TAOS
The Near-Mystical Appeal of an American Classic
by LESLIE WOIT
Surrounded by red cliffs and prickly cacti, my sore, happy corpus inches delicately into the same steamy waters that have healed, soothed and cleansed for millennia. Through the vapors of lithia-induced euphoria, I can just make out the figure of a woman weaving slowly past pools of varying temperatures and mineral contents. Backlit by a ray of sunshine, she wears a halo and carries a small oval sign; Please whisper. Thank you.

This angel of tranquility has light duties at the geothermic pools of Ojo Caliente. The voices of my fellow bathers never rise above reverential hushes, making it a perfect après-ski refuge less than an hour’s drive from Taos. Indeed, this soaker’s retreat yielded a telling remark, “Taos, the reason you move to Colorado.”

Cheeky, yes. Yet many things people are seeking – the empty pistes, the untracked powder and that elusive chestnut, quality of life – may be harder than ever to find. Enter, New Mexico.

Anyone falling for Taos today joins a long and distinguished list of discoverers. A high-desert home to Native Americans for more than 1000 years, Taos has since become a crucible of the artistic, the wealthy and the free-spirited, attracted by a dreamy quality of light and the arid beauty of rolling mesas and imposing peaks. From maverick socialites like Millicent Rogers, who fled a broken love affair with Clark Gable (she dispatched him and his new paramour with a bottle of champagne and a goodbye note via a Hedda Hopper column) to Mabel Dodge Luhan who decamped from New York and Florence to establish a glittering modernist literary salon in the desert, which included D.H. Lawrence, Martha Graham and Ansel Adams, Taos has won a reputation for drawing artists, writers and forward-thinkers into its luminous sphere.

The latest lodestone to roll into town? A New York billionaire with a conservationist bent. In 2013, hedge funder-philanthropist-skier Louis Bacon rescued Taos Ski Valley from troubled financial waters. No run-of-the-mill ruthless buyout, 63-year-old Bacon’s redevelopment plans are on track to take Taos softly, bravely and swiftly into skiing’s 21st century.

Stepping through the door of Taos’ new ski-in ski-out boutique hotel, The Blake, I am struck by the warm flutter of staff. From the young woman who takes the car keys - her brash accent and spontaneous warmth give her Brooklyn roots away – to the articulate young man from Nigeria who helps with my bag, to the welcoming employee at reception who produces my key, a sort of talisman hangs above us all - to the artful young man from Nigeria who helps with my bag, to the welcoming employee at reception who produces my key, a sort of talisman hangs above us all - a breathtaking mountain dreamscape of reds and ochres painted by that doyenne of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains herself, Georgia O’Keeffe.

Courtesy of Mr. Bacon’s private art collection, The Blake’s vibe is tempered by a patina of confident panache. Hotel Manager Eduardo Sampere guides me through the four floors that house 80 rooms and suites, which as of this winter will also include several posh, extremely roomy apartments. It’s nothing short of a walkabout study of the Taos Pueblo people --- one of the oldest cultures on the continent --- a major in Western American history, with a minor in mountain sports. Beginning in reception where O’Keeffe (whose drawings figure elsewhere) is flanked by Walter Ufer’s The Watcher, there’s an embarrassment of images from iconic Edward Curtis - renowned photographer of early 20th century Native American life - some of which were previously undeveloped and unseen. A Gustave Baumann woodblock print leads to the lobby loo, several pieces by Karsh line the walls of the spa, black and white life-size Dick Durrance ski photos command the landings, and 10th Mountain Division artifacts abound.

While Eduardo shines no light on the dollar value of the collection, he is quick to extol its cultural merits - “It’s a
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spectacular collection that sympathetically blends the essence of the century-old Taos Society of Artists movement, the beauty and lifestyle of the Taos Pueblo Native American community, and the roots of a European ski culture that found its way to this part of the Rockies in the 1950s.”

Dawn breaks with a salmon-hued blush over snow-laden mountains. Topping out at 12,481 feet, Kachina Peak proves a deep-powder siren following a big storm, patrol has put opening of the steep, black face on hold for avalanche control. The chairlift, new in 2015, will remain closed during my visit. A lift to the top of Kachina’s forty-five-degree slope was among the first of three hundred million dollars of capital improvements planned by the new owner, alongside three further lifts and a pedestrian gondola that accesses a revamped beginner zone, base area and spacious children’s center.

At its heart, Taos is a challenging mountain. Known since day one for steep north-facing pitches and demanding tree runs, it was the alpine manifestation of the man who built it. Ernie Blake, né Bloch, was a German-born, Swiss private school educated rebel whose Jewish family fled a privileged life in Europe in the 1930s. A highly intelligent individualist who grew up skiing in St Moritz, Blake volunteered to serve in the 10th Mountain Division, but was rejected as a possible spy. Eventually, he commended himself in service with the OSS, which included interrogating Himmler, Goering and Speer, as well as serving under General Patton. After that, he was known to joke, “fooling around in the ski industry was a piece of cake.”

From his New Mexican ground zero at the foot of mighty Mt Wheeler - terrain spotted from the air in his Cessna - Ernie set out in defiance of naysayers and logic-speakers to establish one of America’s classic ski mountains, initially living with his wife Rhoda and their three children in a second hand 16 foot trailer at the base. In its first year, the ski area grossed $1,600. “We had no tax problems,” Ernie observed. “Taos was considered too steep, too remote. And because it was so steep, people had to stay a week to get anything out of it and be in ski school,” admitted Ernie. His original philosophy still prevails. You don’t come to Taos to learn to ski, but to learn to ski better.

