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# BUILDING BIG SKY

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STORY BY DAVID ERICKSON





**A**s the sun sets and a brilliant Alpenglow hue somewhere between pink and orange illuminates the jagged, snowcapped Spanish Peaks range on a cloudless winter night, it's easy to see why Big Sky is becoming known as the "American Alps."

This bustling tourist town in southwest Montana is quickly gaining a reputation as an international luxury travel destination because of Big Sky Resort, one of the largest and most well-equipped ski areas in North America. Visitors are attracted by a range of world-class amenities, from bellmen in cowboy hats who carry skis to servers bringing milkshakes and cocktails to guests in the outdoor heated pool at the base of the slopes. The "mountain village" just below the ski hill boasts everything from high-end retail stores, nail salons, four-star hotels, fine-dining restaurants, live entertainment, children's activities and a movie theater.

"There's a real lifestyle here," explains Brian Wheeler, the resort's director of real estate and development. His job partly entails selling condominiums and land at the resort. The money is then used to make improvements on the mountain, including increasing the amount of employee housing. In fact, the resort recently announced a grand vision for \$150 million in improvements over the next eight years, an initiative called "Big Sky 2025." Plans call for new hotels, new lifts and improvements to existing ones, more ziplines, a transformed base area and much more commercial and retail development. Officials at the resort say the entire community will invest as much as \$1 billion over the next decade in parks and other infrastructure to go along with resort

improvements.

On a record-setting day just after Christmas in 2016, more than 8,000 skiers and snowboarders descended the 300 named runs on the mountain, a sign that the mountain's popularity is only increasing. Big Sky Resort's ski area consists of four separate connected mountains, including the iconic Lone Peak often compared to the Matterhorn because of its imposing, solitary dominance of the skyline. With 5,800 acres of skiable terrain and the highest vertical in the U.S. at 4,500 feet, the resort brands itself as "The Biggest Skiing in America." The longest run is a whopping six miles. There are 23 total lifts, seven terrain parks and a tram that takes the bravest souls to the 11,166-foot summit with 360-degree views.

Although nearly a half-million people visit the resort every year now, it doesn't feel crowded. That's because the sheer size of the place means that there are almost two acres for every skier on an average day.

The resort was founded in 1973 by newscaster Chet Huntley, who co-anchored NBC's evening news program for many years. It was purchased shortly thereafter by Everett Kircher, founder of Boyne Resorts.

Everett's son Stephen Kircher is now the president of eastern operations for Boyne and is working closely on Big Sky Resort's development plans. He remembers when his father was thinking about buying Big Sky after passing up the opportunity to buy ski resorts in Telluride, Colorado, and Jackson, Wyoming.

"It was a bluebird day in the afternoon, and we rounded the corner and saw Lone Peak, and I remember being 11 years old looking out from

the back seat and everybody in the car went 'Oh my gosh, we gotta do this, Dad'," Kircher recalls. "Obviously, we fell in love with Big Sky at first sight."

The ski hill had only about 70,000 skier visits a year back then and was losing millions of dollars, but the Kirchers invested heavily in it over the next four decades.

Now, it's a dazzling, bustling jewel of a resort, the kind of place where even the most seasoned luxury traveler is still awestruck by the beauty and modern comforts.

