



CIGAR STORY

A ski bum's recipe for living large in the high country: stogies, vacation homes, and subsidized housing

AS TOLD TO DEVON O'NEIL // PHOTO BY CHARLES ENGELBERT

In many ways, John Cutroneo personifies the mountain-town transplant: he grew up in Burlington, Vermont; dropped out of college to move to Summit County in October 1998; and has been skiing, fishing, paddling, and wandering around Colorado's high country ever since. However, Cutroneo also represents a new breed of ski bum: the permanent, self-supported variety. While many of his friends have retreated to lower elevations for a more by-the-book life path, Cutroneo, 36, in addition to carving turns, has carved out an entrepreneurial niche that sustains his mountain lifestyle. He owns and operates two small businesses—A Local Friend

property management and Slope Side Cigars, which he opened with a longtime (local) friend in 2011. That same year, he took advantage of affordable-housing subsidies and bought a three-bedroom, 2.5-bath townhouse with a two-car garage for, get this, \$187,000. Here, one of Breckenridge's most colorful characters shares insight on getting by, getting ahead, and subsidizing ski bums like himself.

I DROVE OUT TO COLORADO FROM VERMONT on October 17, 1998. My sister's boyfriend told me Breckenridge would work out. I'd never seen development as accelerated as I saw it here, with money coming from so many different regions of the country. I figured there had to be some niche

markets to get involved in and offer a good service. **I LIVED IN FRISCO MY FIRST YEAR** because I couldn't find a place I could afford in Breck. I was a liftie at Copper; I ran the tubing hill. That summer, I mowed lawns for the town of Breckenridge, which helped me get a full-time job the next year.

I WORKED FOR BRECKENRIDGE PUBLIC WORKS for seven years, plowing sidewalks and taking care of all of the ball fields, until they wanted to put me on a day shift. I realized that skiing only two days a week was going to throw off my schedule, so I put in my two weeks' notice and bought A Local Friend from the founder when he decided to move to

Florida. There aren't many people offering property management the way I do it: with a concierge side, working on a more personal level with the clientele, actually becoming their friend and treating them that way.

SLOPE SIDE CIGARS STARTED BY CHANCE. One day I was sitting at a bar talking to my friend Trent, and we were like, instead of complaining about Breckenridge getting too crowded, we need to start capitalizing on the growth and offer something that nobody else is offering: a guys' shop where men can get away from their wives and all the women's clothing stores for a while and just hang out and chat with other guys. They don't always want to go to a bar.

WE DESIGNED IT TO BE SUPPLEMENTAL to our other jobs. We kept the overhead super low, prepaid rent for a year, and started putting every bit of money we made back into the shop. We carry about forty kinds of cigars and a variety of other products, from pipes to flasks to hookahs to Snus. I'd say we've seen about 10 percent growth each year. The legalization of marijuana has helped and hurt our business. I feel like we've actually sold fewer pipes because people can go straight to the pot shops and buy them there. But we've seen a huge increase in weed tourism, whether that's good or bad.

I LIKE LIVING IN BRECKENRIDGE because of all the like-minded people, but I'd rather stand out than just blend in with everyone else. A lot of people around town call me Cooch. I go out to the bar probably five or six nights a week, and whenever I walk into SouthRidge [Seafood Grille] the bartender, Daryl, announces: "Ladies and gentlemen, John Cutroneo!"

TO BUY MY HOUSE, I had to make under \$80,000, I had to prove that I'd lived here for three years, and I had to prove that I could qualify for it. I never thought I'd have a place with a garage, in town, for under 200 grand.

I'VE SEEN SO MANY LOCALS BENEFIT [from subsidies]. People have kids here nowadays. When I first moved to Breck, not a lot of people in their late 20s, early 30s could afford to raise a kid here. I think that's a sign the town is doing something right. **CSM**



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