



The Silver Queen Gondola on Aspen Mountain offers aerial views and leads to the Sundeck restaurant at the top.



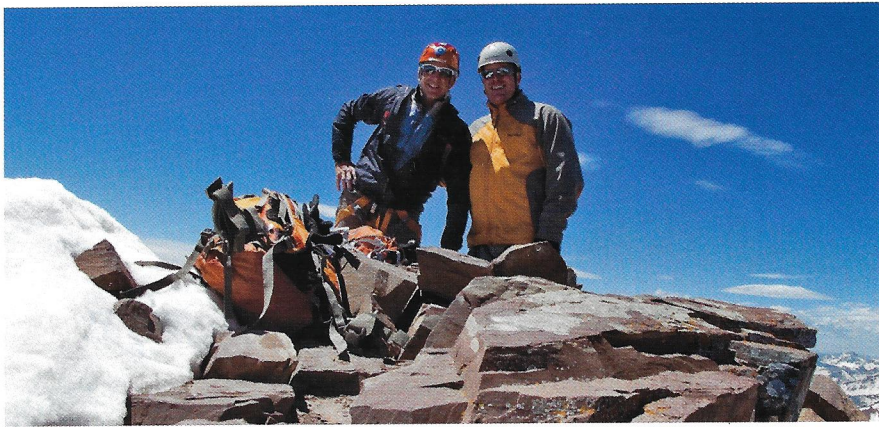
# Aspen by Air

Get up and away from it all with this mountain town's many aerial activities.

BY DAVINA VAN BUREN

**A**spen is synonymous with an upscale ski vibe and glorious powder. But swooshing down those legendary slopes is only one way to experience the town. Both the Silver Queen Gondola on Aspen Mountain and the Elk Camp Gondola and Chairlift at Snowmass are your transport to adventurous, high-altitude activities this season. On Aspen Mountain's upper elevations, take a yoga class at the Sundeck for a new way to relax with a bird's-eye view of the stunning surroundings. And at Snowmass, the chairlift elevates you all the way to the 11,325-foot summit, where you can soak in the scenery or go on a nature walk offered through the Aspen Center for Environmental Studies.

These summer activities are perfect for families, whereas other options—such as paragliding, helicopter flights and hot air ballooning—will appeal to those seeking an off-slope adrenaline rush. Whichever way you choose, you'll be experiencing Aspen from new heights.

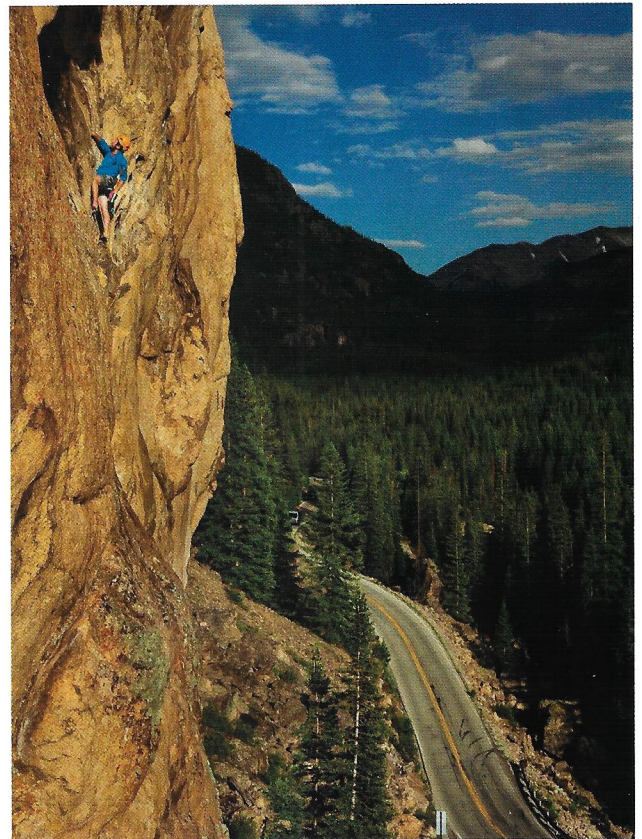


Aspen Expeditions' climbing trips cater to a range of ability levels.

## ON THE EDGE

For a bit more exposure while exploring the mountains, Aspen Expeditions leads rock climbs on the granite crags of breathtaking Independence Pass during the summer. Beginners can choose the introductory option to learn basic belaying, rappelling and movement between holds. More advanced climbers can participate in a multipitch experience that will expand their knowledge of belay transitions as well as creating and using systems efficiently on the rock face. For families, kids may be dropped off for a day of climbing with the company's trusted guides while adults slip away for some mountain biking, shopping or relaxing spa time.

