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## My 60-Something Mom Just Moved to a Ski Town—Here’s How It’s Going

My mom hadn’t skied in 20 years when she up and moved to Park City on what felt like a whim. Now her social calendar is perpetually packed.

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[SCOTT YORKO \(HTTPS://WWW.SKIMAG.COM/BYLINE/SCOTT-YORKO/\)](https://www.skimag.com/byline/scott-yorko/)



As a young kid growing up in the Philadelphia area, my mom, dad, twin sisters, and I would pile into our purple Toyota Previa for day trips to shred whatever man-made Pocono snow awaited us in northeast Pennsylvania. Once the hook was set, we progressed to ski school and long ski weekends in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, and, before long, every spring or winter family vacation we took was a ski trip out West, far eclipsing our previous Disney World experience.

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The author's mother, Jackie Oken, wasted no time getting back on the slopes after moving to Park City in 2021.  
Photo: John Howland

After a few years of straight-lining Pocono slopes on skis, I caught the snowboard bug in its heyday of the early '90s, making friends with families who had houses near ski resorts in New England, competing and getting sponsored by local ski shops and saving up all year to go to snowboard camp on Mt. Hood every summer. The flame of my greatest passion was ablaze and I was reaping the benefits of an agenda spearheaded by my father, who grew up in the inner city and desperately wanted the family to share his curiosity and excitement in exploring the great outdoors.

“This was just at the beginning of when small ski areas were starting to transform to a more expensive crowd,” he recalls. “It was like a celebration for your mom and me to be able to afford this stuff that neither of us grew up around and to learn to be a ski family.”

My mom's memories hold similar optimism: “Dad invited me on a ski trip to Vail a month after I met him and I loved that because it didn't have the ice of the East Coast.” They stayed at the Christiania Chalet with one small bed, bought matching corduroy hats, and sang along to Billy Joel's “Piano Man” blasting on my dad's Sony Walkman while skiing fresh January powder under the strong Colorado sun.

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The writer, center, with his family on a visit out West to Keystone, Colo. (Photo: Courtesy of the Yorko Family)

They went on a few more ski trips before my sisters and I came along and it became a family affair. “We’d run out of the hot tubs and roll around in the snow and get back in,” she laughs. “I loved the 4 o’clock happy hour getting warm by the fire with live music. I got to ski for a week once a year for 15 or 16 years.” She remembers the whole operation running pretty smoothly for a while, with Dad wrangling all of the equipment while she did the mom stuff—getting meals together and wrangling everyone into ski school.

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But it wouldn't remain quite so rosy.

“We were so into it,” Dad says, “but that may have been a distraction from the shortcomings of the relationship.”

“I think you had a drastically different experience,” my sister Jess says. “It was always such a big deal to get all our stuff together, have the right gear, and listen to Dad overexplain things ... I don’t even know if we ever had a choice to ski. It was just something we did.”

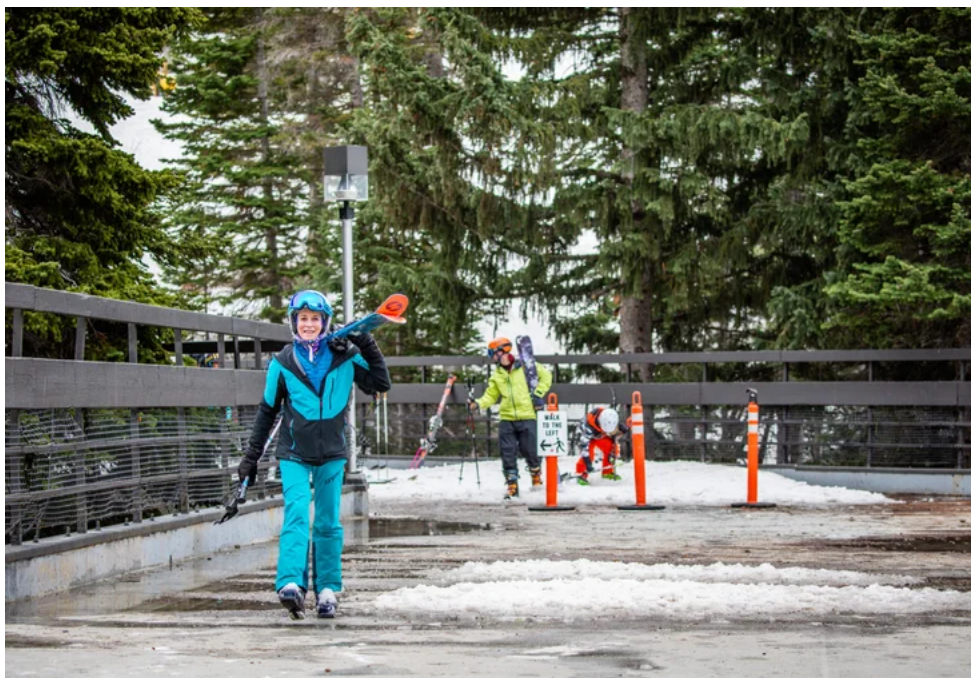
“It was never fun,” her twin, Danielle, tells me. “Skiing was a really stressful and unhappy time. I remember feeling shitty about being bad at skiing and there was so much competition amongst us. Jess and I would fight over who got to sit on the chairlift with Dad because he always had Snickers in his pockets. He and mom would always be fighting and making critical comments to each other. It seemed like no one wanted to be there but you!”

