

the getaway



Utah

# The Champ

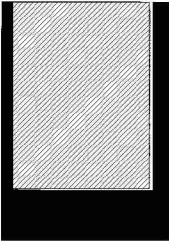
*It wasn't his idea, but Sir Harold Evans's family insisted they go skiing. After all, wasn't he the expert? So onward and downward they went . . .*

WE HAD NO CLUE WHERE WE WERE ON THE MOUNTAIN. It was night. We were thousands of feet up, climbing somewhere in a dense forest in Utah, deep in snow. It was well below freezing. My family—my wife, Tina; son, George, 19; and daughter, Isabel, 15—were barely visible through fur and scarves; George sported sinister Red Army arctic headgear. We could see intermittently as clouds scudded across a full moon. Instinctively, we were ready for the howl of a wolf, but there was nothing save the swish of wind in the ponderosa

Bright lights, Park City: Deer Valley's six peaks and 2,026 acres of skiable terrain mean you can go one-on-one with the mountain.

Photograph by Rob Howard

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pinetrees and the crunch of snowshoes. And then the trees caught fire.

Or so it seemed, as the light in the trees was so sudden and intense, the glow magnified in the whiteness of the snowdrifts. But the illumination was welcoming. It was the warm light of oil lamps hung outside a curious tentlike circular structure hugged by forest.

We caught the scent of wood smoke drifting from a hole in its domed roof. A woman emerged with another lamp. We had arrived at the Viking Yurt, Yurt being the name of the curious hideaway and Viking being its builder, Norwegian-born Geir Vik—Geir meaning “head of a spear.” We were soon inside with him before a roaring log fire, enveloped in warmth and guzzling hot spiced glogg from pewter mugs. If you fret about how cold it was coming up, he is apt to say, “There is no such thing as bad weather, just bad clothing.” With only a ski jacket and not a whisper of fur, he made me feel as if I had ascended the mountain naked and deserved to have my extremities severely frostbitten.

Geir is a genial fellow, actually, just wary of mountain weather. He is an athlete who came to study at the University of Utah and married a young woman who could keep up with him on the downhill, Joy Merritt Vik, the daughter of a mountain ski doctor. Joy has run the nighttime expeditions to the Viking Yurt for nine years from the ski resort of The Canyons, only half an hour from Salt Lake City International Airport. There is no electricity or running water in their yurt, but even in a blizzard it is snug inside. The Viks have gone one better than the nomadic tribes who carried their felt-lined yurts around the cold barren steppes of Central Asia. Geir used bubble-wrap insulation developed by NASA and welded the seams electronically.

There were 32 of us who had trekked up into the night for the promise of a five-course meal “fit for royals,” the kind of food the Viks served the crown prince and princess of Norway during the 2002 Olympics

somewhere down that mountain in Park City, Utah. Most people make it to the yurt wrapped in blankets on a convivial 30-minute sleigh ride from The Canyons (base 6,190 feet), and while the sleigh is drawn not by six white horses but a Sno-Cat, it is nonetheless romantic to see the lights of civilization fade to pinpoint as you head out of the valley into the unknown. You can stay in the sleigh all the way to the yurt, at 8,000 feet, an ascent of almost 2,000 feet. It is the adventurous who drop off some way up the mountain to don snowshoes and cross-country skis for the last 20-minute climb in the forest.

The yurt is limited to 32 at tables for 6 and 8. All the water and food has to be hauled in during the day by snowmobile, but it seems only natural that there is a baby grand and a pianist. Accustomed to magic by now, one takes it for granted that the meal prepared on the spot by chef Adam Findlay is original, quite first-class, and gracefully served, but consider how on earth in that isolated location they manage to serve 32 people the following dishes: sunchoke, tomato, and aquavit bisque; a mizuna greens salad of chicken-apple sausage, feta, and port wine cranberries with almond-vanilla dressing; a sorbet; breast of Sonoma duck with black cherry compote, parsnip puree, and forest mushrooms; cheese and fruit served on an aspen slab; and dessert of passion fruit mousse, on a puff pastry with hazelnut toffee and maple cream.

