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TRAVEL

First-family-friendly Vail

A Presidents Day retreat finds a resort gleaming with lodging and entertainment upgrades

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When a mom plans a long Presidents Day weekend getaway with her daughters, she considers a variety of factors.

Does the destination have enough fun things to occupy everyone the whole time? Is it inviting to kids? Do the restaurants offer more than chicken nuggets and grilled cheese? Can Mom find a place to hide and read People magazine in peace for 15 minutes without anyone poking an eye out?

Colorado has more than its fair share of possibilities, but go ahead, see if Vail fits.

Check, check, check, check.

When that mom happens to be the wife of the president of the United States, the criteria shouldn't change a lot. Sure, there's the consideration of where all those Secret Service people will hang their



earpieces, but otherwise, the same questions might apply. It isn't just about the skiing in Vail. The area has added entertainment options, 305 new residences, 100 hotel rooms, eight eateries and has plans for Ever Vail, a \$1.5 billion, mixed-use project on 11 acres in West Lionshead. (Chris McLennan, Vail Resorts)



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That's why it wasn't much of a surprise that first lady Michelle Obama chose the largest single-mountain ski area in the United States for what Obama's spokeswoman, Katie McCormick-Lelyveld, confirmed was a "private family trip" last weekend. Obama and the first daughters, Malia, 12, and Sasha, 9, along with family friends, stayed at the new Sebastian Hotel.

Adventure Ridge added tubing lanes and an enclosed, elevated lift that makes return trips to the top faster and more runs possible. (Bob Winsett, Vail Resorts)

The Sebastian, a Timbers Resort and Residence Club, is just one of several recently opened properties around town. Vail has had a bit of a growth spurt since the summer, gaining multiple residence clubs, including the Four Seasons Resort and Residences Vail and the Solaris residences and entertainment complex — both in Vail Village — and the Ritz-Carlton Residences on the western end of Lionshead. In addition, sushi restaurant

Yama opened in September on Gore Creek Drive.

The additions bring 305 residences and 100 hotel rooms, as well as eight new eateries, to the valley.

But wait, there's more. Ever Vail, still in the planning stages, is a \$1.5 billion project scheduled for an 11-acre site in West Lionshead at the base of Vail Mountain. The plan calls for a mixed-use

space to include a RockResorts hotel, residences, offices, retail shops, restaurants, a parking garage, gondola and public plaza.

"It's a testament to the commitment we have to our mountains, when other areas may have been forced to pull back, that we continued to push forward," says Vail spokeswoman Liz Biebl. "Did we ever hit a speed bump, when the economy was bad? Yes. When you look back at that time period, we still had cranes up all over town, but we persevered."

The cranes have indeed come down — at least until work starts on Ever Vail — and locals and out-of-towners alike are getting to know such attractions as CineBistro, the new movie theater/restaurant at Solaris, and the hip, aptly named Bol, where



The Sebastian has an outdoor heated pool and roomy hot tubs, two that are adult-only. (Kyle Wagner, The Denver Post)

Brooks Keith and his daughter Katie are bowling their first game.

"We're having a daddy-daughter afternoon," Keith says. "My wife and our other daughter are going over to the movie theater to spend some time together, which works out perfectly."

More entertainment options

Keith says the family, which lives in Edwards, was delighted when the entertainment hot spots opened. "We really needed this," he says. "Yeah, it's not the cheapest thing, but look where we are. But it was so



At the top of Eagle's Nest, the family can tube, snowshoe and ski-bike, and

kids can ride small snowmobiles. (Chris McLennan, Vail Resorts)

necessary. And look how fun it is."

He nods toward Katie, who has just gone to the lane to throw another ball. She grins and claps, and then comes back to the spacious seating area to snack on some house-made potato chips while

she waits for her next turn. "Sometimes I don't want to do anything outside," she says.

Mark Christie, who greets out-of-towners and shares information along with popular ambassador Buddy the dog at the Vail Visitor Information Center, has run into his fair share of Katie Keiths.

"In the past, when it was raining or the weather was bad, what could I say? Now I can say, go bowling, go to the movies," Christie says. "These were great additions to the scene."

Vail Resorts also put money into on-mountain improvements, replacing the legendary High Noon lift — better known as Chair 5 — with a high-speed quad.

The Obamas probably didn't notice that because they spent most of their time on the easier runs



CineBistro is a restaurant and theater showing three first-run movies daily. (CineBistro)

off the Eagle Bahn gondola, but Sasha and Malia did spend one evening with their friends tubing at Adventure Ridge, which was upgraded over the summer. Additional tubing lanes were added along with a new enclosed, elevated lift, which makes getting back up the hill faster, allowing for more downhill time.

The Keiths hadn't heard that the Obamas were in town, but they said they thought it made sense. "Look at all the options there are here," Keith says. "They can ski, they can bowl, they can go snowshoeing, they have endless choices of where to go out to eat. And if they don't want to do any of that, they can just hang out at the hotel in the pool. We haven't been over there yet, but I've heard the Sebastian is beautiful. My wife was going to go over there and just walk around and check it out."

The Sebastian was indeed a smart pick — it's quiet, the staff is discreet and professional, and the property, which opened in November, has plenty of space to spread out — or never be seen, if that's what you desire.

"We have a staff that was already familiar with the workings of this kind of situation, so that was probably a consideration. I think we were also chosen based on our location," says Ann Lynch, director of sales and marketing for the Sebastian. "But clearly, first and foremost, they chose the destination."



At Bol, Edwards resident Katie Keith tries for a strike at one of the 10 lanes backed by giant screens. (Kyle Wagner, The Denver Post)

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