

THE GAME CHANGERS ISSUE

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DISCOVERING LAKE TAHOE'S SKI CULTURE

By Christine Van Dyk

As I-80 climbs from Sacramento into the High Sierras, it's obvious this is ski country. A daisy chain of Subarus loaded down with ski racks, snowboards, and longhaired 20-somethings leads the way over the Sierra Nevada Mountain range. Skirting the Donner Pass, the road juts out over a 7,200-foot drop, snaking around switchbacks and runaway truck lanes designed to slow out-of-control 18-wheelers. Unlike the doomed Donner Party, these explorers risk the journey across the incredible peaks for one thing: the promise of great pow.

Lake Tahoe is a stunning Alpine winter playground with numerous ski resorts encircling a glacier-fed lake. With endless trails and one of the largest selections of skiing and snowboarding terrain in the nation, there's something

for everyone. That's why families and thrill-seekers alike head here to play in the thick powder that gathers in the high elevations. The wide range of terrain means that while beginners master the sport on the gentle green slopes, more advanced skiers and boarders challenge themselves on the near-vertical steeps up top.

As caravans of snow-seekers draw near, the excitement and expectation build. Just past the Old-West mining town of Truckee, the landscape becomes a winter wonderland of snow-dusted pines. In an El Niño year, the snowbanks can grow so high along the road that drivers can barely see over the drifts. The elevation rises along with everyone's spirits, and skiers make their final ascent into the resorts. This is ski season in Tahoe. Get ready to ride!

Sampling North Tahoe's Finest

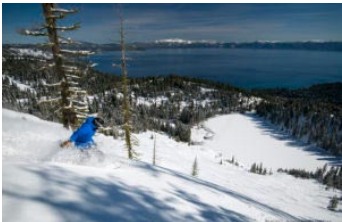
With 14 ski resorts peppering the Lake Tahoe region, there's plenty of powder to be found. Here are a few fan favorites along the north shore:



*Northstar is known for its tree-lined runs.
Photo Credit: Abby Hein*

Northstar California Resort —

Northstar is home to over 3,000 acres of ski terrain. Boasting a Ritz-Carlton and a 22-foot superpipe designed by Olympic snowboarder Shaun White, the resort manages to offer a laid-back West Coast vibe and high-end luxury at the same time. With 100 runs of mostly intermediate terrain, the resort is well groomed and prides itself on great tree-line skiing and multiple terrain parks.



*Trails at Homewood offer spectacular lake views.
Photo credit:
Gary Moore/KIWIKAMERA.COM*

Homewood Mountain Resort —

Homewood is a favorite of locals for its sunshine, old-school feel and abundance of intermediate terrain. Snowboarders appreciate the half-mountain of blue runs and the incredible lake views. "You'll want to ski Homewood for its throwback feel, but you'll love it for the stunning views that make you feel like you can ski right into Lake Tahoe," Spivey says.



*One of Squaw Valley's 270 trails. Photo credit:
Courtesy of Squaw Valley*

Squaw Valley-

Alpine Meadows —

This resort includes more than 6,000 skiable acres with 270 trails. With an average snowfall of 450 inches, the combined resort area offers one of the longest seasons in the area. According to skier Eric Spivey, "This year we skied on the Fourth of July. It was the craziest party you've ever seen."

With a mountaintop beginner's section and giant bowls for intermediate riders, it's become a top choice for powder

seekers — especially extreme enthusiasts who flock to the cliff jumps, chutes and black diamond trails. At the end of the day, there are plenty of après-ski opportunities at the European-inspired Village at Squaw Valley.

Ski School: What You Need to Know

On a perfect bluebird day, the sun peeks out from behind the mountains and the freshly groomed corduroy begs for the swoosh of skiers flying across the landscape. As you prepare for ski season in Tahoe, here's what you need to know to make the most of your time on the snow.

Prepping for Powder

Snow Tracks — Whether you're coming from Reno to the east or Sacramento or San Francisco to the west, you're bound to drive through snow. Even though the roads are cleared often, they can still be harrowing, especially up near Donner Pass. A 4-wheel drive vehicle is safest, and it should come equipped with ski racks for your gear.

Boarding Vs. Skiing — If you're a first-timer, you may wonder which of these two snow sports is best for you. In general, most people find it easier to ski, as your feet work independently and it mimics the movement of other sports like ice skating and roller blading. However, if you know how to surf or skateboard, snowboarding should be a piece of cake. Keep in mind that since your feet must move together while you face sideways, you tend to fall more on a snowboard, making the first day or two intense. The good news is that while snowboarding may be less intuitive, it's easier in deep powder.

Lift Tickets — Save time and money by buying multi-day tickets online before you arrive.

Base Camp or Mid-Mountain? — A ski-in/ski-out accommodation is nothing short of heaven. However, if anyone in your party is new to the sport, staying at the base of the mountain is key. A mid-mountain retreat may be beautiful, but it can be a challenge for a beginner to navigate the more difficult trails down to the base.

