

BY SAMANTHA WRIGHT

*World-Class Skiing**St. Paul Lodge*
*Old-World Charm**R*

ed Mountain Pass beckons to snowriders all winter long with its easily accessed powdery playground of skin-up/ski-down terrain. These days, the area is dotted with several ski huts, but the St. Paul Lodge is the soulful, rambling granddaddy of them all.

Getting there, from a parking area at the top of the pass, requires an easy mile or so of kick-gliding along an unplowed county road. You can't miss it. Come up over a little rise and there it's nestled, in

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It's a little rough around the edges, but there's plenty of running water at the St. Paul Lodge (top left), thanks to an ingenious plumbing system which proprietor Chris George designed and built himself by tapping into a spring on the property. The lodge is heated by a Russian stove, or cockle opfen. The system (center left) consists of a wood-burning fireplace and serpentine flu encased in 15 tons of brick. In addition to the lodge, George has also refurbished a cabin on the property, whose loft (bottom left) offers a cozy place to sleep on a winter's night. The St. Paul Lodge, atop Red Mountain Pass, offers access to some of the best steeps and deeps of the San Juans. (Photos by Samantha Wright) Photo: A visitor in winter (facing page). (Courtesy photo)



an alpine basin, at the foot of McMillan Peak (12,805 feet), whose flanks offer a white-pillowed nursery of beginner-friendly winter terrain.

Off to the south, U.S. Basin's smooth, snowy slopes sweep up to a ridgeline with see-forever views of Silverton, the Animas River gorge, the Continental Divide and the ragged-toothed Weminuche Wilderness. Across the way, on the other side of the highway, Chattanooga and Trico Peaks rise up, pointing the way toward the Ophir area, near Telluride.

It was all green, wet and fog-shrouded, in the early 1970s, when Chris George first beheld this place and envisioned the lodge he was destined to build here. Already a seasoned mountaineer, with expeditions in the Alps, Afghanistan, Scandinavia and the Andes behind him, George came to America to work for the Colorado Outward Bound School in 1967 on a ten-week contract to teach mountaineering and skiing.

"And I'm still here," he remembered. "It's hard to get away from Colorado."

Over the course of a decade, George worked all over the state, running winter programs at East High School and Colorado Academy in Denver. When at last he saw the South San Juans, that was it. "I knew where I wanted to be."

In 1973, age 32, married and working for Outward Bound out of Red Cloud Ranch, in Lake City, George was restless, ready to break away and do something new. On one of his days off, he and his wife made their way to Silverton, riding his motorcycle over Cinnamon Pass.

When they arrived, they searched out a local real estate broker who told the couple about a mining claim called the St. Paul that was for sale, up on Red Mountain Pass. They made their way up there, on a road barely wide enough for the motorbike.

It was a rainy, monsoon-y August afternoon.

"We came up over that rise over there, and I saw this building," George recalled of the first time he laid eyes on the old mining structure, called a tippel house, that he transformed into the St. Paul Lodge. "I've often said, I felt like Brigham Young when he saw the Salt Lake. I said, 'This is the place. This place has been waiting for a guy like me.'"

The couple ventured into the structure with a dirt floor that had been "kind of trashed" from efforts to strip it of its old mining machinery during World War II. George didn't care. He had caught a whiff of both his future and his past in the tippel house's musty air.

"I looked at the way it was timbered and it reminded me of an old English barn," he said, his voice hushed with wonder at the memory. "Or, as a friend



'It's hard to get away from Colorado.'

of mine said, "This isn't a barn; it's a *mead hall*! We got really romantic about the whole thing. We'd suddenly leaped back to *Beowulf*."

In addition to the tipple house and some other outbuildings, the St. Paul claim boasted a few derelict miner's cabins that bore evidence of creature comforts once enjoyed by its inhabitants, including steam heat, electricity, even a telephone line. One of those cabins was still barely intact. "I got here just in the nick of time," George said.

With some help from his in-laws, George bought the place for \$7,500.

The first task was to get the cabin straightened up, weatherproofed and remodeled. "We worked like dogs until the end of October," he said. "It was the Indian summer of Indian summers. It went on and on and on. We had all this great weather. We got a roof on it, and a coal range in there."

By Thanksgiving, they were ready for paying guests. "We did like Middle Eastern or European immigrants; we put the guests upstairs in the bed and we slept on the kitchen floor. That's how we got started."

Next, George got to work on the tipple house. The building, though cavernous, had only had one floor, so his first task was to dig down about five or six feet to create enough interior space for his future lodge to have both an upstairs and a downstairs.

