they're the junkies and we've got the fix."



An interesting allusion, given Aspen's recent round of drug busts, but unquestionably a healthier addiction.

To me, though, the beauty of Aspen manifested itself on my return to town, where some of the state's best restaurants and most luxurious hotels nestle up to the flanks of Aspen Mountain.

My research concluded that Aspen is, in places, just as steep as Silverton or even the heli-camps of Alaska but with accommodations that far outstrip the remodeled canneries or budget motels in those places.

The St. Regis Aspen, for instance, boasts some of the finest service in the Rockies but also serves as the press center for the World Cup races and is just steps from Silver Queen Gondola and the steep and deep of Aspen Mountain.

But pulling a triple wasn't in the cards. That's a research project for another day.

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Highland Bowl at Aspen Highlands has been enhanced by the new Deep Temerity lift. "Pretty much everything in the bowl is consistently over 40 degrees the entire way with rollovers I'm sure approaching 50 in spots," said Pat Doyle, who frequents the bowl.