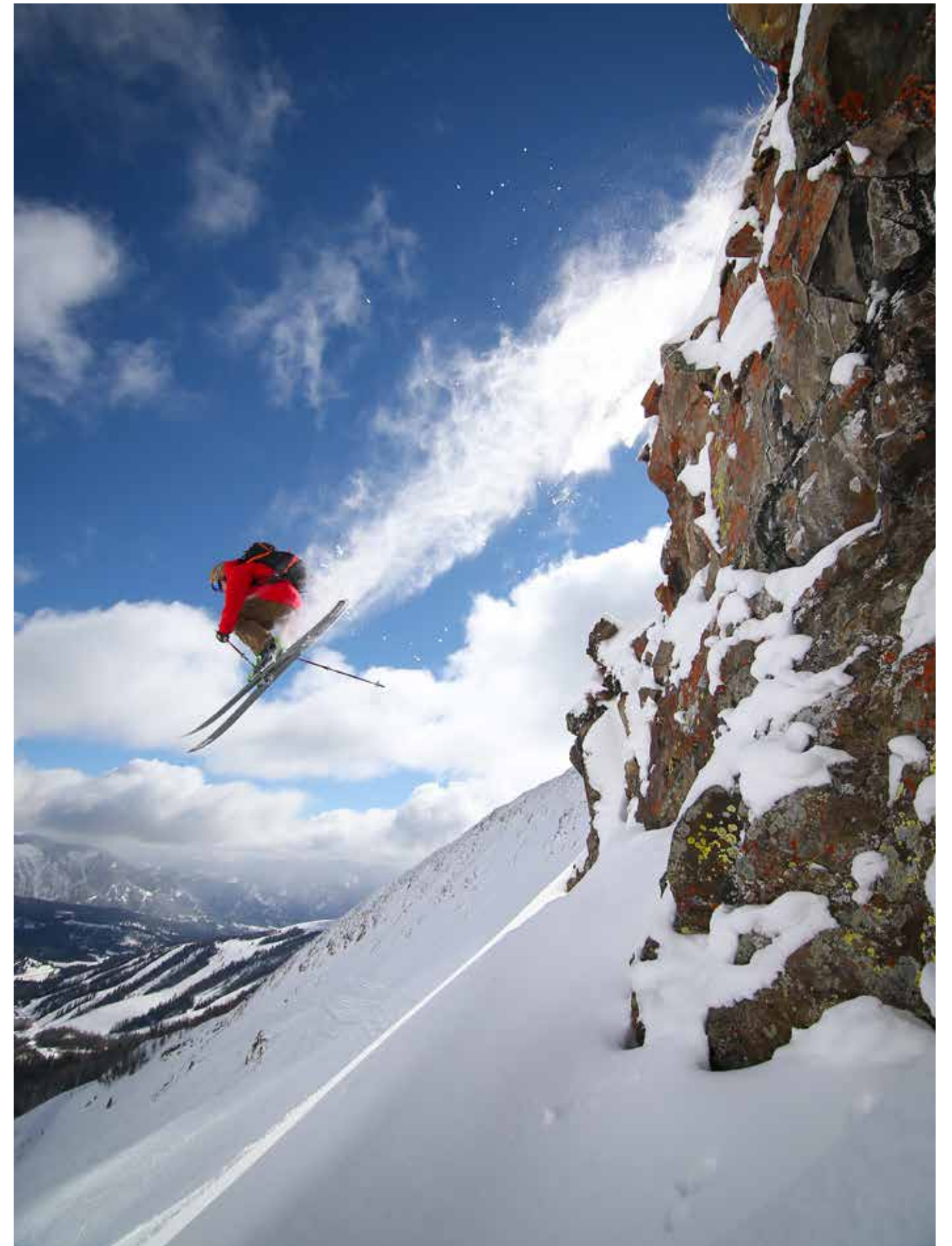
"We're all proud," Kircher said. "Not just the family, but the senior team and the management and all of our employees. We're proud of what we've accomplished and what lies ahead."

Kircher said by 2025, the resort will have one of the continent's most advanced chairlift networks, new on-mountain activities for both summer and winter and elevated dining, lodging and shopping opportunities.

"For more than 67 years, my family and organization (have) remained committed to creating memorable experiences at unique destinations, often inspired by sense of place and attention to detail," Kircher said. "Big Sky will become the best representation of that ideal with our 2025 efforts."

Kircher isn't kidding about the attention to detail. At the four-star Summit Hotel, for example, the lobbies are constantly stocked with bowls of free apples and citrus-flavored ice water to refresh skiers and guests as they walk through on their way to the chairlift a few yards away.

Comfort for families is also a top priority. This past summer, a new lift called Powder Chaser was installed using a Black Hawk helicopter. The



**Previous:** Photo by Chris Kamman.

**Right:** Skier Drew Peterson gets some air. Photo by Jeff Engerbretson.





Big Sky Resort's new Doppelmayr 6-place lift takes skiers up the Bowl in under 3 minutes.  
Photo by Cody Whitmer.

lift is a high-speed, six seater that provides riders with heated seats, backrests and a covered "bubble" to protect them from the snow and wind. It's one of only two bubble lifts in the country, and reaction to it has been a mixture of awe and joy from pleasantly surprised guests, according to resort public relations manager Chelsi Moy.