He dug all winter, using a pick and shovel to excavate broken rocks bound together by frozen kaolin clay. "Sunday nights, I would cook a big Swedish stew in a five-gallon pot in the cabin. Then me and my cat would come up here every day and I would measure out a square and say, I'm going to get rid of that by sundown."

His dilemma was where to throw the dirt. An old mineshaft under the tipple house's eaves presented itself as the obvious solution.

"It snowed 800 inches that winter," he recalled. "The snow was almost up to the eaves." By May, 1975, the job was done. George's first marriage broke up a year later.

"I was here by myself," George said. "But I didn't mind being by myself. I loved the place, so it didn't matter. I fell in love with this building. That's what got me. I just looked at this place and said, 'This place needs me.' It's still standing because I did what I did."

As a little boy in Surrey, England, George had watched teams of men working on bombed-out buildings. "Our own home was bombed," he recalled. "When I got into the loft of our house in England, all the rafters were sistered. Each broken rafter had a new rafter beside it. They pushed things back into place, and nailed in new timbers. That's why this place didn't frighten me."

Today, at age 73, George still marvels at the joinery, the quality of the work, the hand hewn timbers. He describes with awe how the building's foundation was painstakingly fashioned out of redwood sills, pilings and planks set in the muck, in much the same manner as medieval stone buildings in Europe. "It grabbed the historian in me, and the romantic in me," George said.

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It was love at first sight for British native Chris George (opposite), when he came across a historic mining structure called a tippie house atop Red Mountain Pass in 1974 (top left), and transformed into the St. Paul Ski Lodge. A historic cabin on the property dating back to 1887 (below left) once provided a home for miners. Now restored, it is available for short-term rentals and was recently featured on a website called "cabin porn." (Photos by Samantha Wright) Chris George (facing page). (Courtesy photo)

METAMORPHOSIS

Within a few years, the tippie house had metamorphosed into the ski lodge that George envisioned, with an upstairs, downstairs, dormitory rooms, kitchen, sunroom and generous deck, common rooms, and cozy quarters for the growing family that he and his second wife, Donna, were by now raising together at 11,440 feet.

Tapping into a nearby spring, George devised a system to get running water into the lodge. The system still operates today. Water flows downhill through a pipeline to fill up a tank on the roof. When the tank is full, the water continues its journey through another pipe and back down to the creek.

"The water is moving all the time," George explained. "If you keep water flowing, you can keep it from freezing.

"We also pride ourselves in being able to take a hot shower here," he added. That might have been a condition that Donna set, when the feisty redhead from California agreed to move up to Red Mountain with her Englishman.

"She's the second Tomboy Bride, Donna is," George said fondly. "She made it work and she never complained."

Today, with their three kids grown, and the family headquarters having shifted to Durango, George once again finds plenty of solitude at the lodge.

"It is still a work in progress," said George, who recently had heart surgery. The asthma of his youth is acting up again, and his thick, once-blond beard is going gray. But the Brit is still up here on the mountain most days, providing gregarious Old World hospitality to his guests.

George has never known a stranger. He's rubbed shoulders with more than a few mountaineering luminaries – like the Stettner brothers, and Dolores and Ed La Chapelle, who once frequented the lodge.

"I'd have these old European guys here – guys from Germany, Czechoslovakia and Poland – they'd walk in that door and practically burst into tears," George chuckled. "This place reminded them of the old ski lodges they'd grown up with, back home."

Elizabeth Shogren, an environmental reporter with National Public Radio, once came here on a holiday.

"But one of the most notable people was the French atomic physicist Cécile DeWhitt-Morette, who founded the School of Applied Physics in a place called Les Houches just below Chamonix, in France," George said.

Some of the best-known mountaineering guides of



...funky youth hostel meets alpine chalet...

the San Juans, including Michael Covington, still use the St. Paul Lodge as a base for instructional programs, as do numerous universities from around the country, from Dartmouth to the University of Texas to Ft. Lewis College (just down the road).

For years, whenever guests came up to the lodge, George did "all the guiding, all the cooking and all the housewifery." But he doesn't guide anymore.

"People who come up now know what they are doing," he reflected. "They have the savoir-faire to do it for themselves. The market realities have changed."

George himself is partially responsible for this phenomenon, having spent much of his career teaching others how to backcountry ski, and how to do it safely in avalanche terrain.

The west flank of McMillan Peak is still George's bread and butter. "Although not 100 percent safe, it has fairly reasonably avalanche-free terrain," he explained. "All the terrain surrounding it, as we well know, is completely loaded."