There is another service on offer, going back, they say, to the 1800s. It is called ski-dating, which means a man and his fancy head into the snow strapped to the same pair of Nordic skis by fore and aft bindings. If a couple take a tumble in the snow, it is hard to disentangle and get up again, which may be a tactical advantage. Prudence keeps me from rendering a personal report on this aspect of a night at the Viking Yurt. This is one of a profusion of non-ski activities that makes the accessible Park City, The Canyons, and Deer Valley a good option for a winter vacation, bearing in mind that not everyone likes to pound the piste every day, and the lifts stop at 4 P.M. anyway.

**W**ELL, LET ME COME CLEAN here. It wasn't my idea to go skiing at all. It was the family's. They

had for years tolerated my bedtime stories about alpine adventures—in those old-fashioned days, everyone took it for granted they were true, which they were, mostly. Having taken up the sport in midlife, I had then co-written a best-selling instructional book about skiing and co-produced six ski films for television, employing the stuntman from the James Bond movies; as the years rolled by, it is entirely possible I muddled up our roles. I should have kept my mouth shut. After a couple of ski weekends with their schools, my children nagged me to lead them to speed down exciting mountains, and my reluctance mounted, not out of modesty but out of shame. Once I entered my seventies, I discovered on a solo trip to Aspen that I was not quite the limber, youthful daredevil of my stories. I had managed to find excuses not to risk familial scrutiny on the slopes. This year, however, I was outflanked by my wife, who has been skiing gracefully since she was six and is only now at the age when I first took up the sport. She attended a business conference in Deer Valley and was so enchanted she impetu-

ously booked us all to return there for skiing. The limp I developed played to empty houses. I nursed one comforting bit of knowledge—that the snow in this part of the West is the alchemy of dream. Having lost much of the heavy moisture farther west, and been dried out by the deserts of Nevada and western Utah, weather systems produce snowfalls, at higher elevations, made up of stellar dendrites, light crystalline snowflakes. There is a world of difference between floating downhill in this kind of powder and fighting your way through treacherous—and humbling—surfaces of crud, porridge, or slush.

A guide knows where to find the best snow and slopes. I arranged for our initial exploration to be in the care of Ken Stenmark, a teacher at the time at the Park City Ski School. He is a songwriter but should moonlight as a diplomat and psychotherapist. Frankly, it is a chilling moment when you have skis on again after many years and

wonder if you can remember anything at all. “That’s splendid!” he lied, as I traveled a very awkward 30 yards in chewed-up snow by the lifts and skidded to a stop. I turned to shout back to George and Isabel not to worry on this first outing—they’d find it was just like riding a bicycle again. But they weren’t there. They had scooted ahead and were looking back at me. I could see that I had passed another of life’s turning points: Their parents used to worry about them; now they worry about their parents.

Lines were short for a six-person chairlift. For that we had to position ourselves at a starting gate like racehorses. The stranger who snuck into place in the fifth seat seemed to have difficulty with the English language. He did not understand my very careful explanation, as we approached the ramp at the top, of how the public interest would best be served if I, the most senior, was allowed an unencumbered exit. The general melee as five people on skis edged out of their seats and volleyed down the narrow ramp proved my point, but he shot off before I could remonstrate.

We all got bolder heading down the mountain trails under Kcn’s eye. Isabel often raced ahead; she said she was trying to get away from snowboarders who have an unattractive habit of catapulting into a thump-thump double somersault just where you planned the kind of stylish turn you always try to do when you are the cynosure of idling crowds at a lunch place. By the end of the day, I registered a remarkable fact. I had skied as fast as the others, and I had not fallen once. Which reminds me, did I tell you about the time I skied the Eiger?

It is true that half the 100 runs at Park City are for intermediates, but there are four rough terrain parks, challenging tree skiing off the Thaynes and McConkey’s lifts, and a whole day’s expedition in which you can ski to and through five neighboring resorts. Ken took us to Deer Valley one day when the skiing in light powder exhilarated everyone. Indeed, the ultimate ski experience in the world is at Deer Valley’s Stein Eriksen Lodge, where you ski to a stop at the end of the afternoon to find a valet waiting to relieve you of the clobber and offer a cup of hot chocolate. “Yes, that will be all for now, Jeeves. But make sure to warm my boots properly before I come down in the morning.” Stein Eriksen, winner of gold and silver

in the 1952 Olympics, does not own the hotel bearing his name, but he lends it a grace note. Approaching 81, he can still be found eating lunch at the lodge's Troll Hallen Lounge.

