



# K2 SKI COOPER

STAYING PURE AND HIGH IN LEADVILLE

ALONG U.S. 24 RUNS THE SNOWY gauntlet of Tennessee Pass, a thin black ribbon that connects Leadville, Colorado—America's highest town at 10,152 feet—with the glitter of the Vail Valley. Perched high on this lonely road is historic Ski Cooper.

In 1942, the War Department cut four trails on 11,700-foot Cooper Hill to create Ski Cooper as part of Camp Hale, the training ground for the 10th Mountain Division. More than 60 years later, the county-owned ski area still serves up 250 inches of powder a year spread over 26 mostly mellow runs, 400 skiable acres, and 1,200 vertical feet. A slim \$34 buys a day of what skiing used to be—no shuttles, no crowds, no glitz, and no waiting in line.

Cooper is definitely old school, as there are no ropes to herd you in the right direction and no buildings other than the base lodge. The idea of a "facilities upgrade" here is a new outhouse on top of the mountain.

"The people that ski here are the exact opposite of the people that go to Vail," says Smoky Burgess, manager of the Leadville-based fleece company Melanzana and longtime Coop skier. "They don't come here to shop or browse expensive real estate."

He recommends starting the day on top of Cooper Hill and skiing the backside down Burnout before cutting under the lift to Kamikaze and Nightmare, the most challenging runs on the mountain. The best late-day stashes are in the steep trees between these two runs. These aren't wide-open spaces, and it's pinball if you're not on your game.

Head back up and ask the guys at the ski patrol shack about conditions on Hoyt's Folly, an out-of-bounds area of open bowls that requires the patrollers' permission. If the conditions in Hoyt's aren't cooperative, slip over to the front side and hop on Molly Mayfield, a new terrain park featuring a few rails, tabletops, and a rhythm section.

Ski Cooper also operates Chicago Ridge Backcountry Ski Tours, a cat skiing outfit that carries clients to 12,600 feet on nearby Chicago Ridge to access an additional 2,400 acres of untracked. A day with the cat and a lunch of steak, baked potatoes, and cheesecake costs just \$234.

On Chicago Ridge, you're well above tree line and the huge views encompass two of Colorado's highest peaks—Mt. Massive (14,421 feet) and Mt. Elbert (14,433 feet). The dicey lines drop into the exposed North Face bowl or sneak into the Buckeye Trees where the wind drops the deepest powder. For a real hair-raiser, climb over the top of Chicago Ridge and bet your hand on Buckeye Creek. Bring your beacons and park a shuttle at the Belvedere Hut lot on U.S. 91.

At the end of the day, when you're rolling back to Leadville with thoughts of a fat margarita from The Grill dancing in your head, you'll realize that the name of the

game at Ski Cooper is still purely skiing with no distractions. —NATHAN WARD

#### DETAILS, DETAILS

**Phone:** 800.707.6114

**Website:** skicooper.com

**Lift Ticket:** \$34; half day \$25; child \$18

**Getting there:** It's 125 miles from Denver. Take I-70 to U.S. 24.

**Hours:** 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily

**Lifts:** One triple, one double, two surface

**Vertical:** 1,200 feet

**Terrain:** 26 trails, 400 acres (cat skiing adds 2,400 acres). 30% beginner, 40% intermediate, 30% expert

**Nearest beer:** Tennessee Pass Café at 222 Harrison Ave. (719.486.8101), or try The Grill for authentic Mexican food and strong margaritas at 715 Elm St. (719.486.9930).

**Closest coffee:** Cloud City Coffee House at 711 Harrison Ave. (main street, Leadville) also has pastries and sandwiches (719.486.1317).



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