

Dinner and a Snowshoe: An Evening at Devil's Thumb Ranch

By Ryan Alford

“The one thing I enjoy the most at Devil’s Thumb Ranch is the moment right after a good snowshoe trek and I’m sitting either in The Lodge or outside watching life slow down enough to witness the beauty of Colorado.”



A suite at the Devil's Thumb Ranch Lodge: *Check.*

Two tickets to the Grand Huts Association Progressive Dinner: *Check.*

Two pairs of snowshoes: *Check.*

My wife: *Check.*

A sense of adventure: *Check.*

A full moon, deep snow, no wind, good conversation with fellow attendees.... I won't follow that statement with the word "priceless," but the whole experience was pretty darn cool.

“Priceless” doesn't quite capture the thrill and adrenaline-infused dining experience of a Grand Huts Association Progressive Dinner at Devil’s Thumb Ranch. On Feb. 18, 2011, the moon was exceptionally full and bathed the Ranch’s more than 5,000 acres of “snowshoeable” backcountry in a brilliant glow. This wintry night was one to be remembered – and one of my favorite Colorado year-round destinations was the evening’s playground.



Devil's Thumb Ranch isn't ordinary. It's beyond the usual. It has personality and character that far exceeds expectations. In fact, before visiting, don't expect anything other than a tasty gulp of Rocky Mountain excellence.

The Ranch sits at the foot of Colorado's majestic Ranch Creek Valley, near the Continental Divide, in Grand County. Panoramic views and awe-inspiring scenery calms the blood pressure and hushes the hum of everyday life.

Nothing can match how all the right elements fell into place that evening. More than 200 people on snowshoes and cross-country skis followed a 5K trail to full bellies. Distinctive. Extraordinary. Strangely elegant.

Grand Huts Association's Dave Maddox and Andy Miller spearheaded the planning of the progressive dinner – using Devil's Thumb Ranch to host the gala. Organizing these events provides an opportunity for GHA to raise money through ticket purchases and a silent auction. Proceeds go to fund the GHA's construction of a sustainable hut system within Grand County.

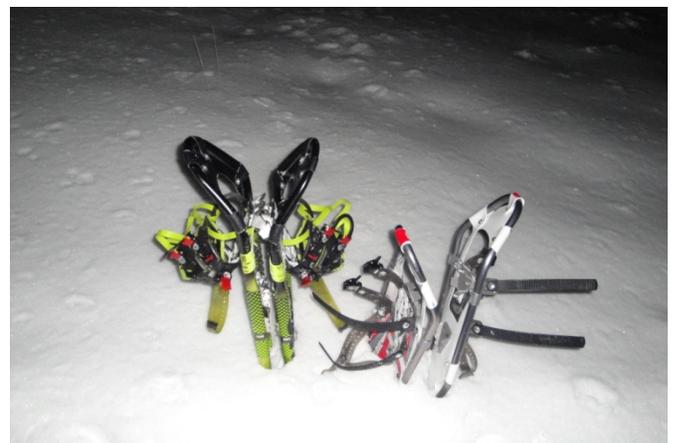
So far, the GHA has built four huts – spread out from Winter Park Resort to Grand Lake. More huts – approximately five – are needed to bridge the large gaps between the existing huts. Snowshoers, cross-country skiers, and other backcountry enthusiasts can then schedule reservations at the huts – depending on where their excursion takes them.

Could a full moon progressive dinner be on your bucket list? Chances are this would be your first time to hear of such an event. Plan on it for the 2011/2012 snowshoeing season. Of course, the Ranch is always open for all-season activities.

A Recipe for Romance

Each year, the Devil's Thumb Ranch calendar features a lineup of winter weekend events that aim to inspire. In addition to full moon get-togethers, the Ranch offers skijoring clinics, festivals and cross-country ski races. No matter the preferred flavor, each weekend has something for everyone. And the full moon events – on snowshoes or skis – are ideal for families, groups and couples.

The evening's progressive dinner itinerary couldn't be more appealing. The course starts and ends at



