Vehicle crowds among largest in Vail’s history

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By John LaConte

VAIL — Saturday was one of the busiest winter days in the town’s history for weekend warriors trying to get off the roads and onto the slopes.

After both parking structures filled by 10 a.m., the town of Vail recorded 1,070 vehicles spilled over onto South Frontage Road and 297 cars in the free lots that shuttle visitors into town.

“It’s one of the busiest days on record, for sure,” said Kevin Berga, Vail’s parking supervisor. “In the last few years, we’ve had some 800-car days during the winter season, but we haven’t seen more than a thousand in the winter like this in a while.”

Berga says the winter record of 1,380 cars, which was set around 10 years ago, came before the days of the free lots in West Vail, which hold roughly 300 vehicles, and before the Solaris lot, which has roughly 250 spaces available for skier parking.

“I remember we hit nearly 1,400 the first year Vail introduced the buddy pass, where you could ski 10 days here,” Berga said.

BUSY FOR A REASON

On Vail Mountain, skiers swapped stories of 45-minute lift lines.

“There was no escape,” said Mike Paulick. “It was the longest lift lines I have ever seen at Vail ... The China Bowl lift line was 35 minutes and built up immediately after they dropped the ropes in the morning.”

Paulick was one of many who found themselves amid a crowd at the Blue Sky and Teacup chairs the likes of which they had never seen.
“The crowd to get to Chairs 36 and 37 was backed up past the bridge getting into Blue Sky,” said Matt Iarrobino, who was
at the mountain at 7:30 a.m. in an attempt to beat the crowds. “The Eagle Bahn Gondola and Chair 8 were both
completely clogged by 8 a.m. It was the busiest I’ve ever seen it.”

But, added Iarrobino, it was also one of the best days he had ever experienced in his 100-plus days on Vail Mountain.

“I don’t think I’ve ever had a day where it was truly a bluebird sky with brand new fresh powder underfoot,” he said.
“Over these last few years, it’s either been cloudy and snowing during the powder days, and when the blue skies return
it’s already tracked out.”

Gondola One had a 30-minute line in place before it even started loading for the day at 8:30 a.m., with skiers and
snowboarders wrapping a large line all the way back to the slow signs at the bottom of the run “Head First.”

The line moved fast, though, with lift operators working swiftly to ensure 10 guests were on every gondola car for
maximum efficiency. Once on the Gondola, a line of traffic in both directions was visible on I-70 from 8:30 a.m. to 9:30
a.m., as both of the exit ramps were clogged with cars.

‘LIKE BLACK FRIDAY’

Those who found themselves stuck in that traffic describe a frustrating scene.

“My wife sat on the exit ramp for 20 minutes,” said Misha Moritz, who runs the website skieveryday.net.

Regardless, Moritz said once on the mountain, a savvy skier was able to avoid the crowds.

“I swear there was no line at Chair 11 around 10:30, 11 o’clock,” he said. “Everyone was trying to get to the back.”

Moritz posted a hilarious video on his site of a crowd of hundreds gathered at the gate awaiting Tea Cup Bowl to open on
Saturday. Once the rope is dropped, mayhem ensues, with a ski patroller trying to avoid being trampled as the crowds
envelope him.

“It was like Black Friday,” Moritz said.

APRES SKI DAY GOOD, TOO

Workers in town said the crowds seemed to stick around following the ski day.

“We had to turn people away,” said David McMahon, who was working the door at Garfinkel’s in Lionshead. “It was
totally packed, people would tell me they’re here to meet someone and they’d just walk in and turn around.”

Barry Parent, owner of Vail Skate Supply, said while he wasn’t necessarily seeing more traffic in his shop than he’s seen
on the busy weekends this year, he definitely noticed a few indicators of the large crowds when he went out for his
snowboarding break.

“Usually, Chair 2 isn’t still totally swamped at 2 p.m.,” he said. “I had to change my route and go uphill on some
catwalks, but luckily I have the fastest wax in town, so I was cruising.”

Parent said while Saturday was indeed busy, this whole season has been a story of more snow and bigger crowds.

“I can’t tell you how much better this season has been, business wise, than the last two,” he said. “There’s just been a lot
more people in town, and it shows.”

The National Weather Service issued a winter storm warning, in effect until Monday, which they say could bring another
7-10 inches in the coming days.