

EXPERIENCE

Bombardier Business Aircraft Magazine

Issue 20 2013

THE NEW GLOBAL COMPLETION CENTRE



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KEITH URBAN'S SKY-HIGH GIG + SAIL THE WORLD + SKI YELLOWSTONE CLUB

WELCOME TO THE CLUB

Occupying a superlative slice of southwestern Montana, the Yellowstone Club aims to cater to its intrepid members' every whim.

BY NEAL McLENNAN

“Wanna cut through Warren Miller’s backyard?” grins my guide Steve, making a conspiratorial gesture at a glade of trees just below the sprawling stone-and-cedar mountainside home of the ski filmmaker. I’m halfway down the hill at Montana’s Yellowstone Club and, from the looks of the largely untracked mid-afternoon snow, we appear to be the sole skiers on the mountain. Steve’s suggestion to trespass serves a 40-year-old’s need to feed the inner juvenile. So of course we do it.

To be fair, it’s a harmless transgression. Miller, the Yellowstone Club’s honorary director of skiing, is more likely to invite trespassers like us into his home for tea than to shoo us off with a shotgun. Like the rest of the club’s approximately 400 members, he’s excessively content in the charms of this 13,600-acre private ski and golf retreat tucked into the Madison range of southwest Montana.

A few turns later we’re at the main lodge, a 140,000-square-foot (13,006-square-meter) post-and-beam chalet on steroids. This ethos – big without the buffoonery – is the cornerstone of Yellowstone’s mystique. For years, whispers abounded of a private Montana ski club, home to a world-class golf course that was so sparingly played you could simply walk on whenever the mood struck. The community was said to be protected by a legion of ex-secret-service agents patrolling the perimeter. A Rocky Mountain Shangri-la, a secret paradise on earth.

Sam Byrne has heard it all. He’s the co-founder and managing partner of CrossHarbor Capital Partners LLC, who in 2009 took on the club’s ownership: “Yellowstone Club is a place where people come to escape stress and enjoy time with their families in a comfortable, relaxed environment.”

And while Byrne can laugh about the tall tales surrounding the place, there’s no denying that this is not your normal club. A point underscored as I walk into the lodge on the first day and notice a sign advertising an upcoming concert. They’ll clear out some of the tables in the vaulted dining room and James Taylor will stroll in and play a set. “For charity,” a staff member offers by way of explanation.

Byrne is quick to point out that, Grammy-winning folk legends notwithstanding, the YC (as it’s known to members) is not the bastion of the idle rich that it’s so often portrayed as. “I grew up skiing with the Boston Hill YMCA,” he says and notes that the vast majority of members are not Vanderbilts, Astors or other landed gentry, but self-made people who just want to maximize precious downtime with their families. That translates into never having to make a tee time at the stunning >



PHOTO: AUDREY HALL





Tom Weiskopf-designed golf course and never standing in line for the chairlift. Luxurious to be sure, but glitzy? Not so much. “You want fur coats and celebrities, go to Aspen” seems to be the mantra here.

The club came about as a result of one of the greatest real estate plays in the American West, whereby Oregon timber man Tim Blixseth strung together 47,000 contiguous acres neighboring America’s oldest National Park and Ted Turner’s famed 113,000-acre Flying D Ranch. It was out of that parcel that the Yellowstone Club was born. Blixseth and his wife Edra envisioned the place as an ultra-exclusive retreat without peer. Ultimately the Blixseths’ high-flying lifestyle and messy divorce plunged the club into a very public bankruptcy right at the height of the Great Recession. Enter Sam Byrne.

For Byrne and his partners, the YC’s turnaround is more than just a smart real estate play. CrossHarbor Capital has racked up a string of successes turning around undervalued real estate assets, but Byrne came to the YC as a member first, one who valued the club’s unique mix of privacy and world-class skiing. When the club lapsed into bankruptcy, he saw an opportunity to step in and put it back on the right track. Since buying the community, he’s been single-minded in meeting nearly every member to ensure everyone is on board with the club’s new direction, neatly summed up in the motto, “Where families gather.”