And if indoor climbing in a more controlled environment sounds appealing, visitors won't be disappointed by the Aspen Parks and Recreation Department's two climbing facilities. Scale the 32-foot tower at the Aspen Recreation Center or head to the Red Brick Recreation Center, where you'll find 3,100 feet of climbing space for all abilities. ([aspenrecreation.com](http://aspenrecreation.com))



Rock climbing above Independence Pass





Above It All Balloon Co. provides hot air balloon flights for two to 16 people.

### **FLOAT ON AIR**

Hot air balloons provide an unequalled view of Aspen from a high-up vantage point. Above It All Balloon Co. takes to the skies each morning just after sunrise, offering flights for two passengers or groups up to 16. The early wake-up call may seem daunting for some, but it's worth it, says owner Pam Wood. "When you vacation here, you want to take advantage of every waking moment," she explains. "This is a perfect way to start a perfect day."

While it is a surprisingly quiet and serene journey, hot air ballooning is also an interactive experience. Participants may be asked to help hold the "envelope" (fabric section of the balloon) steady while air is fanned inside or to keep the basket grounded while others board.

Balloons launch from the Snowmass Recreation Center parking lot, then typically drift down the Brush Creek area. As the pilot takes you higher, upper winds during the summer usually steer the balloon toward the breathtakingly beautiful Elk Mountains. Keep your eyes peeled for eagles, coyote, elk, deer, bears and lavish estates below. Flights usually last about an hour and end near Old Snowmass, although the final destination depends on where the wind blows. Before launch and upon landing, kids are invited to touch and feel the balloon.

After the flight, relax and enjoy a hearty breakfast of sausage, cheese, fresh fruit, bagels, yogurt, mimosas (or sparkling cider) and Wood's homemade chocolate-covered strawberries. "I used to only make those for special occasions, but a local concierge started to tell hotel guests about them and word got out," Wood laughs. During breakfast, the pilot shares hot air ballooning history and everyone does one last toast before piling into the van and heading back to the launch site. To commemorate the journey, participants take home a souvenir pin and personalized flight certificate. ([aboveitallballoon.com](http://aboveitallballoon.com))





Above: Aspen Heli Charter flies sightseers in the Eurocopter 130B4 with oversized windows that provide optimal panoramas.

Left: Helicopters can hover low to view flowers or wildlife.



### TOP FLIGHT

Seeing the Rocky Mountains by helicopter is an experience unlike any other; a quintessential VIP jaunt. Aspen Heli Charter offers this scenic experience in style as the company's aircraft is a luxurious Eurocopter 130B4.

The helicopter's amenities include oversized windows specifically designed for sightseeing, custom leather interior, climate control and headsets so passengers can communicate. The aircraft seats six comfortably, with room for luggage, mountain bikes or other sporting equipment in the cargo hold.

Chief pilot Josh Thorne says his usual route includes views of Mount Sopris, McClure Pass, Snowmass Peak, Maroon Bells, Pyramid Peak, Snowmass Lake and Independence Pass—all of which can be seen in an hour. "Doing all that by car would take an entire day," Thorne says. "And that's just my suggestion as a pilot. We are happy to customize each tour to our clients' desires."

The helicopters can maneuver between towering peaks or hover above a secluded meadow to glimpse herds of grazing elk. Another popular option is for visitors to hike to Crested Butte, then return to Aspen via chopper, dipping low across fields of wildflowers. According to Thorne, "It's a beautiful flight over the trail they just hiked." ([aspenhelicharter.com](http://aspenhelicharter.com))





Feel the sensation of flying with Aspen Paragliding flights, which take off at 11,000 feet and sometimes soar to 12,000 feet or higher.



### SOARING OVER ASPEN

Even in Aspen, visitors can turn their dreams of flying into a reality. Aspen Paragliding begins its summer excursions with a 20-minute ride up Aspen Mountain in the company's rugged four-wheel-drive vehicle. Once at the launch site, paragliders receive a safety check and a brief tutorial before setting off on the adventure. The company provides gear like the helmet and harness, but be sure to bring sunglasses, wear proper footwear and dress in layers to protect yourself from wind chill.

Paragliding flights take off at 11,000 feet, and land on the valley floor 3,000 feet below. "On a good day, [the ride] could be half an hour or 45 minutes," owner Alex Palmaz says. "It's possible to reach altitudes of 12,000 to 14,000 feet." While in the air, participants may see deer, coyotes and birds. "There are some hawks and a couple of golden eagles that come and fly with us," Palmaz says. "And we land in a nature preserve just east of town."