If you don't yourself take advantage of the easy powder skiing, Deer Valley has entertainment enough for a morning here. After a couple of runs, when the others went off again in an excess of enthusiasm, I said it was necessary for me to stay behind to examine the Deer Valley snow reports. I did it relaxing in the sun over a cappuccino in one of the Silver Lake Lodge loungers scattered about the bowl area called "The Beach." This spot gets plenty of sunshine as well as nearly 500 inches of snow. Instead of being part of the geometry of risk, you can speculate on the trajectories of the skiers converging on one another from Flagstaff and Bald Mountains (though in Deer Valley, they don't have to dodge overexuberant snowboarders as in so many resorts these days: they are banned from the lifts and slopes).

**D**EER VALLEY IS DELIGHTFUL, but it's a dead-at-night resort, not a town. The action is in Park City, Deer Valley's neighbor, and we based ourselves in a hotel there. The environs are the usual dreary dross of highway and mall, redeemed at night by celebrations of light. At the ski plaza, where the lifts begin, there is an ice rink, the large Legacy kitchen for breakfast, and a friendly Mexican restaurant. The Park City crowd is without the whiff of pretension that shimmers in Deer Valley. Everyone hooted and hollered in the dark of Christmas Eve watching a conga line of skiers with torches snake their way from the top—and something of a relief, these politically correct days, to find that the last rollicking figure, in a silver beard and red gown, was an unabashedly jolly Santa Claus.

The real non-ski attraction in Park City, five minutes from the plaza, is picturesque Main Street, the heart of the old silver mining town. The street is much as it was a hundred years ago, even to nurturing a large population of bears. Utah's bears being proudly proclaimed by the state as more intelligent and athletic than bears anywhere else. George, who has always had a deep interest in the species, alarmed us by taking the paw of a big one near the chocolate factory; this one turned out to be

in taxidermy heaven. We enjoyed navigating the slippery hill at night amid the cheerful bustle of people balancing concoctions of fudge and ice cream, inebriated with good health from the ubiquitous designer water bottles carried like revolvers on every hip. Whatever your taste, in day or nightlife, we discovered that what everybody tells you is true: You must drink gallons of water at this altitude, or end up a frizzled walnut.

A little red trolley bus runs up and down and will stop anywhere to give you a free ride if you give it a wave. The street is brightly lined with boutiques, art galleries, a historic vaudeville theater, the old jail with its three horrible little cells open for contemplation, a bookstore, pizza and coffee places, nightclubs, and restaurants. I'd been warned back east that Utah, being largely Mormon, was a dry state and we'd have difficulty finding a party or a drink. On our first dinner out, on Main Street at the Mustang, our waiter bore the name badge MIKE, so I asked Mike what the night's off-the-menu specials were. The dialogue was Pinterish:

"Don't call me Mike," he said. "It's not my name, and if you shout out for Mike, I might not respond. My name is really Ed. Are you folks okay with Ed?"

"Oh, very well, Ed," I said. "I don't suppose you can rustle up a bottle of pinot noir?"

"No, no, call me Mike if you want wine. It's illegal in Utah for anyone to serve a drink unless they can be identified by name. It's just that I couldn't find my Ed name tag. So for wine I'm Mike, right?"

"Okay, Mike, but could you ask Ed what the specials are?"

The apparently strict laws of Utah readily succumb to a little pantomime. Beer is freely sold, but the state does lay it down

that wine and spirits can be served only in a restaurant by a named, identifiable individual and only if you have a meal. There are no bars. But there are plenty of "private" clubs. These are bars in the sense that Ed is really Mike. You can wander into any "private" club and find everything you would find in bars--wine and whiskey, pool tables, dancing. All you need to do to explore the clubs is ask any perfect stranger inside if he or she will sponsor you, and Utahans being very open, friendly folk will be glad to oblige.

