

steps above

A LITTLE BIT OF LUXURY HIDES IN ALTA'S POWDER | RACHEL ODELL WALKER



With an average annual snowfall in excess of 500 inches, scenes like this are common in Alta.

➤ THE ONLY FLUFF AT ALTA SKI AREA IS THE SNOW. PERCHED at the top of Utah's Little Cottonwood Canyon, Alta is a two-planked paradise, utterly void of pretense, snowboards, and glam. So I was fully prepared for the locals brown-bagging lunch in the on-mountain lodge, and the athletic greyhairs passing me on the in-bounds hikes (before they would outski me in the couloirs).

But even here, where “no frills” is the height of anti-fashion, there is a high-end clientele. For them, there is the Alta Lodge. Of the digs in Little Cottonwood Canyon — and there are only a few — the lodge has staked a reputation for casual sophistication, gourmet food, and an interesting clientele.* Its modernist design beckons the outdoors inside with floor-to-ceiling plate-glass windows offering 360-degree views of the surrounding mountains. And it's home to the Sitzmark, one of skidom's most revered watering holes — which I planned to revere personally and frequently.

First, one must check in. Shunning the stereotypical double doors and uniformed valets, Alta Lodge's entrance is a covered shaft atop a long, dark staircase. There is a phone, accompanied by instructions to call for a bellman, but no one answered on my first try so I schlepped my own bags. Sixty-four steps later, like Alice from the rabbit's hole, I emerged onto a sunny porch.

Inside, I found myself surrounded by the real wood paneling and exposed beams of the original 1939 A-frame. The goggle-tanned clerk bestowed on me both a metal key affixed to a hand-carved room number and the combination to my wooden ski locker, located in the basement (apparently, the ski valet concept has not yet made it to the canyon). Boot dryers, he noted, were in the room.

There was no television, but I did find a fireplace and a soft down comforter on a firm bed. I donned my sheepskin slippers and shuffled to dinner, where I reluctantly joined the common table and steeled myself for small talk. But I had misjudged my company: The tie-dye-wearing retired investment banker to my left was in the midst of writing a mystery novel, and the woman across from me had been a fashion model in the 1970s. She was on her 29th annual visit to the Alta Lodge, and she knew all the best powder stashes.

So ideal was my routine — breakfast and dinner with fellow skiers, beers at the Sitzmark, and unbelievably epic skiing — I nearly forgot the stairs. But on the last day, as I heel-toed my way up all 64 of them, the weight of my bags was nothing compared to the weight of reality, with its planes to catch, work to be done, and deadlines to meet. At the top of the stairs, I again reached for the bell phone.

This time, someone picked up, and, like many before me, I booked my room for next year. Suddenly, my burdens were lighter. ●

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