According to Palmaz, it usually takes about 15 minutes to reach the landing site if there's not much wind. For those visiting Aspen on vacation, he recommends booking a paragliding session early in their stay, since occasionally outings are canceled due to high winds. "It's usually the highlight of a trip," he says. "So it's best to leave time for rescheduling just in case." ([aspenparagliding.com](http://aspenparagliding.com))

## Frequent Fliers

Transportation to and from Aspen can be thrilling from the seat of a private jet.

Soaring in style is best experienced with a private jet. Those arriving at Grand Junction Regional or Denver International airports have the opportunity to start their getaway with a short charter flight to Aspen or finish the trip by returning this way, enjoying the scenery below while soaring through the sky in comfort.

To charter a private jet, there are a number of companies in the northern Colorado area. For last-minute requests, visitors can go through Air Denver, a referral service that works with different operators to access more than 18,000 aircraft. It offers transport to several mountain-area airports, including Aspen, and can usually get groups airborne within two hours of booking. The company also provides charters from Aspen to Las Vegas, although these trips must be booked in advance. ([airden.com](http://airden.com))



Air Denver has access to more than 18,000 private jets.



**TAKE A HIKE**

Acrophobia may deter some visitors to the more extreme aerial activities, but there are ways to reach higher elevations while keeping feet firmly planted on the ground. The Centennial State has 58 mountains that tower more than 14,000 feet into the air; however, only about 53 meet the Colorado Summit Criterion (which defines a peak as having 300 feet of prominence) or rise above the top-most saddle that connects the summit to higher ground. Locals affectionately refer to reaching these summits as “bagging a 14er.” And it’s not just Coloradans who are up for the challenge: Some visitors return year after year in a steady quest to conquer all 53 peaks as part of their bucket lists. Summer is the ideal season to tackle as many peaks as you can handle. Visitors can even check two 14ers—the iconic Maroon Bells—off their list in one day.

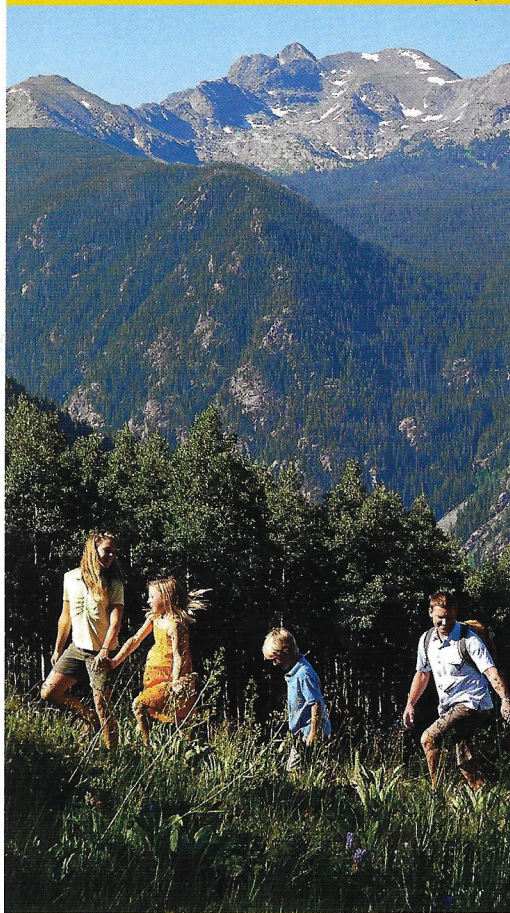
Novices interested in backcountry hiking can sign up with Aspen Alpine Guides for a tour around the Elk Mountains. With an emphasis on safety and acclimation, the company offers day hikes, high-altitude primers, overnight backpacking trips and 14er peak climbs. “We like to work with people and see how they are doing at altitude if they haven’t done a 14er before,” says managing partner and guide Stephen Szoradi, adding that possible routes range from well-traveled paths on Mount Elbert and La Plata Peak to more technical trails on Pyramid and Capital peaks and the Maroon Bells. “We also do some specialized routes, like a snow climb in springtime. ... Those are fun.”

The company also curates ladies-only peak climbs, day hikes, biking and rock climbing through its Leave the Boys Behind initiative, which aims to include females of all ability levels and ages. For the program’s six-day, 100-mile trail run along the Continental Divide, participants sleep in rustic 10th Mountain Division huts along the way; the trip includes local, organic food and beer. (aspinalpine.com) C

STEPHEN SZORADI OF ASPEN ALPINE GUIDES



Aspen Alpine Guides leads programs like hikes and overnight trips.



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ASPEN • SNOWMASS

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- Aspen Gondola (970) 925-1360
- St. Regis (970) 925-6332
- Grand Hyatt (970) 920-0228

**Snowmass**

- Snowmass Mall (970) 923-6111
- Base Village (970) 922-0586

[aspensports.com](http://aspensports.com)