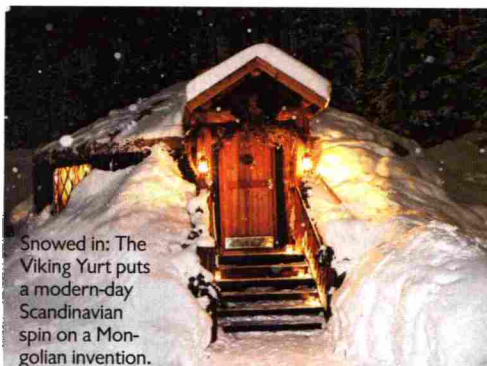
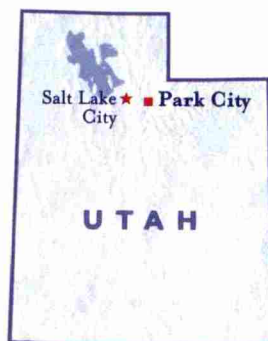
Park City got a boost from staging the 2002 Olympics, and the Games' legacy is that the grounds of the championships have been converted into the 400-acre Olympic Park open to the public. Here you can hurtle down the bobsled track at 70 to 80 miles per hour and see how much you enjoy being a nanosecond blur against the force of four g's. Kindly note the careful phrasing here. This is something for the adventurous you. Dropping 40 stories while rounding 15 hairpins in 60 seconds is a taste I have failed to acquire. Having achieved that, you can attempt to defy gravity, catapulting into the sky over one of the six Nordic ski jumps. For some reason, the park authorities insist that you go down the bobsled with a professional driver up front, and for the big ski flight you're strapped into a harness and zipped down an overhead cable at 50 miles per hour. If that paternalism rouses macho instincts to rebel, hang around until the ski champions take a break training on Freestyle Hill and suggest that the last one down is a sissy.

Park City is a good center for excursions like this. On another day, we drove ten minutes to Gorgoza Park, where George and Isabel relished long, bumpy slides sitting in a rubber inner tube. Cable ropes drag tubers to the top of the hill, where there are seven different lanes, none really scary. Then back to Olympic Park.

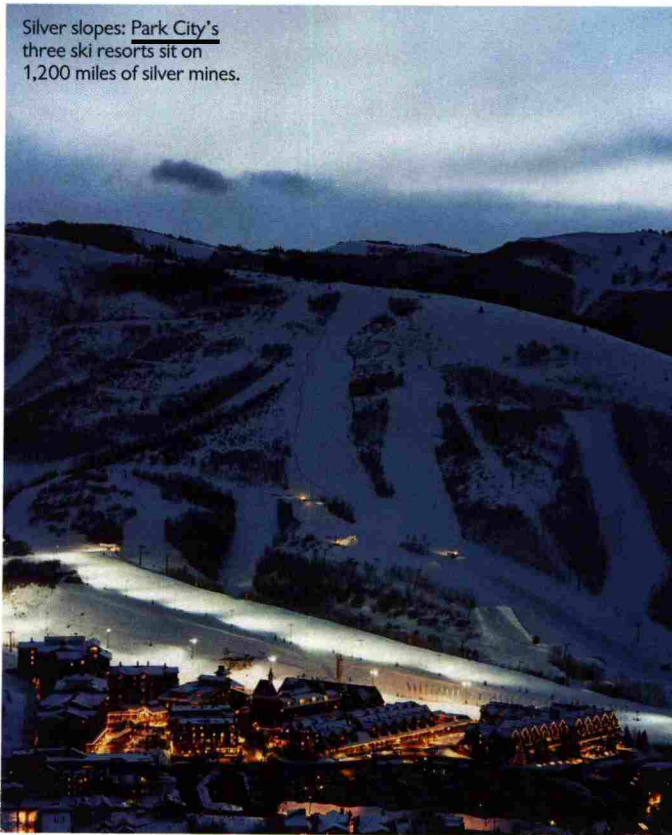
In fact, in our six days in Park City, we were so busy we never got around to floating

off to the peaks in a hot-air balloon; trail riding on horseback; dogsledding; ice fishing; exploring the woods and canyons in a rented snowmobile; inspecting the stars through the 11-foot telescope at the Utah Skies playground; or riding the steam-powered Heber Valley Historic Railroad around Deer Creek reservoir and ending with a campfire sing-along.

Pity. We'll just have to go back. Yes, and maybe this time I'll demonstrate a few of those James Bond stunts I was telling you about. . . .



Snowed in: The Viking Yurt puts a modern-day Scandinavian spin on a Mongolian invention.



Batter up: At 3.5 miles,  
Homerun is Park City's  
longest trail.

