



# JACKSON SCALES NEW HEIGHTS

The launch of the longest continuous vertical cable car in North America is just one of a host of reasons to revisit revitalised Jackson Hole, says Suzanne Gannon.

**“Big Red is back,”** declared the cinema-sized screen at the base of Rendezvous Mountain, 12 miles north-west of Jackson Hole, Wyoming, where a crowd of 1,000 or more had braved darkness and freezing temperatures on a Friday evening late last December to witness the unveiling of a new \$31m tram. Moments later, a gleaming, cherry-red cable car, emblazoned with the resort’s iconic cowboy atop a bucking bronco, slid down the cable and was unwrapped from its billowing white sheath. From a trap door in the bottom of the box, a tram worker, known hereabouts as a “trammie,” rappelled down to the ground below. The crowd hurled snowballs, and the fireworks began.

But then this is no ordinary tram. Spanning 3,799m of cable and climbing a vertical distance of 1,262m, its two cars ascend to the summit of the 3,185m Rendezvous Mountain in a speedy nine minutes, covering the longest continuous vertical rise of any lift in North America.

“I’m not sure it was vision, it was just so obvious that this was the best skiing,” says Alex Morley, one of the team who built the original tram system 42 years ago. Back then he spent two winters toting his buddies up the mountain to scout runs before raising nearly \$1m to build the first tram.

Now 90 and still skiing, he’s lost none of his enthusiasm. “We lost money all the time,” he adds, “but had our own private ski area.” To appreciate the defiant brilliance of this man-against-nature achievement, one simply needs to absorb the statistics. Located in the backyard of Grand Teton National Park, in a base camp known as Teton Village, Jackson Hole Mountain Resort consists of two mountains: Rendezvous and the 2,585m *Après Vous*. Between them, at 2,772m, nestles the Gondola Summit. Together they account for 2,500 acres of in-bounds terrain and 116 named trails (not to mention 3,000 back-country acres) – half of them expert grade and 40 per cent intermediate. In the distance, due north, looms the asymmetrical knob of the Grand Teton, the range’s highest peak at 4,197m, its omnipresent granite face shrouded in white and striped with dark crags.

Descent after descent, you never know what lies beneath the next precipice. The

mountain falls endlessly in steep drops, broken by slopes that seem to level off in generous, reassuring swags. But underneath an annual 12m of powder lurks a tumbling rock pile and tree stumps like bamboo shoots. Cornices are prone to avalanches, temperatures are sub-zero, fall lines inconsistent and visibility compromised. In other words, this is one beast of a ski hill. And if you don’t watch out, this treacherous mountain, once known only to fur trappers, can become an obsession.

Although daredevils have been skiing its wild chutes and bowls since the 1920s and 1930s, it was only when the Kemmerer family bought the ski area in 1992 that Jackson’s potential as an international ski destination began to be realised. But the reinvention of Big Red has raised its game as a winter sports resort once again, which, in conjunction with its revitalised après-ski scene, makes it an alluring place for a holiday.

Chief among those who have pioneered the renaissance of its restaurant scene is Jeff Drew, the accomplished chef at the Snake River Grill, just steps from the antler arches of Jackson Square, whose menu runs to chorizo-stuffed medjool dates wrapped in applewood-smoked bacon and goose-leg confit with pickled cranberries – just the kind of dishes to warm up with after a day on the slopes. A few blocks away is the recently renovated Snake River Brewing Company, noted for its organic OB-1, an English styled brown ale that it brews on site.

Another restaurateur worth knowing about is Gavin Fine. Of his three establishments, the lively Rendezvous Bistro is a great place for classic meat dishes with a twist (cider-glazed pork belly with fennel and apple coleslaw; Marchos Farm lamb chops on a lemon-garlic chickpea purée), and draws locals and visitors alike. His peanut-shucking barbecue joint Q Roadhouse, on the road out of the village, is another fun joint, and Osteria, at the eco-chic Hotel Terra (all organic cotton sheets, Fairtrade coffee, natural bath amenities and chemical-free cleaning products) is a good bet for a slap-up Italian mountain supper of mozzarella wrapped in speck; prosciutto and fontina cheese fritters; and piles of thinly



Main picture: a skier enjoys Jackson Hole’s famous knee-deep powder snow. Inset: the new \$31m aerial tram, Big Red.