As much as the good times shined, our skis weren’t the only thing racing downhill. We all felt the darkness of my parents’ tumultuous marriage casting an icy shadow over our week at the ski condo.

“Mom stopped wanting to go on vacations with me so you and I just peeled off and turned it into a father/son thing,” my dad explains, a deal in which my younger sisters got supremely shafted. “We were also overbooked with school and two careers and then team sports got more serious and knocked out regular family ski weekends.”

When they finally divorced, Mom was working full-time and didn’t have the money, time, or anyone to ski with. Aside from her ex-husband, she’d only ever skied with other couples or her kids. Jess and Danielle skied and snowboarded intermittently, Dad went on his annual guys trip to Vail, and I moved West, where the mountains became a major part of my life. Mom’s last ski trip was to New Hampshire for New Years in 2000.

**That’s why it completely blew my mind** last summer when Mom, 18 years divorced, still single, and living near her nonagenarian mother in Richmond, Virginia, informed me that she was selling her house and was under contract on a condo near Park City, Utah. I’d been trying to get her to move to Colorado, closer to her Western-transplant kids, for years. I still don’t know exactly why or how she chose Park City, but I was almost as psyched as she was.



It took a few days on the slopes to get her ski legs back under her, but Oken continues to level up thanks in part to her beloved new skis. Photo: John Howland

“I was shocked because I don’t really have any memories of her skiing,” says Jess, who is now living in Oregon. “I tried to think of any reasons why it wasn’t a good thing and all I could come up with was ‘Hell Yeah!’”

Dad was also baffled by the news. “It’s not like every week is spring break out there. She always talked about wanting warmer weather.”

Mom is extremely active and rides her road/gravel bike at least 4,500 miles a year while spending hours a week on the Stairmaster training for who knows what, but didn’t have much more than that going on in Virginia. Despite her 21-year hiatus from skiing, she was feeling the preseason stoke. She bought an Epic Local Pass, texted me at all hours for winter gear advice, and sleuthed around Facebook forums inquiring about used uphill setups.

Accompanying the wave of anticipation were lingering background questions about how this abrupt life move would play out. Would Mom quickly remember how much she hates the cold? Would she get hurt? Would localized ski culture be intimidating to a new transplant after such a long absence? Or would she enter into the happiest golden age in her life with only a tinge of regret for not making the move 20 years earlier?

The truth is that Mom had been pretty lost for years and, now 66, was sensing that her window to live the active lifestyle she always wanted in a place with ample opportunity would soon be closing. She needed this beacon of hope.

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Within 48 hours of Mom’s arrival in Park City, before her Subaru or the moving truck even showed up, Danielle and her fiancé, Dan, flew into town from the Bay Area and I drove from Colorado. It was Christmas week, but Santa Claus was hardly the main attraction now that skiing was back on the holiday menu. Mom had already Ubered to a ski shop to get her new boots fitted and she was geared up and ready to ski before she’d even unpacked her bags. Post office, grocery shopping, and other errands be damned—first we ski.

Her inaugural day back on the slopes at [Park City Mountain Resort](https://www.parkcitymountain.com/) (<https://www.parkcitymountain.com/>) was like a rebirth. For the first time since parabolics were the hot new thing, Mom had to remember how to carry skis and step into them, how to skate, and push across flats. With no idea about RFID sensors, she stood in line holding up her pass waiting for the liftie to hole-punch it.



A lot has changed since Oken's last time on the slopes, including trading in her widgets and paper lift tickets for RFID cards. Photo: John Howland

"I do this now!" she choked up as the highspeed eight-pack lift zoomed her up into the sunshine. Like a baby deer, her skiing was a little wobbly at first, but she skipped pizza and falling leaf and went right back to linking turns with her feet close together in old-school style. She was in awe of her new home and even started scoping out dating prospects, which we hadn't heard her do, really, ever. "I'd date him," she said about a friendly mountain host. "I'd definitely date him!" after a chairlift ride with another energetic retiree.

