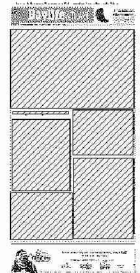




Northstar-At-Tahoe ski resort's front-side is a complex of some of the best ego-building, perfectly-groomed terrain for beginners and intermediates in the Sierra.



BY DINO VOURNAS
Special correspondent

“As it lay there with the shadows of the mountains brilliantly photographed upon its still surface, I thought it must be the fairest picture the whole earth affords.”

Mark Twain,
“Roughing It,” 1872.

These words and similar accolades, uttered by the entranced, surely helped hasten the influx of visitors to Lake Tahoe. They arrived first to work, then to enjoy the waters and vistas of summer. Later on, in the mid-20th century, the excitement and challenge of winter sports came to call.

So what should you expect, flying from Florida — over two perfectly good ski mountain ranges — to ski the Sierra Nevada and Lake Tahoe? Expect the greatest overall skiing and riding experience in these United States.

Tahoe, 22 miles long and 12 miles wide, is the largest Alpine lake in North America and straddles the states of California and Nevada, about 45 miles from Reno and 200 miles from San Francisco. Taken as a whole and in no particular order, Lake Tahoe has:

Weather: An average winter high of 43 degrees, mostly sunny weather, with very rare instances of bitter cold, unlike the inner ranges.

Snow: Usually lots of it. About 800 inches (that’s 67 feet!) last season, with 40-plus powder days, and averaging 350 to 500 inches of great quality snow.

Resorts: Three mega-sized and seven large-to-moderate ski areas, and a huge Nordic resort, surround the Lake Tahoe Basin.

Terrain: Appeals on all levels. Squaw Valley is internationally known for its steepes. Snowmaking at Heavenly and Northstar is among the best in the United States.

Scenery: Most resorts have gorgeous views of the Sierra Range and the always-blue, never-frozen Lake Tahoe; and snow-laden evergreens beat bare-naked aspens anytime.

Real, small towns and Reno: Sure, you have the A-Class trappings, but real towns mean good, cheaper options for lodging and food.

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Apres-ski: They have the jubilant bar and club scene at the resorts, but there’s also an assortment of gaming casinos in North and South Lake and in nearby Reno. They offer 24/7 entertainment, gaming and great bargains in lodging and food.

Let’s start at the South Shore. The cities of South Lake Tahoe and Stateline have the highest population density and offer a seemingly infinite supply of rooms, from casino-resorts such as Harrah’s, Harvey’s, Horizon and the Mont Bleu on the Nevada side to the Embassy Suites, two Marriotts and myriad

small inns and motels flanking U.S. Highway 50 in California.

The elephant in the room for Tahoe ski resorts surely is the 4,800-acre Heavenly Mountain Resort, situated in two states, operating 30 lifts and five terrain parks out of four base areas, with a gondola, tram and 10 high-speed lifts. Heavenly transformed South Shore forever by running its gondola from the Stateline-South Lake Tahoe hotels to the top of the mountain to the new, green-certified Tamarack Lodge, reinventing itself as a true destination resort. Heavenly boasts tremendous tandem views of the lake, the Sierra and

the Nevada desert, and also fires up the largest snowmaking system in the country.

The Nevada side, with its Stagecoach and Boulder base lodges, has an impressive fistful of runs, including the long cruiser, Olympic Downhill; the mellow Boulder beginner slopes; and Milky Way Bowl, my favorite advanced run on the mountain. Also in the Silver State, experts can “get their ya-yas out” through the gates and down the radical chutes of Mott and Killebrew canyons. Schuss back to California to Ridge Run, with its magnificent blue-water views, or dip down into the Pinnacles for

some great fall-line skiing, photo ops and arguably the best view of Tahoe. Then catch the Sky Express back up to elevation 10,040, the highest lift-service in Tahoe, and drop into the trees down Ski Ways and lower down Maggie's Canyon for some of the best glade skiing in these parts.

The infamous and steep Gun-barrel run awaits you in lower California. Skiing its VW-sized moguls, you'll think your knees will say hello to your face at any moment. The run ends at the original California base lodge, but don't forget to leave time to get back to the gondola for the trip back down to Stateline, since the slope back to lake level is out-of-bounds and there is no "official" way to ski back to Stateline.

Thirty minutes from Stateline on Echo Summit is the Sierra-At-Tahoe resort, noted for its accolades as a terrain park innovator, its laid-back feel, and the drop-dead views from the 360-degree Smokehouse BBQ. Learn to ski for \$35 and then, next time, slide down the Sugar and Spice run for a mellow top-to-bottom adventure. Intermediates will love Beaver, and advanced skiers will go for the bumps on Horsetail and the red fir glade in Avalanche Bowl. Extreme aficionados will head to the Huckleberry Gates for radical pleasures. There are free guided tours of Huckleberry on Fridays, or — new this year — guided snowcat tours for an extra \$79.

