



Soak It In

In the simmering sanctuary of a mountain hot tub, we confront the elements—and ourselves. By Ron S. Doyle

TI swear I heard a squeak—like wet balloons rubbing against one another—when the taut-and-toned skin of the two twentysomethings first collided. I was schlepping grocery bags back to my family's hotel room when I noticed the couple, pressing hard and careless against one another in a hot tub. The sun was on its final tilt, stretching light long and orange, but dark was still an hour away. Three manorexic college boys nursing cans of cheap beer sat in another tub, also staring, their mouths agape. A circle of prune-skinned seniors softly chuckled and cooed, lightly encouraging the passionate display. The two lovers knit their mouths together, completely unaware of their audience.

There are lots of iconic symbols of life in the mountains: The glow of aspens in the fall. Glittery fresh powder. Pristine mountain streams. Sunshine on your shoulders. Whatever. You want a symbol? I say it's the hot tub.

Think about it for a moment: Like life in a mountain town, a hot tub is totally decadent with just a hint of dirty. Space and sometimes privacy are limited; germs and gossip spread quickly. It's okay for children in small doses, but it's primarily a place made for athletes, adventurous single folks, and successful retirees. It can be difficult to maintain, in both terms of cost and convenience. And even a three-degree temperature change, in either direction, can make the difference between a good day and a bad one.

But we're not talking Jacuzzis here, the foo-foo indoor cousins of the hot tub. I'm talking the real deal—outdoors, in the ground or on a wooden deck, in the snow. Thick brown foam-and-vinyl insulating covers that burp steam like a new piece of Tupperware. Deep, 1970s cask-barrel-style soakers with

benches made of redwood, and those shiny new one-piece, vacuum-formed acrylic models with bucket seats and jets so strong they could knock you over if you weren't already sitting down.

That's mountain life's true baptismal fountain, where we all strip to our skivvies (or less) to confront the elements, one another, and ourselves. It's the altar at which so many of mountain life's rites of passage are performed.

Maybe that's why I couldn't help but stare at the lovers. Seeing them, young and unfettered, filled me with nostalgia for the time in my life when the mountains were my everything—when my beard was big, my winter skin was thick, and I was never treated like a tourist above 9000 feet. Seeing them made me remember the beginning of my love affair with mountain living.

I was a freshman in college; it was my first invitation to stay in a mountain condo. The dozen teenagers that packed into the place on Buffalo Mountain each had their own firsts—some drinking for the first time, some making first-time romantic plans. For me, it was my first trip to Summit County.

The native Colorado kids changed into trunks and bikinis, wrapped themselves in towels, and ambled out to the hot tub across the snow-packed parking lot in bare feet. I wanted to join but I was terrified. In the mind of this New Mexican desert boy, the snow could have been glowing charcoals. But I knew that the hot tub snow walk was an initiation—so I bared my soles

to the snow and became someone new. It sealed my sense of belonging, it made me an equal.

Indeed, the circular hot tub is a great equalizer, no one position holding more power than another, making it the perfect place for post-pow-pow pow-pows. Hot tub poachers climb fences for a free soak while hot tub owners grow bored of their own and hike off in search of backcountry hot springs. Access keys and codes to the best condo hot tubs are coveted, traded and shared in secret like powder stashes. Ever wonder why mountain locals are so friendly to tourists? They want an invitation to one of those big hotel whirlpools downtown.

Ultimately, hot tubs are an apt metaphor for mountain living because they are like us. Let's face it: Hot

tubs and humans are essentially oversized bags of hot water. We aren't made for below-freezing temperatures at 9000 feet. It's easy to start wondering, especially when you're sitting outside in a hot

tub during a snowstorm, if perhaps maybe we don't belong here.

But the hot tub, like a mountain town, is supportive. It wraps you in a warm bubble, a lover's embrace, enabling your survival in the colossal cold. Maybe we don't make sense here. But as you lean back and look up at the sky, enamored with the peaks around you, watching the snowflakes and steam collide, polar opposites dancing and swirling, accepting one another, it becomes possible to imagine that maybe the mountains love us back. ❄️

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