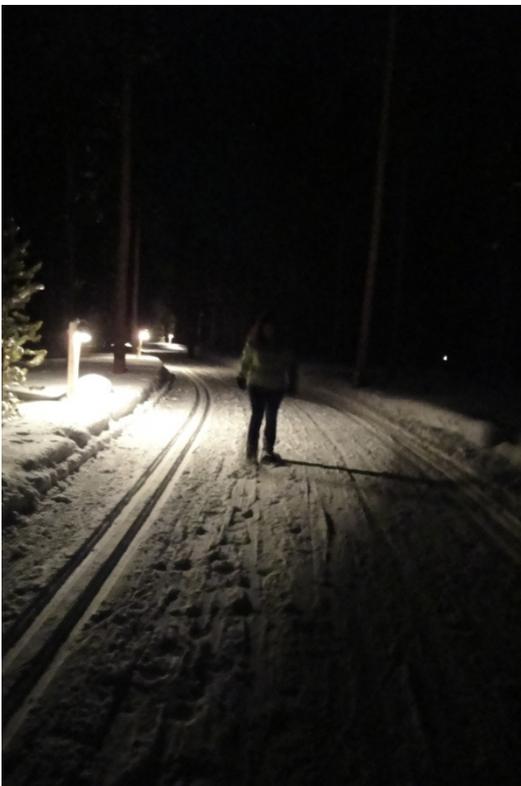
Zach's Mercantile & Nordic Center; it's here where you can rent snowshoes or skis, and purchase other necessities. If you have your own equipment, bring it. We brought a pair of Atlas 1230 snowshoes and a pair of GV Cat Trail snowshoes – no poles – and wore Icebreaker base layers to tame the evening's frosty sting.

That evening, the Mercantile was bustling with energy and pre-event excitement. Participants were hurriedly renting equipment and confirming their spots at the dinner. My wife, Emily, and I were met with smiles and appreciation as we searched for our spot among the trail and segmented feast. Although a tad late for our scheduled "wave of diners," we were quickly directed to the start of what seemed like a steady flow of snowshoers and skiers; all participants were prepared to run amok within the confines of a groomed pathway.

The temperature began to drop. We quickly learned that a steady exertion would be our friend for the evening. At the top of the hill the Cabin Creek Stables offered appetizers and our first stop on the trail.



In addition to various h'orderves, red and white wines were served. Several Ranch animals reside in the stables, including the horses reserved for sleigh and pony rides. They seemed fairly undisturbed despite the flood of snowshoers and cross-country skiers that crowded the stables. Of course, during the summer months, Devil's Thumb Ranch offers various horseback adventures.



Outside the stables, a modest fire pit offered some heat and a reason to roast marshmallows. A few of us stayed to watch the full moon rise over the Ranch's namesake – the actual Devil's Thumb rock formation.

The moonlight was intense. Some cloud cover created moments of dullness throughout the Ranch's glowing snowfields. But when the moonlight was at its crest, snowshoeing on the trail was easy to navigate and didn't require a headlamp or flashlight. Nevertheless, the trail was marked with covered candles to dimly light the way.

Our next stop was the yurt for soup (vegetable, chicken noodle and a beef stew), and a well-deserved rest after a steady uphill climb. Before arriving to the yurt, we followed the trail through the Devil's Thumb network of standalone cabins (approximately 16).

Remembering my last experience at the Ranch, I had the opportunity to stay the night in one of the cabins. Each structure offers a sustainable geothermal heat system that radiates from the

floors, which is common for most of the buildings on the property. This reduces its dependence on natural gas and electricity. The creature comforts in each cabin are sublime (in addition to the opportunity to snowshoe or ski out the front door).

“Where’s the yurt?” This was the question that many people asked while we continued to ascend the trail. In the distance, we could hear laughing and the sounds of high spirits. The warmth of soup and a wood burning stove were getting closer.

When we arrived, the yurt resembled a picturesque Nordic party: Many people gathered in groups and shared their trail experiences. This picture was straight out of some backcountry adventure in Scandinavia. It was hard to believe that this full experience was possible just two hours away from my home in Denver.

The yurt did its job: We were plenty warm. So it was a quick downhill jog to the meadow, where some eye-opening nighttime views of The Lodge were possible. The main course was being served in the Day Lodge (a short walk from the Mercantile).

When we arrived, the food choices were numerous – especially matching people’s varied preferences. It was a satisfying meal; it was an earned meal. After full moon snowshoeing the 5K trail, it was time to get to know our fellow progressive diners. As expected, we met locals and even travelers from out of state. Breaking bread with new friends was a great way to end the evening.

But it wasn’t quite finished. We retired to the upstairs area of Heck’s Restaurant for dessert and the GHA silent auction. A lone guitarist was performing some popular bluegrass and country tunes while people enjoyed some after-dinner drinks and indulgent treats.

The Ranch at a Glance

I first visited Devil’s Thumb in December 2004. At the time, the structures that rest at the end of Highway 83 (just north of Highway 40, near Tabernash, Colo.) were different than what’s present today.



The Broad Axe Barn offered fine dining and bar service to visitors; today, it's an open room that can host large events, such as weddings and corporate gatherings.

Connected to the barn was the property's original Ranch House, which now is the fine dining restaurant and saloon.