On a visit to St. Paul Lodge in early 2012, Ohio Peak and U.S. Basin beckoned in the bright March sunlight. Soon, it would be sugar-snow season. For years, George and his guests had the whole place largely to themselves. Now that word has gotten out about the legendary powder stashes on Red Mountain Pass, he's had to get used to sharing.

Many guests these days opt to rent the cabin, where they look after themselves, but George "still caters out of the lodge," which is perfect for large groups.

Wintertime recreation possibilities here range from porch-sitting and bird-watching to snowshoeing and flat-track skiing, from low-angle beginner-friendly telemarking to the kind of steep and deep cliff-hucking insanity where, as the Denver magazine *Westword* put it in a recent headline, "skiers/climbers/whoever fall thousands of feet and [usually] don't die."

THE DIGS

Come on up to the lodge, and if George is around (as he is most winter days), he's happy to show you around.

All in all, the place is quite a step up from indoor camping. Old wooden skis and snowshoes decorate the walls; it has two showers (with warm water!), a three-seater "in-house," and, best of all, a sauna. Rustic is the word that comes to mind for the lodge, which is perhaps best described as funky youth hostel meets alpine chalet.

"The place is a little crude and under-financed, but it functions," George said, grinning, clearly at ease with the whole rough-around-the-edges concept.

The lodge is heated by a Russian stove, or *cockle opfen*, that George built himself. The system consists of a wood-burning fireplace and serpentine flue encased in 15 tons of brick. Hardly any heat goes up the chimney; instead, the heat of the fire is absorbed by the bricks, which radiate a constant, even warmth. It's an efficient, time-honored heating system often seen in Russia, eastern Europe, Germany and the Alps, requiring very little fuel and releasing few, if any, pol-

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lutants into the atmosphere.

"Once you get it hot, you only have to light it for about two hours a day; then you let it go out," George said. "It just stays warm, and you don't need anything else."

Under a trapdoor in the wood-planked dining room floor, a mine shaft plumbs a silver-rich breccia pipe, 800 feet down into the earth. It has the cool, earthy, metallic-tinged breath of an old mine. George keeps potatoes, apples and vegetables down there now.

A small set of stairs curves its way from the kitchen to the second floor, where George points out the sway bracing and hand hewn beams crafted by carpenters a century ago.

The place can sleep 22 people in a number of dormitory-style and private rooms. There are plenty of beds, with mattresses and pillows, but it's BYOB – "Bring Your Own (sleeping) Bag." Chris and Donna's south-facing room – cozy, lovely and warm – has a double bed, properly made up with sheets and a quilt. It is transitioning into a guest room too, now that they don't live here full time anymore.

A loft, once the family living room, has been repurposed into a classroom and lecture hall, where a generator can be fired up for slideshows.

By night, the place is lit by kerosene lamps.

Step out onto the huge sun porch on the second story to get a better feeling for the lay of the land – mountains upon sprawling mountains, all dolloped in snow. Just down the hill is the little cabin in the big woods, and its outhouse with possibly the best view in San Juan County.



UNCHANGED SINCE 1887

George mentions offhandedly that someone recently posted a picture of it on a website called "Cabin Porn."

"The place hasn't changed since 1887," he said, squinting down at the rustic log structure. "It's just the way it was. It has such a nice feeling."

Having weathered the storms of time up here on the mountain, George now thinks about what might come next for the old place. His oldest child, Christopher, recently obtained a master's degree in recreational management, and seems to be following his

father's footsteps in many ways.

"He's been a guide for the Air Force, he's taught ice climbing. He's taking after his old man. But he has a degree in English, and he's an absolute mustard on organizing things," George said proudly.

"That's why I keep the pot boiling. If I leave it empty, the animals will take over. I'm keeping it for the kids. I think Christopher ... it's kind of made for him. He's already prodding me. Since Christmas, we've done about three times the business we did last year. All it takes is brains."

That, and a lot of love.

GETTING THERE:

Red Mountain Pass is located on Highway 550, north of Silverton and south of Ouray. The St. Paul Ski Lodge is accessed via San Juan County Road 14, which veers off to the southeast from a parking area near the top of the pass. In the winter, there will almost certainly be a well-skiied trail heading off into the woods in a southeasterly direction. The road is a bit steep in places, but doable even for beginners. After about a mile, you'll see a sign for the Saint Paul Lodge. The lodge and cabin are open year-round, with skiing in the winter and spring, and four-wheeling, mountain biking and hiking in the summer and fall.

Reservations and information: 970/799-0785, skistpaul.com, stpaul@frontier.net.

Colorado Avalanche Information Center (CAIC) Avalanche Hotline: 970/247-8187, avalanche.state.co.us. @

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