

The Traveller's Guide to the **Seven Deadly Sins:** Slothing it in Aspen



MENNA VAN PRAAG tries to laze about in Aspen, but the lure of the snow is powerful

I hadn't planned to stop in Aspen on my tour of America. For one thing, I'd never heard of it. Not being of a particularly activity-driven inclination I'd seen no need to make myself aware of a place that existed only to service the enthusiastically fit.

Aspen isn't really a proper town. Established and populated by ski aficionados, it lacks all the staples of city life so gloriously present all over America: 24-hour supermarkets, multi-screen cinemas, Dunkin' Donuts.

As is the case with so many spontaneous travel adventures, I found myself, to my despair, arriving in Aspen in the middle of winter. If there is anything I'm less partial to than skiing, it's cold weather. Holiday happiness necessitates a beach and a bikini, not a mountain and a snow suit.

Financial crises had driven me to Aspen. Travelling up the West Coast had depleted my funds dramatically and I'd heard (as one is wont to do while on the road) that Aspen was a particularly good place to stock up on much needed cash. Apparently, obscenely rich people flooded Aspen every winter, just desperate to be relieved on their millions in various ways, most of which didn't require a work visa. Which was perfect, since I didn't have one.

So I found myself, broke and desperate, in a ski resort. I watched the skiers going to and from the slopes. And I had absolutely no urge to join them. Unfortunately this was not to last. The Aspenites refused to leave me in peace to slouch home after work

and curl up in front of the fire with a hot chocolate and a bag of doughnuts. No, the ski nuts started to get to me, slowly undermining my resolve to be the only person ever to pass a season in Aspen without once setting foot on the slopes.

Whenever it snowed, which was every day, I was bombarded with eager ski-bums asking if I'd 'checked out the fresh powder?' Quickly realising they weren't referring to illegal substances I responded in the negative. If they inquired further and discovered I hadn't set foot on any powder, fresh or otherwise, they tended to respond with a degree of shock and horror as though I'd just confessed a penchant for drowning kittens.

Eventually, fed up of the censure, I decided I'd better get off my lazy arse and try it out. My friends suggested I start off with snowboarding. Admitting it was a tad harder than skiing to begin with (though they significantly underplayed just how much more painful) they persuaded me on the grounds that snowboarding was hip and skiing was for oldies. Not wanting to be the geek of the group I donned my board.

'Donned' suggests an ease, a confidence, a skill with which I applied said snowboard. To put it like that is a serious misrepresentation of events. Unable to stand straight and click my feet into the fittings, I was forced to fall over and do it from the seating position. Two employees of the Aspen Lodge Ski Company then had to hoist me vertical again. I stepped



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onto the snow and that was the last time I stood straight that day.

My 'friends' assured me that the best way to learn was to begin at the top of the mountain. Being of a naive bent, and totally ignorant of the new sport I was attempting, I innocently followed them up the mountain to experience the cursed thing for the first (and last) time in my life.

Prior to the excruciating amount of pain I was about to be subjected to, I did enjoy a fantastic invention: the ski lift. Ever one to avoid the stairs if I can take the lift I found this calorie-saving excursion immensely pleasurable. For an all too brief few minutes I delighted in the spectacular scenery from a sensible distance.

Then, horrors of horrors, the ski lift came in to land. Just as I had settled into the ride, and was forgetting I ever had to disembark, it was time for me to manoeuvre myself off the infernal thing. I managed this with the grace and elegance of Bridget Jones coming down a fireman's pole.

Then followed the effort to stand up. After falling over and repeating the exercise nearly a dozen times I

eventually accomplished the task and stood erect, queen of all I surveyed. Then I tried to move. Unfortunately this was a fairly easy enterprise. And with ease came danger and incredible amounts of pain.

I careened down the mountain at warp speed, heading straight for a cluster of trees and without the slightest idea of how to counteract the force of gravity. My choice was colliding with a couple of tons of wood or bringing myself to a halt by means of a self-induced accident. I chose the latter. My howl of pain was heard by perplexed citizens in several adjoining states. Five months later it still causes considerable muscular twinges to bend over.

Needless to say that was the last time I ever went near a snow-covered mountain again. The only good thing that came from the whole experience was that, in my disabled state, I had the perfect excuse to spend the rest of the winter curled up in front of the fire with a hot chocolate and a bag of doughnuts. A month later I left Aspen, a lot wiser and a couple of stone heavier.