Skiers will find breathtaking views of Lake Tahoe from this trail. Photo credit: Max Whittaker
On the Mountain

Fresh Tracks — There's no better time to experience the mountain than first thing in the morning, before the snow's been carved up and the sun's baked the trails into ice. Be first to board the gondola, or check to see if your resort offers an early-risers breakfast that puts you mid-mountain before the crowds.

Know Your Level — Whether you're a skier or a boarder, knowing your ability level helps you determine which trails are best. Most Tahoe-area resorts classify their runs with the following colors:

- **Green** — These are for first-timers and novices who are still learning. If this is your level, stick to trails marked for beginners.

• **Blue** — Blue trails are for intermediate skiers and riders who are confident, able to stop and can turn at moderate speeds. The harder blue runs are slightly steeper and can be icy, requiring you to make parallel turns.

• **Black** — Black trails are for those who can navigate a variety of advanced terrains with control and speed. Expect steep trails, moguls and unpredictable terrain. A beginner on a black trail is asking for trouble, both for themselves and for other riders.

Know Where the Lift Leads — Before you board a ski lift, make sure you know how to load and unload safely and what type of terrain awaits you at the top. Review the trail map signs before entering the lift line.

Beware Below — The people ahead of you always have the right of way. It's your responsibility to avoid them by staying in control, knowing the terrain and giving others ample space.

Pull Over — Never stop in the middle of a trail or anywhere you aren't visible from above. There's nothing scarier than coming over a ridge at top speed, only to see a child stopped in your path.

Yield the Right of Way — When merging with another trail, always look uphill and yield to others.

Après-Ski Please — The best part of skiing may not be skiing at all, but the party you find at the lodge when you finish the day. Most resorts offer drink specials, live music and fire pits where you can mingle and recount the day.

Be a Time Traveler — When the day is done and you've soaked your tired body in the hot tub, it's time for dinner. While there are some fantastic restaurants at the Tahoe resorts, it's nice to get out and experience life among the locals. From the mountain town of Truckee to King's Beach, the towns of Tahoe are the kinds of places that rarely exist anymore. Mom-and-pop motor courts ring the waterfront and "free color TV" is still an amenity on the ancient motel signs. It's the kind of laid-back lifestyle that has yet to be gussied up in the name of progress. But go now, while you can still experience Tahoe the way you'll always want to remember it.

Before the Snow

Unless you're fortunate enough to live within driving distance of the slopes, most American skiers enjoy the sport just one week per year, making preparation a must.

"If you don't work out beforehand, you'll spend the first two days getting your groove back and only a few days enjoying your time on the snow," warns David Scott, co-owner and instructor of WinterClub Indoor Ski & Snowboard, the nation's first indoor interactive ski simulator. "By preparing physically, you can prevent injury, increase performance and have a better time."

Here's what Scott says you should do in the weeks leading up to a ski trip:

Squats — This move strengthens your quads and awakens your core.

Lateral Jumps and Lateral Side Steps — Normally, our movements tend to be forward in motion. These exercises strengthen the knees and ankles with the side-to-side movements needed for skiing.

Stretch — Flexibility decreases the chance of injury and increases performance. Pay close attention to the back, knees and hamstrings. Scott warns that most people don't stretch long enough and or warm-up before flexing their muscles. In addition, Scott advises to continue stretching throughout your ski vacation.

Drink Up — Not only does drinking plenty of water prevent the dehydration common at high altitudes, it also flushes out lactic acid quicker and keeps you limber.

Posture — A good ski posture prevents pain and the injuries that can occur when you become fatigued. Practice keeping your weight over the front of the ski boots, skis hip-width apart, knees bent to absorb bumps and your center of gravity over the middle of the skis.

North Vs. South: Which Tahoe Is Best?

As snow accumulates in the Sierras, skiers get the urge to head to the mountains. But you may find yourself pondering which side of "Big Blue" is best for your next getaway. With two very distinct faces, Lake Tahoe offers a flavor for everyone, from the party scene of the south shore to the more family-friendly, nature-loving feel of the lake's northern coastline.

Anchored by the mammoth Heavenly ski area, South Lake Tahoe is famous for its Nevada casinos, breweries and nightlife. While the crowds are big, so is the fun. Just don't be surprised if, while playing a hand of blackjack, go-go dancers entertain on the table across the room. There's good shopping, places to grab a drink and lots of restaurants.

Up in North Lake Tahoe, you'll find the small communities that many locals call home. The area is known for high-end shopping, fine dining and plenty of quirky lodges and family-run businesses. The towns of Incline Village and Carnelian Bay offer a peaceful retreat this time of year, and the perfect chance to enjoy nature and get away from it all.

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Christine Van Dyk