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Walk on the Storied Side

Writer:

Christine Benedetti

Byline:

Time Out Staff Writer

Sometimes, we take Aspen for granted, and other times it's easier to let its history go, too.

We've all heard stories about our town, and even interesting, lesser-known tidbits along the way. The general premise goes that the upper valley was settled by the Ute Indians, boomed with silver mining, and was eventually developed for the Aspen Idea — a combination of mind, body and spirit established by the Paepcke family.

But what about the everyday things we pass each day that deserve a second notice? Like the fact that Rusty the Bear, the gargantuan statue on the Hyman Avenue mall, is made of more than 60,000 nails? Or, that those massive steel sculptures around town — a horse in Rio Grande Plaza and an eagle on the Tyrolean Lodge, among others — are comprised of old car bumpers. Take a closer look next time.

That's where Dean Weiler comes in. He's the man that you can spot around town, dressed in Carharts, suspenders and carrying a burlap satchel. Weiler gives tours to visitors and residents alike; the classic "Past-to-Present" tour is a 90-minute walk through Aspen's downtown core, and the "Darkside" tour is an hour-long jaunt through some of the town's more storied haunts, which include tales of murder and mystery.

"I like to tell life stories," says Weiler, who has been giving tours since 2005. "This allows me to explore different aspects, which includes research, performance and a little bit of writing."

And he's fortunate to have found something that brings several of his talents to life. Unlike reading from an Aspen history book or cruising the town with a local, Weiler is able to make a patchwork quilt of information from several different sources, and complement that with physical structures, and remnants, of a town with rich history.

Whether it's jaw-dropping facts, like the prices of commercial space and land in the core just three decades ago compared to the \$40,000 monthly rate landlords now charge, or the explanation behind street names and where to find the city's cheapest beer, the tour is a walking book of information for someone new to town, and entertaining and comprehensive for anyone who is curious or lived here for some time.

Weiler plays the part well, with a rugged beard and cantered gait. But perhaps it's his smiling eyes and enthusiasm for Aspen's history that also excites participants. The self-proclaimed "cultural anthropologist" has a passion for his tales, and he says he's continually researching to dig deeper into a layered history.

The classic tour is just that, a collection of facts and fun pieces of information and stories the give a quick, yet comprehensive look at how this area developed. The evening tour looks into the underbelly of Aspen, and the criminal activities, outlaw customs and more nefarious on-goings that have taken place here. During October, approaching Halloween, Weiler also hosts a "Cemetery" walk for those who aren't afraid to walk around in the dark. All of them offer an enriching new (and old) perspective to Aspen.

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