

Park City, Utah
By Suzanne Wright

“We’re a blue dot in the reddest of states,” says a longtime resident when I ask him to explain the city’s politics. “We’re known as ‘sin city.’”

Established in the 1860s by prospectors, Park City was a silver mining town founded to stop the spread of the Mormon Church. As such, it attracted brothels and bars; later, it drew hippies, ski bums and the 2002 Winter Olympics. The year-round population is 8,500.

It’s a picture perfect summer day when I land in Salt Lake City: deep blue skies punctuated by fluffy clouds. The shuttle bus heaves as we climb 2,700 feet in elevation on our way to Park City; it takes about 35 minutes. Here in the Wasatch Range, the western edge of the Rocky Mountains, the drop in temperature is equally precipitous: it’s about 20 degrees cooler. I’ve come for the Park City Food & Wine Classic, held every July. As a gastronomic event, I’ve been to better, but I’m really here to explore summer in one of America’s favorite ski towns.

I’ve checked into Sky Lodge, a 33-suite boutique hotel that opened in December 2007. My one-bedroom suite is spacious and contemporary; it almost has a Zen feeling. There are hardwood floors, dark woods, a kitchenette with smart stainless steel appliances and granite countertops, three flat screen TVs, two sitting areas and a separate marble bathroom with Molton Brown toiletries. Water feeds the freestanding tub from a single stream in the ceiling and there’s a hot tub on the balcony. It’s a sexy setting for couples. There’s loads of daylight left, so I head to the chic Sky Bar, “Soho meets the mountains.” I tell the pretty chestnut-haired bartender I want something sour and she smiles, rising to the challenge. Her take on a Tom Collins is perfect.

Wahso, located on historic Main Street, is just steps from the hotel, but its sumptuous interiors—jade table settings, curtained booths, antiques—conjure the Far East. Tyler, the attentive server, brings warm finger towels and a cucumber martini. On Main Street Wahso: warm finger towels, jade table settings, curtained booths attentive service. The refreshing libation is followed by gazpacho, Malaysian pot stickers with sambal sauce, ahi tuna and mango tartare, meltingly tender cedar grilled filet mignon with asparagus lo mein and guava sorbet. The meal stretches languidly to three hours, interrupted only by a sharp whistle (think Fred Flintstone). My dining companion explains it used to signify curfew for the town’s teens. It was silenced for a time, but residents missed it, so it was reinstated. Though you can’t quite set your watch to it. Sometimes it goes off at 10 p.m., sometimes at 10:10.

The next morning I arrive early for my treatment at Sky Lodge’s Amatsu Spa. I start with a soak in the wooden ofuro tub (said to purify), before Jessica begins my 90-minute bamboo treatment. She uses warmed lengths of bamboo to apply deep pressure to my neck and back, loosening the knots that have permanently lodged there thanks to frequent economy class travel.

The day-use resorts in Park City are trying to build a summer season to rival the winter one. Though mountain biking reigns supreme, I opt to hike the Silver Lake Trail with the amiable Chris at Deer Valley Resort ranked as Number #1 ski area in the U.S. for several years. We ride a scenic chair lift to Bald Mountain past multi-million dollar homes; newscaster Charlie Gibson's is the most prominent. The 2.5-mile hike is mostly uphill and I am grateful for the walking stick. We're at nearly 10,000 feet and the views are predictably spectacular: wildflowers in bloom, a reservoir and snow-peaked mountain tops, marred only by the haze from the California wildfires that rage some 800 miles west and a last-minute, cartoon-like dust storm that temporarily threatens to steal my ball cap. Reward for the exertion is lunch at the Royal Street Café: shrimp and lobster margarita with papaya salsa, guacamole, grilled tuna tacos and lemon icebox cake. The portions are enormous—enough to fuel any mountainside activity.

It's a short, though oddly odoriferous ride (the smell of skunk clings to the road in and out of town) from Park City Mountain Resort. Here, I board my first-ever roller coaster called the alpine coaster low-slung, wooden contraption that hugs the mountain curves. There's also an alpine slide (wheeled plastic boards) and the zip rider, that zings by at a too-fast 40-second clip. I make repeated rides on it—enjoying the aerial whoosh through the treetops.

But the real show is the Flying Ace All Stars at Utah Olympic Park. A crowd has assembled under a hot midday sun to watch these aerial ski jumpers and trampolinists. Elite athletes—many current or past Olympic hopefuls and world champions—provide high octane action. Performers, including an 11-year old who wowed the crowd, in wetsuits and helmets, wearing skis or snowboards slide down a steep, mountain-like incline at up to 35 miles an hour, then launch into the air in twists, flips and somersaults before landing in the pool below. Observers can have their picture taken with the athletes or even attend a day school to learn their own acrobatics.

The opening night reception for the festival is at the AAA five diamond Stein Ericksen Lodge. There are domestic and international wines and spirits (including my favorite gin, Hendricks's), but I make a beeline for the local hooch. Castle Creek Winery out of Moab, has a respectable white, but it's High West Distillery that really scores. David Perkins has crafted a rich, resonant rye whiskey, blended from 6 and 16-year batches. By the time you read this, he will have restored a 1907 building that was once a livery in Old Town Park City—the country's only ski-in distillery. I temper my drinking by nibbling on appetizers such as mushroom tarts and boar sausage.

Dinner at Sky Lodge's Fin is a grand culinary affair without the pomp: tenderloin of buffalo and tomato carpaccio, ugly tomato salad with local goat cheese and black olive and basil vinaigrette, an outstandingly flavorful duo of rabbit with five bean salad and feta and for desert, pavolva with pomegranate chiffon mouse and Utah raspberries. The more I eat, the more I realize Park City's dining scene is big city sophisticated.

I've moved to the family-friendly Grand Summit at The Canyons, a sprawling, self-contained resort village about a 10-minute drive from downtown. My one-bedroom suite is done up in earth tones and features a fireplace, dining room, kitchen, two TVs and a separate bedroom. It hosts this afternoon's grand tasting under white tents to shade us from the heat, so the 5e's a bubble of activity.

Tonight, I attend the quintessential mountain entertainment event at Deer Valley Resort, an outdoor concert. Aimee Mann and Marc Cohn may not be headliners to twentysomething hip-hop fans, but the baby boomers assembled here are ardent supporters, pumping fists in the air and whooping at hits they recognize. We've got a gourmet picnic basket provided by the resort: brie and baguette, grapes, truffled salami and olives, and steamed artichokes with homemade aioli, chilled filet of beef with horseradish cream, lemon pound cake, chocolate raspberry tartlet and a bottle each of red and white wine. As the sun sinks behind the mountains and the air cools, bare arms disappear under fleece.

It's a perfect summer night in Park City.