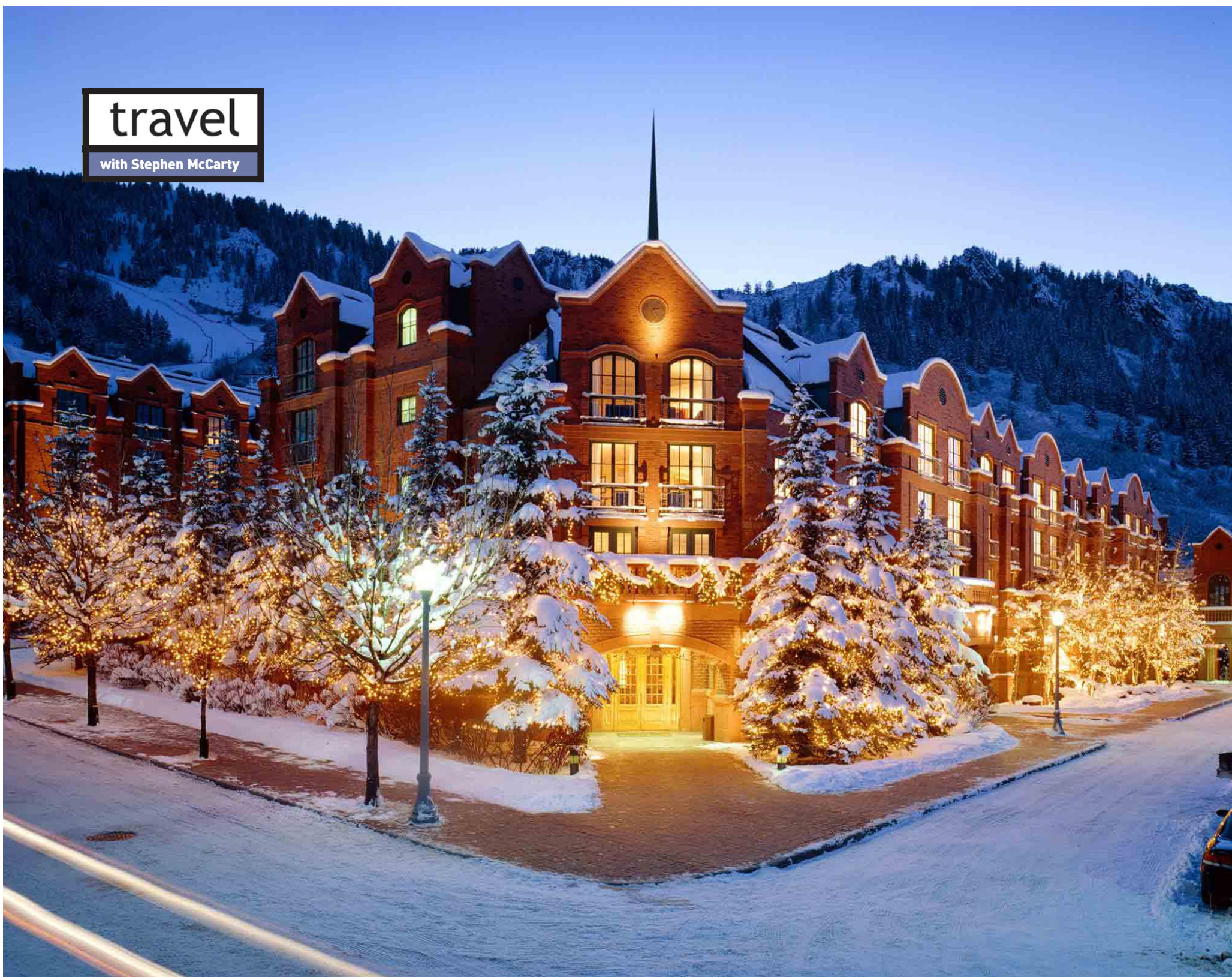


travel

with Stephen McCarty



Parallel universe

Rachael Oakes-Ash takes to the slopes in Aspen, Colorado, where tussling over a ski instructor with supermodel Elle Macpherson is all part of a day on the piste.

I am in a love triangle with Elle Macpherson, even though she doesn't know I exist. My ski instructor, Guernsey, has double booked and my fourth consecutive day of skiing with him is the supermodel's first day of instruction. It's not hard to figure out who will get the flick.

We're in Aspen, Colorado, Elle and I. Long considered the St Moritz of North America, Aspen has made it's name from the rich and famous. Not that Aspen needs to rely on its high-profile visitors: the ski terrain alone is enough to attract flocks of snow lovers. That, and an average seasonal snowfall of 7.5 metres of dry Colorado powder combined with its trademark blue-sky days.