Kirkwood Ski Resort is the most remote of the Tahoe areas, lying in a spectacular ridge-lined valley 37 miles from South Shore. But it's well worth the trip for the scenery and the awesome skiing brought on by monumental snow dumps that turn the whole resort into a powderhound's paradise. Kirkwood has two base areas: the Mountain Village, where lodging and amenities are available, and Timber Creek, where beginners are sure to congregate for an unintimi-

dating day in the learning center or up the TC Express and Funny Bunny chairs. Intermediates will love the variety of terrain off of the Reut, Sunrise and Solitude chairs. Advanced skiers have a lot of choices, including the delicious offerings off of the Cornice Express. Experts will get a touch of paradise on the famous Wall and the chutes of the Wagon Wheel Bowl. If you like cross-country skiing, the Kirkwood Meadow has an extensive trail system. Don't miss the vintage 1864 Kirkwood Inn and Saloon nearby.

Itching for more at South Shore? Try a paddlewheel boat cruise on Lake Tahoe aboard the Tahoe Queen, a lakeside snowshoe or Nordic ski at Camp Richardson, a Borges sleigh ride, or a snowmobile excursion from Zephyr Cove.

Then it's on to the mellower confines of North Lake, via the west shore and the stunning vistas of Emerald Bay and Lake Tahoe.

The North Shore is a collection of small towns — among them Tahoe City, Kings Beach and Incline Village — that are centrally located to the largest concentration of ski areas, and eight major and four small resorts. There is a boundless array of lodging and dining options available in the towns, at the resorts and in Truckee, 13 miles north of the lake.

The "big daddy" of the north is Squaw Valley U.S.A., with its 4,000 acres, 33 lifts with a cable car and funitel (aerial lift), and three terrain parks. Co-founder Alec Cushing put Squaw Valley and California skiing on the international map when he persuaded the International Olympic Committee to allow him to host the 1960 Winter Games. The resort always has been known for its six challenging peaks and runs that include Headwall, Olympic Lady, Silverado, the Palisades and KT-22 (so initially

terrifying to co-founder Sandy Poulsen, it took her 22 kick-turns to reach the bottom).

A word of advice, Squaw has no double-black diamond runs indicated, just single black. Make local inquiries before attempting a black run because, believe me, the 75 Chute is not Granite Chief. Squaw also has a huge beginner-intermediate complex — surprisingly on the upper mountain, and reached with ease by the cable car — with runs such as Shirley Lake, Links, Bailey's Beach and Solitude. Up here you'll also find High Camp, with its Olympic Museum, ice rink and restaurant. Try the trees off of Red Dog and also see a great lake view at the top of the Squaw Creek lift, adjacent to the upscale Resort at Squaw Creek.

At the end of the day, ski down the Mountain Run — formerly the Olympic downhill course — and into fabled Bar One, Le Chamois or Cornice Cantina for cheap eats, or any of several après-ski stops in the village.

The big news this season is that Squaw has merged with neighbor resort Alpine Meadows to form a mega-ski complex. Although not officially physically linked as yet, the future looks promising. Alpine has open bowls and ridgelines with challenges for all levels. Experts will get their jollies on Our Father, the aptly-named Idiot's Delight, and the three bowls skier's left off of the six-pack summit chair. Throw in Scott Chute for good measure and drop into the trees of Gentian Gully on powder days. Intermediates will love Sherwood and Lakeview (photo op!), and beginners will feel like pros skiing Subway.

Back south on Tahoe's west shore, Homewood offers the closest and best views of Lake Tahoe, where the next turn will feel as though you might land in the water. Spectacular views

from every single run are the norm. Beginners love Rainbow Ridge-Homeward Bound, blue-cruisers revel on Hidden Vein-Second Creek, and Quail Face is the destination for advanced tree-hugging skiers and riders. FYI, don't panic looking up The Face, most of Homewood lies above and beyond. After the slopes, check out the specials across the highway at the lakeside West Shore Café-Inn.

Northstar-At-Tahoe has undergone a radical transformation in recent years, culminating in the development of a new village, the opening of an on-mountain Ritz-Carlton Hotel-Resort and the purchase of the ski area by Heavenly's parent, Vail Resorts. What hasn't changed is their consumer and family-friendly focus.

Northstar's front-side is a complex of some of the best ego-building, perfectly-groomed terrain for beginners and intermediates in the Sierra. Then, after cutting your teeth on the mellower front-side black runs, you'll be ready for the Backside, which unfolds as some of the best sustained-pitch trails in this mountain range. Afterward, head for Lookout Mountain, where surprisingly steep groomers and super-long steep bumps will keep you on your best game. New for this year, "The Star" boasts the new off-piste Lookout and Sawmill Glades, a new Back-

side chair and a rad 22-foot superpipe, designed by none other than snowboard legend Shaun White for his new home mountain.

We'll now slip into Nevada for two ski areas, Mount Rose and Diamond Peak.

The Mount Rose ski area, which actually sits atop Slide Mountain, has the highest base elevation in Tahoe and therefore great-quality snow. The area, which is closest to Reno and a local's favorite, has always been known for terrific high-intermediate fall-line skiing on Northwest Passage and most of the runs in the Slide Bowl. And some years back, they remedied their lack of expert terrain, opening the previously forbidden but often-poached slope known as The Chutes, via gated entry points.