Fear not. Time and technology have softened the edges of the savage fall lines of the 60s and 70s, while
improvements in ski design and snow grooming mean trails and glades are more amenable to middle-of-the-road skiers on wider, shorter boards. Though state-of-the-art Pistenbullys have turned “death cookies” into pub trivia quiz material, the soul of Taos is, however, still about great powder descents down chutes off the West Basin and Highland ridges. Most of the best expert runs are still accessed only by hikes – from a few short steps to the huff-pant-pant kind favored by hardcore locals.

Despite 50 percent of terrain being classified as expert, with 15 lifts and 110 trails, there are plenty of long blue and green runs to go ‘round, including one long run with five miles of continuous cruising. The snow is dry and north-facing, so there’s no melt-freeze either. The bumps on Al’s Run will rattle your bones - no complaining allowed - it’s named for a local doctor who skied out his last runs wearing a portable oxygen tank. A glance at the trail map yields further clues about the world view of Ernie and his founding friends. Stauffenberg, Fabian and Oster - all responsible for assassination attempts on Hitler - rub elbows with heroes Winston (as in Churchill) and Patton, under whose service Ernie rather unwittingly uncovered valuable intelligence around the Atomic bomb, informing his “anything is possible in America” mantra.

For Taos, another bomb of sorts went off in 2017, one that resonated with an industry increasingly sensitive to environmental concerns and green values. The first ski resort in the world to become a Certified B Corporation® (B Corp™), Taos was judged to have demonstrated a commitment to positive social, economic and environmental actions. Joining the ranks of Patagonia and Ben Jerry’s, Certified B Corps are required to meet the highest standards of verified economic, social and environmental performance, as well as public transparency. Among the initiatives that contributed to its status, The Blake’s geothermal heating and cooling system and LEED Green Building Certification, which reduced energy consumption by almost eleven percent in two
years, restoration of the Arroyo Hondo River through the ski valley in cooperation with the US Forest Service and The Nature Conservancy, and employee benefits that include paid time in return for charitable work of their choosing.

Its spinoff benefits may surprise. “The B Corp certification has also really helped us in recruiting millennials,” explained Dave Norden, Taos CEO. “We found they were approaching us first because they truly want to work for a purpose-driven organization. Our commitment to sustainability is embedded into everything we do, and a direct reflection of the vision of our owner – lifelong conservation philanthropist Louis Bacon.”

Another of Taos Ski Valley’s commitments is honoring the land it inhabits. Recognized as the longest continually inhabited civilization in North America, the Taos Pueblo has been home to a non-nomadic people for over 1,000 years. Once a year, the ski folk meet with the War Chief to share plans and foster neighborly relations. Recently, the ski company was paid high tribute indeed - not only did the Pueblo request the tribal council be hosted at the resort, but they offered to pay by barter with a buffalo, no less. It was the first non-intertribal buffalo barter by a Native American tribe and resulted in bison burgers all year at the ski hill – a delicious manifestation of a unique and rare culture that’s been a part of these mountains longer than any of us.

One of Taos’ challenges getting there – was met with a similarly creative approach. Last season, the resort opened its own airline, Taos Air, operating from Dallas and Austin into Taos’ newly expanded airport. This year they will add flights from Los Angeles and San Diego. In keeping with the green philosophy, a carbon footprint offset was put in place. With no TSA to navigate, passengers arrive just thirty minutes before takeoff, like a private airport. A jammy deal with Rossignol offers complimentary rental skis with your boarding pass. “No car, no security, no skis,” says Dave Norden, “make it the easiest route to the Rockies.”

Before leaving Taos behind, a visit to at least one or two museums is a must. The Millicent Rogers Museum is a romp through 2,000 years of Southwestern history, including her jaw-dropping jewelry collection, and a beautiful shop with original artisan pieces for sale. At the Harwood Museum of Art, diverse collections include Native American, Hispanic and Moderns, as well as the famous Taos Society of Artists. “There’s a biological phenomenon called heterosis, or hybrid vigor,” explains docent Bob Fies on a fascinating hour-long tour. “When you bring various things together, they are improved by the experience. Taos is a cauldron of such creativity.”

B Corp status in tandem with a
better-not-bigger philosophy is indeed a 
creative way to work to Taos’ strengths.
Arts, culture and beauty surround these 
high-desert snow-blessed peaks, so 
maintaining scale and husbanding its 
environment are integral to its success.
From Native Indians to New Mexicans, 
it’s long been both a crossroads and a 
journey’s end. From the 1000-year-old 
pueblo to galleries a go-go housed in 
Spanish revival studios, to Doc Martin’s 
restaurant in the historic Taos Inn and 
the sophisticated show-stealing dining at 
Lambert’s off the piazza, the overall effect 
is a vibrant mountain town alive with 
authentic culture, exhilarating skiing, and 
the peace of a good night’s sleep.

On the way to a delicious shared-plate 
dinner of spring lamb, charred Brussels 
sprouts and the finest Chilean Malbec at 
The Blake Restaurant 192 - named for 
Ernie’s Cessna tail number - we pause to 
admire another artifact on display near 
the door. A hand-knitted pop-pom toque, 
circa the 1980s, with “JANITOR” spelled 
across its headband.

The juxtaposition of knitwear 
belonging to the first owner and the fine 
art of the new one begs the question, “How 
often does Mr. Bacon leave his New York 
City lair to come to rustic, rolling Taos?”

“As often as he can,” says Eduardo. 
“Given the legendary and unique terrain 
here at Taos, when the snow is good, it’s 
second to none.”

The latest enthusiastic custodian of a 
very special place. 