The next day, we met Danielle and Dan at Deer Valley and took some easy laps, but made sure to enjoy a long après on the deck next to a heater as clouds blew in. Everyone was psyched that this reunion was actually happening, but Covid tensions were still high on top of preexisting family issues and the time together was building with stress. My sister blew up at me and my mom over a small thing and it was a tearful, shouting mess from which no one believed we would recover. So much for this family skiing experiment.

Somehow, with lots of soft spoken apologies, we pulled it together enough to chase new snowfall at [Alta](https://www.alta.com/) (https://www.alta.com/) the next day. The freshies were soft but the light was flat and, for her third day in a row back on skis, Mom's seizure of this special moment with her kids was pushing her beyond her limits. She hit a bump she didn't see and face planted into the slope.

"My body wants to go in but my mind wants to keep skiing with my kids," she said. I convinced her it was time to take a break, but on the way down to the base, I watched her lose control and wrench her ankle on another fall. I skied over and could hear her crying through her balaclava with that old familiar self-disappointment. She spent the rest of the day icing her ankle at the Goldminer's Daughter Lodge, but was able to shake it off and smile while heeding the lesson on listening to her body when it's time to call it. Still, with such an immediate setback, we all wondered how this whole new life was going to work out.

Two weeks after Christmas, Jess came to Mom's condo to ski and visit from Oregon with her dog and some friends. It was happening—the kids were coming, fulfilling Mom's prophecy and actually wanting to visit where she lived. "She was still finding her groove, but really excited to show me all of the new places and things she'd found around town and new trails and stuff," Jess said.

A week later, I called mom to check in on how she was adjusting and she answered with “You’ll never guess who I skied with today...” Apparently Dad had been in town visiting friends and called her to ask if she’d like to take some laps. They caught up and made tame conversation over mellow laps at Park City.

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“The weather was nice and it reminded me of our first time skiing together 40 years ago,” he said.

In March, Mom’s brother popped in for a visit on an annual work trip and they skied together for several days, the first time in decades. She’d upgraded to the Blizzard Black Pearls and left me a rambling voicemail in tears of joy, “Honey, I am LOVING my new skis! Ah! It’s like a little breath of fresh air—they just do exactly what I want them to—and I got first chair on a bluebird day. The Uintas were amazing yesterday. I had three friends with me in the woods on cross-country skis doing seven miles. There’s another group going to the same area tomorrow and I might do that.”

**Less than six months later**, it was hard to get my mom on the phone. Her social activity calendar was jam-packed with downhill skiing, cross-country skiing, hiking, road biking, pickle ball, and pool parties. She’d even somehow found the time to learn to play mahjong and was even taking mountain biking lessons, something she’d all but sworn off the last time I sandbagged her on muddy singletrack. She’d found dozens of groups and friends with whom to do it all.



The garage at Oken’s condo is now packed with toys, including bikes, skis, and snowshoes. Photo: John Howland

“I put myself out of my comfort zone on a daily basis to learn the trails and meet like-minded people, but the web is so easily spun here that it’s paid off in spades,” she told me on the phone between a hiking date and paddleboarding this summer. “I used to have to try so hard. It just shows that you can take a divorced, senior, East Coast, retired woman without many active passions and she can go to a ski town and create this outdoor life and

immediately have an endless natural playground to do all of these things she never imagined doing. It's almost a fairytale, but you have to have the courage to leap and immerse yourself."

"I think it's been an insanely positive experience for her," says Danielle, who is even considering giving a Christmas ski trip another try this year. "She was intimidated when she first started skiing again, but she's relaxed into it and feels proud of herself for getting back on the slopes and it's kind of beautiful."



Oken may have come for the winters, but enjoys the summers just as much, if not more. Photo: John Howland

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Now, we're all psyched for the next visit to Mom's new home. Rather than sitting around killing tense time between holiday meals, we all get to play outside together in a way that was cut short in our childhood. It turns out that this move, which not too long ago seemed like a sudden, shocking leap, now looks like a well-calculated orchestration, all by Mom's design.

As she says, "skiing is the thread tying it all together."

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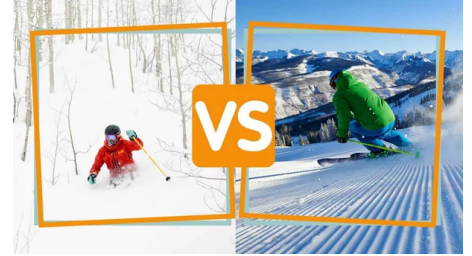
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