Underneath these structures is the Ranch's incredible wine cellar – providing a corking room and a large dining area that can seat up to 16. Also part of these structures is Zach's Mercantile & Nordic Center.

The original structure for the main lodge was moved to what is now the Day Lodge and in its place The Lodge – as seen today – was constructed.



A majority of the interior trim throughout The Lodge is reclaimed lodgepole pine killed by pine beetles. Of course, beetle kill is a big problem in Grand County. Instead of allowing this wood to rot and become a wildfire hazard, the Ranch reuses this wood for its internal structure. The floors are also made of reclaimed spruce wood. Additionally, the floors in Heck's are made from dead-standing Douglas fir.

For more information on the Ranch's sustainability efforts, visit <http://www.devilsthumbbranch.com/index.cfm/page/Green-Thumb/pid/11467>.



Devil's Thumb Ranch has two restaurants: Heck's and the Ranch House Restaurant and Saloon. Housed in The Lodge, Heck's serves breakfast and lunch daily through Après Ski and dinner (Thursday through Sunday). Ranch House Restaurant is open every night, and both restaurants are open to guests and the general public.

Ranch House Restaurant serves a full menu of high-end New American Cuisine and is open daily from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. Reservations are suggested, due to its popularity. Enjoy a pint of New Belgium 1554 (and other beers) in the Saloon while you wait for your table or to cap-off your evening.

Of course, a stay at Devil's Thumb Ranch deserves some relaxing extravagance. After a tough day of snowshoeing, visit the 12,000 square foot Ranch Creek Spa for some well-earned, nature-based



rejuvenation. The spa is located in a quiet corner of the Ranch and includes eight treatment rooms, a 700 square-foot couples suite, a second-story yoga lookout studio, and locker rooms (each with steam, sauna and aromatherapy rooms). Schedule a hot stone massage, an exfoliating body scrub, or a high altitude facial.

Visit. Revisit. Repeat as needed.



Grand County, Grand Country

When I leave Devil's Thumb Ranch, there's always an immediate craving to return to its more than 120K of designated snowshoe trails. A crash of envy overwhelms my thoughts, with each beautiful mountain home I pass on my travels back to the big city of Denver – where life speeds up again.

It's inspiring to know that while Colorado is my home, I have access to some of Earth's most genuine "works of art." The natural art of

Devil's Thumb Ranch is on display for all to view, but unlike a Cezanne or Monet, it can be touched and embraced.

Nobody is there to tell you the words "can't" or "that's not possible." Instead, you only hear the sounds of snowshoers and cross-country skiers engaging in a quiet conversation with nature. And what can be seen are the smiles that always seem to develop after becoming fully enveloped in the Ranch's true Colorado experience.



What's achieved while visiting? A slowing down of life enough to see the surrounding brilliance: *Check.*



Resources:

<http://www.devilsthumbranch.com>

<http://www.grandhuts.org>

Notables:

Devil's Thumb Ranch is located in Grand County, which is home to some of the best downhill skiing in the United States – specifically Winter Park Resort and SolVista Basin at Granby Ranch.

If venturing outside the boundaries of the Ranch, try visiting these resorts and surrounding small towns. Nearby communities of Granby, Fraser, Tabernash offer everyday amenities and a reasonable choice of restaurants.

However, if you're feeling extra adventurous, take a half-hour drive to Hot Sulphur Springs. Just follow highway 40 (you can't miss it). Have lunch at the StageCoach B&B Café – a down-to-earth establishment that prides itself on making a good burger. Also, its über-friendly atmosphere is intoxicating.

It's wise to also visit Hot Sulphur Springs Resort and Spa. Established in 1864 (and not many improvements since), the Resort boasts 24 hot mineral pools that are open year round. This is a great way to soak and relax among the natural hot springs that Colorado seems to flaunt throughout its lands.

Gear Mentions:

Atlas Snow-Shoe Co. – <http://www.atlassnowshoe.com>

Brooks-Range – <http://brooks-range.com>

Columbia Sportswear – <http://www.columbia.com>

Darn Tough Socks – <http://darntough.com>

GoLite – <http://www.golite.com>

GU Energy – <http://www.guenergy.com>

GV Snowshoes – <http://www.gvsnowshoes.com>

Icebreaker – <http://www.icebreaker.com>

Mountain Hardwear – <http://www.mountainhardwear.com>

Oboz Footwear – <http://www.obozfootwear.com>

Osprey Packs – <http://www.ospreypacks.com>

Sherpa Adventure Gear – <http://www.sherpaadventuregear.com>

Talus Outdoor Technologies – <http://www.talusoutdoor.com>

Wilderness Athlete – <http://www.wildernessathlete.com>

Photography by Ryan Alford (taken with a Sony Cyber-shot DSC-W290)

