One a.m.

Jack Young, an architect and developer from Ridgway, Colorado, found himself alone in a hotel room at a Tony Robbins seminar. The light in his room was dim, but on the inside, Young was on fire.

“What are you going to do with your life?” That’s the question that had been asked of him. And in the shadows of early morning, a dream was born. “I’m going back to Ridgway to take care of Chipeta,” he thought, “expanding it and making my vision of it.” And that’s exactly what he did.

Nearly 20 years later, the Chipeta Solar Springs Resort and Spa is a destination for travelers from around the world boasting a 62 percent return rate — an astonishingly high average for the lodging industry.

What’s the secret?

It feels like home — only much, much better.

HOW IT STARTED

Jack Young and his wife, Patsy, never intended to be in the hospitality business. In fact, when Young first came to the San Juan Mountains in the early ’70s, he was a ski bum. Fresh out of graduate school, his goals were purely recreational. But then he began working as a builder and developer in Telluride, “building hippie crazy spec homes,” he says. Many of his projects earned local names — Rocket Ranch, Darth Vader. All had a solar component; one even had a sod roof. “But the houses just got bigger and bigger,” he says, “and ultimately it was unrewarding.”

The couple moved to Hawaii, where Young became an architect. Little did he realize that he would bloom into a hotelier. That part of the story begins back in Ridgway, where, in the early ’90s, he and Robert Savath developed Solar Ranch, initially planned as an energy efficient community. The development’s corner lot was zoned for commercial use. Savath told Young, “I will give you that lot if you put a hotel there.”

Young designed the original Chipeta Sun Lodge as a twelve-room bed and breakfast. Completed in 1993, it is a true adobe structure that still serves as the main entrance to the resort. “His inspiration was Mesa Verde,” Patsy says, and while it’s easy to see this ancestral Pueblo influence in the structure — the organic curves of the walls, the play with many levels in the public spaces — the overall feel is quite local to Ridgway. For instance, the entry way is adorned with stained-glass windows, made, incidentally, by John Clark, presently the town’s mayor. From the moment you step inside, you know you are nowhere else in the world but at the Chipeta. It has a feeling all its own, the absolute antithesis to a chain hotel.

Stepping out of the reception area, guests find themselves in the cozy breakfast room where a real fire crackles and
leaps in the fireplace. The breakfast bar — a countertop covered in bright copper pennies and pieces of turquoise — is always stocked with handmade chocolate chip cookies, water and juice. The walls are filled with Hopi art, and the room feels intimate and warm, the perfect place to find yourself on a cold day, snuggling up with a book or best friend.

Almost paradoxically, the cozy room is adjacent to the bright, open solarium, a two-story sunroom with windows facing east and south. Outside the glass, guests take in breath-catching views of the snow-capped San Juans; inside, there are ficus trees and exotic cacti, passionflower vines and bright red geraniums. “The original innkeepers were third generation landscapers,” Patsy says. Their botanical talents still bless the solarium. Spaced around the room, amongst the trees, are tables and niches for eating the daily breakfasts of homemade quiche, pastries, fresh fruit, granola and yogurt.

Spend some time in this room, and you begin to notice the design touches that are carried on throughout the resort: arrows (found here in the iron railings of the balcony), suns (found here in the blue and yellow tiles on the walls), and triangular tile trim, suggestive of mountains. An intrepid parent might take their child on a sun hunt around the Chipeta. They’d find hundreds, from terra cotta ones on the sides of buildings to carvings in benches to cutouts in iron gates to tile suns in the floor.

You’ll also notice the red sandstone walls and floors — the grout joints are all pointed, a style that nods to the craftsmanship on the Navajo reservation. “It took local rancher Billy Scales and his brother two years to do the stonework here,” Patsy says, noting that the stonework is also found in other public areas throughout the resort. “After that, they retired from rock work and returned to ranching. I think we wore them out!”

More than 62 percent of visitors to Ridgway’s Chipeta Solar Springs Resort return. What’s the secret?
The lodge was built entirely with dead standing lumber, a choice of material that was very important to Young. "And," he adds, "the Brazilian hardwood flooring was harvested from underwater in Amazonia when they built dams and flooded the Brazilian cherry forests in the valleys."