Nothing is more symbolic of this transformation than the huge mahogany bar that dominates the Lodge’s main room. Under the previous owners it was an over-the-top caviar bar, surrounded by Persian carpets. Now it’s a stop for casual breakfast and the de facto meeting place for members before a day on the slopes, the course or the fishing hole.

One of the pluses for members is that few outsiders are aware of the club’s phenomenal terrain. At 2,200 skiable acres, it’s bigger than Sun Valley; with 15 chairlifts, it has nearly as many as Park City; ➤

Access to Big Sky and Moonlight Basin make the skiable terrain 8,000 acres – the largest in North America.



PHOTOS: BRYCE DUFFY (THIS PAGE); AUDREY HALL (OPPOSITE)



RUSTIC CHIC

At Yellowstone Club, guided trail rides can be planned for the day or overnight in the back country; (opposite page) Sam Byrne shows off a peak view; members meet up, make plans and unwind in the Warren Miller Lodge; (previous page) residences range from condominiums to multi-story lodges - this one has six bedrooms.



at 2,700 feet (823 meters), its vertical is longer than Taos. The club is also connected by chairlift to the neighboring Big Sky and Moonlight Basin resorts, both justly famous for their mix of big, wide bowls and insane chutes for extreme skiing, a genre more or less invented by YC head guide Scot Schmidt. Such access brings the community's skiable terrain all the way up to nearly 8,000 acres – the largest in North America. And, as a reward for a day of turns, the YC has thoughtfully scattered “warming huts” on the mountain, which are essentially saunas filled with complimentary candy, cookies and drinks.

Once the snow melts, the community becomes even less populated. The championship golf course need only be shared with the local elk and bighorn sheep. The summer activities continue with horseback riding, kayaking, hiking and the unparalleled fly-fishing that inspired *A River Runs Through It*.

Above all, there's one constant: not a lineup in sight.

YC membership is capped at just 864 – with no “Phase 2” and no additional offerings. After the last property is sold, Byrne says, “We step back and turn the keys over to the homeowners.” And just like that, ownership of the club will transfer to the membership, a group ideally suited to keeping the Yellowstone Club vision on track.

Given his passionate involvement, I ask whether that day will be somewhat bittersweet. He quickly shakes off the notion. “It'll just be sweet,” he laughs and looks out the lodge window at the untouched fields of snow. “I can't wait to be just a member here.” Sam, I know how you feel. ■

TIE ONE ON

The club's environs are home to some of the best fly-fishing in the world.

MONTANA

Where to sleep in, dine out and refuel.

STAY

The Yellowstone Club is only open to members and their guests. Approved prospective homeowners can arrange access to one of the 20 guest cabins. These ski-in, ski-out accommodations are situated at a rarified 8,400 feet (2,560 meters), where they provide a breathtaking view of the neighboring Big Sky resort.

DINE

Both the Warren Miller Lodge and the more intimate and secluded Rainbow Lodge offer a note-perfect take on elegant Rocky Mountain Cuisine. Think racks of wild boar, loins of venison and a wine list that hits the big names but also has beautiful surprises (such as the Sonoma Coast's cult pinot noir, Flowers, available by the glass).

DO

In addition to the skiing, there are snowmobile tours up neighboring Eglise Mountain and Saturday evening shinny hockey games on the outdoor rink. In the summer, in addition to the Tom Weiskopf-designed golf course (pictured), there's also horseback riding and some of the world's best fly-fishing.

TAKE OFF

Bozeman Yellowstone International Airport (BZN)

bozemanairport.com

Through a partnership with XOJET, which has the Challenger 300 jet in its fleet, guests of Yellowstone Club can get exclusive rates on private travel, including priority access and guaranteed access.

For more information regarding Yellowstone Club, please visit yellowstoneclub.com or contact T 406 995 4900 ycsales@yellowstoneclub.com



PHOTO: DUSAN SMETANA (TOP)