Check out the views of Washoe Lake and the Carson Valley from South Rim and Tahoe from Upper Ramsey's.

Diamond Peak in Incline Village is a family-oriented, reasonably priced resort with more drop-dead views of Tahoe. Intermediates will feel as if they're skiing into the lake on Crystal Ridge and there are trees and steep pitches galore to keep advanced and experts busy for the day. I guarantee you will stand in awe watching the sunset over the lake from these slopes.

Then it's up to Donner Sum-

mit to visit the Grande Dame of Tahoe resorts, Sugar Bowl, which opened for business in 1939 and still has the original lodge and vintage family cabins to prove it. Powder days, and there are a lot of them with 500 inches of average snowfall, are quite special on Mount Disney (yes, named after Walt, an original landowner). Adrenaline addicts will head to the wild Palisades or The '58. There is a plentiful variety of beginner and blue runs off of Mount Judah, and ditto off Mount Lincoln, which is also home to many of Sugar Bowl's classic runs, including the famed Silver Belt.

Interconnected to Sugar Bowl by groomed Nordic trails is Royal Gorge, the largest cross-country resort on the continent, with a whopping 200 miles of groomed tracks tended by the largest grooming fleet in the world. Worthy of mention are more summit resorts, including Boreal, a favorite of boarders; kids-centric Soda Springs; family-friendly Donner Ski Ranch; beginner-friendly Tahoe Donner ski area in nearby Truckee; and Granlibakken, with its old Tahoe charm.

Visit and ski/board Lake Tahoe and you'll be ready to write your own "deathless Tahoe prose," as did one Samuel Clemens some 140 years ago.



Snow falls on Commercial Row in old Truckee, Calif., near Lake Tahoe. About 800 inches of snow fell around Lake Tahoe last season.



Lake Tahoe has a vibrant bar and club scene at the resorts, and there are gaming casinos in North and South Lake and in nearby Reno.



The sun sets on Crystal Ridge at the Diamond Peak ski area, Incline Village, where trees and steep pitches keep advanced and expert skiers busy.



DINO VOURNAS

A skier busts some powder above Milky Way Bowl, with Lake Tahoe in the background, at Heavenly Mountain Resort, which operates 30 lifts and five terrain parks out of four base areas, with a gondola, tram and 10 high-speed lifts.



Squaw Valley U.S.A. boasts 4,000 acres, 33 lifts with a cable car and funitel (aerial lift), and three terrain parks.



Snowboarders take a break in the blowing snow off of Emigrant chair at Squaw Valley U.S.A., Calif.

IF YOU GO

Air: Several airlines fly Tampa to Reno runs, including United, Southwest, Delta and US Airways. You also can fly into Sacramento, where airfares tend to be cheaper, and then rent a car for the two-hour drive to the lake. Driving from Reno to the lake takes about 45 minutes to one hour. Most airlines count two ski-related bags (i.e. ski bag, boot bag) as one bag, but they do not allow packing other items inside without an extra charge.

Ground: I recommend renting a four-wheel-drive car (or a cheaper two-wheeler if you carry chains) for maximum flexibility, but especially for the North Tahoe resorts and sightseeing. You can do without a car more easily at South Shore. There are shuttles to both ends of the lake from Reno, and free or cheap shuttles from lodgings to the resorts, including a free South Shore to Squaw shuttle. Check resort websites. TART public transit links the towns and resorts of the north.

Air shuttles: www.southtahoexpress.com or www.northlaketahoexpress.com

Lodging deals: Try the Horizon Casino-Resort for bargain rooms starting around \$59, or smaller inns and motels like the Mark Twain Lodge (\$69 rooms with a fireplace, walk to the lake or Heavenly Gondola). Northstar has stay and ski packages for \$105 a day, or there's a Cal Neva Lodge-Diamond Peak package for \$79. Reno hotel ski packages start at \$79 a night.

Other Deals: Show your air boarding pass: At Squaw, you'll ski free that day-night only; at Sierra, take \$20 off, same day or next.

Ski, lodging, eats and deals info: www.skilaketahoe.com, 800-588-SNOW;

North Tahoe, www.gotahoenorth.com, 800-TAHOE4U

South Tahoe, www.TahoeSouth.com, 800-AT-TAHOE

Resorts: Heavenly Mountain, www.skiheavenly.com; Sierra-At-Tahoe, www.SierraAtTahoe.com; Kirkwood, www.kirkwood.com; Squaw Valley, www.squaw.com; Alpine Meadows, www.skialpine.com; Homewood, www.skihomewood.com; Northstar, www.northstarattahoe.com; Sugar Bowl, www.sugarbowl.com; Mount Rose, www.mtrose.com; Diamond Peak, www.diamondpeak.com; Royal Gorge cross-country; www.royalgorge.com

If you visit in early March, don't forget to check out North Tahoe's SnowFest at gotahoenorth.com

— Dino Vournas



With the Carson Valley and Reno in the background, a skier takes a steep ride down the Chutes at Mount Rose ski area.