BROADENING THE VISION

Like a cactus flower, the Chipeta has continued to blossom, unfolding in surprising and beautiful ways. "Jack is a chronic builder," says Patsy, "a compulsive creative," and since that first building, he’s designed and constructed four more spaces — a spa, a kiva (a highly unique, circular conference center), a restaurant and, most recently, a building exclusively for additional lodging, including four new units completed this year. "The resort has grown as the need has grown," says Patsy. Now the Chipeta offers twenty-nine boutique rooms — everything from single rooms to condos with a full kitchen and living area. "When guests return, I encourage them to try a new room. I say, ‘Come to Chipeta and sleep around.’ There’s such a variety."

The rooms are highly individual when it comes to the art they are adorned with and amenities on offer. Each is given a Southwestern name: Chaco Canyon, Mesa Verde, Red Mountain, Black Bear. There are Colorado wines available for purchase in the rooms. Twelve of the rooms have private hot tubs on their private decks.

"The heart of the resort, though, is the spa," Patsy says. Built in 1998, it features treatment rooms, a mirrored yoga room, a circular cedar sauna, a steam room, a sitting room with a fireplace, and a secret enclosed garden in the back. "When people come out of the spa, they are blissed out and happy," she says. Morning yoga and tai chi classes are free for guests — the public is welcome for a fee.

The Kiva, which serves as the resort’s conference center, is a large circular room. It feels both practical and intimate, with a woodburning fireplace inside, a second penny bar, and curious details everywhere you look. Immediately, one is struck by the artistic sun that dominates the ceiling, a metal circle with eight, warm, wooden beams that extend outward like rays. Like the main lodge, the Kiva has exquisite red rock walls and planters, and all around the room, ivy plants create organic patterns on the walls. "We host everything here from Tibetan Rinpochees sand painting to business meetings with PowerPoint," Pat sy says. The resort also hosts a monthly "Chill" event with music and food. Musicians range from the local favorite band Bone Wagon and the performers Heather and Douglas to international bluegrass star Johnny Cowan.

For three months of summer, the Chill event takes place at the Sky Bar, a roof-
top deck with 360-degree views of the mountains. The Sky Bar, voted by locals as “best view in the valley,” offers specialty cocktails and food from The Four Corners Café. The menu is an eclectic blend of Southwestern, Asian and seafood: fish tacos, tempura asparagus, sushi, chicken breast stuffed with crab, grilled wild salmon, vegetarian offerings and more.

Linking all the buildings is an enclosed courtyard that features two solar-heated thermal pools. The larger pool, 16'x60', is a lap pool heated to 85 degrees. It’s lined with fruit trees growing out of the red sandstone deck; in the distance, the San Juans ring the valley. You feel at once cloistered and a part of the wilder, natural world.

The second pool, recently completed, is an elevated, tiled Roman bath heated to 103 degrees. This communal pool easily seats twenty. Because it feels protected. Still, it’s airy in nature, and allows for spectacular views.

**MORE THAN JUST ANOTHER PRETTY PLACE**

Though part of what makes the resort feel so special is the eclectic and thoughtful architecture and design, Jack Young suggests that it ultimately owes its success to its staff and their commitment to hospitality. “Honestly,” he says, “we learned this in Fiji,” where the couple owns the Koro Sun Resort. “The Fijians are voted the friendliest people on earth, and having a resort there — seeing the difference that friendliness makes — taught us how important it is for a guest’s experience to have hospitality on an elevated level.”

He continues, “If people come in with a frown, our goal is to fix that attitude.” Guests are offered a personal tour of the property — the history of the resort, the town of Ridgway, and are told about resort’s namesake, Chipeta, queen of the Utes, renowned for her intelligence, generosity and hospitality. “We offer them a cookie, a warm welcome,” he says. “Right away, we let them know they are home.”

The resort treats the whole person: the sense of hearing, for example, is awakened and stimulated through the use of wind chimes, crackling fires both indoors and out, water fountains, music. “The sound of the water brings people back to center,” Jack says. “And having that dichotomy between fire and water, well, it makes the space feel so good.”

He continues, “The direction we are committed to heading with the resort is creating a place of transformation. If someone has a breakthrough at the meditation we offer on Sunday nights, well, we want to help nurture that. “You can fill a hotel with people — that’s one thing. But if you make their lives better through experiences they have here, then that feels like a real success to me.”

For more about Chipeta Solar Springs Resort, visit chipeta.com.

Clockwise from lower left: Each bedroom at the Chipeta is unique (courtesy photo); the resort boasts two pools, a lap pool and an elevated Roman bath (photos by Eric Ming); local musician David Nunn plays the Sky Bar (courtesy photo); a view of the Sky Bar and the Four Corners Café (courtesy photos).