"We'll reduce the reputation that it's a cold place to ski," Kircher said. "If you can keep people comfortable it's a big part of making the experience... Everyone has different temperature tolerances, especially families with young kids."

The resort is also working to increase the number of non-stop flights to and from the nearby town of Bozeman, with the goal of making it a worldwide mountain venue access point like Salt Lake City or Denver.

"I was talking with a guest the other day who flew in from Newark, New Jersey," Wheeler said. "He and his wife were trying to decide where to go, but he told me the reason they chose Big Sky was the direct flight to Bozeman."

It doesn't hurt that the entrance to the famed Yellowstone National Park, with its iconic geysers and wildlife, is only an hour away. Bighorn sheep, bears and elk are often spotted along the road to Big Sky, and the area is known for its incredible fly fishing opportunities.

The unincorporated community of Big Sky just down the road only boasts a permanent population of just over 2,200. But the resort is making sure the locals have a voice in the development and benefit as well. A resort-wide sales tax goes to make infrastructure repairs or to build new parks for the local school kids.

"Boyne has a 40-year history of investing in Big Sky, and is now doubling down to continue sustainable growth in the community," said Taylor Middleton, president and general manager of Big Sky Resort.

Gallatin County has the fastest-growing economy in the state, and the resort area is a big part of that.

Lone Mountain Land Co. is in the midst of new retail and commercial development in the Big Sky town center area, and a groundbreaking ceremony for a new hotel and residential project is expected soon. The nearby Spanish





**Left:** The Lone Peak Tram whisks skiers up 1,500 vertical feet in about 4 minutes, unloading at 11,166 feet. Photo by Glenniss Indreland.

**Top:** Big Sky's Mountain Village is home to hotels and condominiums with space for over 2,500 visitors. Photo by Glenniss Indreland.

**Above:** Powder Seeker 6-place, new for 2016-17, is the most technologically advanced lift in North America. Photo by Cody Whitmer.

Peaks Mountain Club, a members-only community that features a golf course, a pool and family activities like sleigh rides, has a new neighborhood going in and plans for a new, five-star hotel.

The similar Moonlight Basin community recently built a new set of ski-in, ski-out housing called The Lake Cabins, and its golf course was ranked No. 2 on Golf Digest's "Best New Private Courses" list in 2016.

The Yellowstone Club, a private ski area within view of Big Sky Resort, has a new base village under construction and real estate sales there have been booming at around \$400 million a year recently.

Kircher said that over the years, his company has invested more in Big Sky Resort than it has received. Because it has played the long game, rather than focusing on short-term returns, the entire resort has benefitted and is now what he calls one of the premier vacation spots in the world. Indeed, accents from all over Europe, South America and Asia are often overheard at the hotel bars at night.

"It has been a love affair that's starting to bear fruit," Kircher said. "2025 is really the next decade of improvements. We thought it was important for the community and our customers to know where our priorities are and what we are improving."

He acknowledged that it's a very ambitious project, but also believes that it's a "realistic and sustainable" business model.

"We are really creating a better product on a national level and earning a reputation as an international destination," he said. "Jackson (Wyoming) has done a great job of reinventing itself and also becoming an international product. With the combination of the two northern resorts, Big Sky and Jackson, there is a little bit of

a shift that this part of the Rockies is becoming more attractive."

Wheeler said that the feedback he gets from real estate buyers is that they love Big Sky Resort because of the close-knit atmosphere.

"It's family-oriented, it's simple and there's fewer crowds," he said. "Parking is free and access to the mountain is amazingly simpler than other places. And our summer experience has a lot happening, with

farmers markets and festivals and art and classical music. There's 17 softball teams in this tiny little town."



The sense of adventure is palpable in a place like Big Sky, because a new crowd of thrill-seekers arrives every day.




"You have somewhere to go every night," Wheeler said. "Someone is always inviting you to cocktail hour. Every night is like Saturday night if you want it to be." **M**

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