Four mountains in the Elk Range of the American Rockies make up the ski resort of Aspen Snowmass. Combined, they offer more than 2,000 hectares of "skiable" terrain, and that's not counting the back country. Aspen village, a former silver-ore mining town that became a ski resort in 1947, sits in the Roaring Fork Valley at the base of Aspen Mountain – with its mogul runs, steeps, deeps and glade runs for those

who know what they're doing. Explore the glades and find the wooded shrine to folk singer John Denver, who called Aspen home.

The nearby Buttermilk ski area is home to the ESPN Winter X Games and is a snowboarder's and free-skier's dream, with two enormous terrain parks and one "superpipe". The third zone, Snowmass, lives up to its name with, yes, masses of snow. The longest of the 90 trails is 8.5km and is a good 20 minutes from town, so you need to take a car, hitch a ride or catch a shuttle bus.

Then there is the Aspen Highlands, which have an impressive array of beginner, intermediate, advanced and expert terrain. Take the lung-burning 45-minute hike with skis strapped to your back to drop into the Highlands Bowl, with its 48-degree slope of ungroomed powder and major boasting rights.

I am staying in Aspen village, with a permanent population of 5,900; daily population 20,000-plus. My digs are on the Alpine floor of the swanky St Regis Resort, with butler service, personal concierge and valets who warm

one's boots overnight. I'm tempted to flash my room key in Elle's face should I see her on the street. It would be pointless, however, because la Macpherson is staying at the town's only true "ski-in, ski-out" hotel, the Relais & Chateaux Little Nell, where Tiger Woods has been known to dine. She wins again.

It's worth fighting Macpherson for Guernsey, and not just for his eye-candy looks. Spend a day with a good instructor – one who observes your technique and makes minor adjustments for major advancement – and you won't want to let him go. Spend three days in his care, add a couple of nights out and you won't want to lend him to anyone, especially to a supermodel who could have any of the town's top instructors. She's had Guernsey before and, like me, wants him again.

Strictly speaking, you don't need a Guernsey to ski five star in Aspen, just a lift pass to experience complimentary baked cookies and fresh cider at the top of the hill. What also helps is the free video analysis on Aspen Mountain; tackle a few runs and watch the playback with advice on how to improve your style.



Clockwise from far left: the St Regis Resort, at the base of Aspen Mountain; ski lifts on Powder Mountain; hitting the powder on Aspen Mountain; skis in waiting; the Remede Spa, at the St Regis Resort; the Aspen Snowmass in all its glory.



At the end of the day, ski down to the mountain valley, hand over your skis, nominate your mountain of choice for the next day and they'll be waxed, tuned and transported for you – ready to be picked up before the first run. You should tip for such service, but you would expect nothing less from a resort town where the lift attendants and crew wear uniforms designed by Ralph Lauren.

You do, however, have to pay for après-ski time in Aspen. When the last lift stops running it's time to stretch your hamstrings in the bar. The truly pampered ski right into the bar at The Little Nell for a celebrity ale; the ski fraternity head for the 39 Degrees Lounge at the Sky Hotel, where the locals drink big. Rich folks with an art-house bent choose the J-Bar at the Hotel Jerome, once a haunt of author Hunter S. Thompson.

On my last night in town I take Guernsey to the local "cougar den", the Caribou Club, a seriously ritzy private club in a basement filled with alcoves and eclectic furnishings that would make Donald Trump proud. Cougars in this part of the world walk on hind legs in stilettos, wear baubles worth millions of dollars, stretch

their faces with surgery and have a string of ex-husbands who fund their exorbitant 50-plus lifestyles. Men younger than 30 are their prey and I use Guernsey as bait to lure them out, hoping he'll bag us free drinks if he tells me I'm his sister.

I wake on my fourth day, sans Guernsey, whom I imagine is already tightening the ski boots around Macpherson's pretty ankles. I'm ready to tackle the mountains with my substitute instructor, Mark Smith. Guernsey assures me he has found only the best to take his place but his name does little to inspire my

enthusiasm. There's only one Guernsey but there must be a million Mark Smiths.

The phone rings as I am walking out of the door, ski mitts in hand. It's Guernsey; it seems he's been ditched. Macpherson can't make her first date and has rescheduled for tomorrow. Surprise, surprise; he wants me back. It was only a matter of time.

I tell him and Smith to sort it out, pleased to have entered a love triangle involving two men instead of a man and another woman. Elle may have "the body" but my ski legs have Guernsey, at least for one more day.

Getting there: Cathay Pacific (www.cathaypacific.com.hk) flies from Hong Kong to Los Angeles, from where United Airlines (www.unitedairlines.com.hk) flies to Aspen. The Aspen Powder Package at the St Regis Resort (www.stregisaspen.com) costs from US\$385 a night, including ski-lift tickets and breakfast. Rooms at The Little Nell (www.thelittlenell.com) start at US\$660 a night for two. The Hotel Jerome (www.hoteljerome.com) Ski Deal package starts at US\$250 a night, including daily lift passes on a three-night booking.