



Springtime snow

THINK THE NORTHERN HEMISPHERE SKI SEASON IS ON THE DOWNHILL RUN? THINK AGAIN. *Craig Tansley* DISCOVERS THE TAHOE SKI REGION, WHERE THERE'S SNOW ON THE GROUND WELL INTO APRIL (AND HARDLY ANY AUSTRALIANS ON THE SLOPES).



IN 1846 A GROUP OF SETTLERS ATTEMPTED to forge their way west through the mighty Sierra Mountains that surround Lake Tahoe, seeking a new life in California. What followed was one of America's most gruesome survival tales. The 87-strong Donner Party took extraordinary measures to survive a brutal winter in the Sierras; 48 survived, due in part to the human flesh they ate in a bid to make it to the spring.

My journey to the Tahoe ski region is a little less arduous. It's a surprisingly easy journey in: an hour's flying time from LA to

Reno, Nevada and a 45-minute drive across the same route taken by those ill-fated folk – the Donner Pass. Though it's hardly a secret destination, the Tahoe ski region manages to avoid the fervoured attention Australian skiers and snowboarders pay to Hokkaido, British Columbia and Colorado.

I have no idea why; as I negotiate my way in my pick-up through rustic little mountain towns and past quaint hamlets that sit on one of North America's largest alpine lakes, I'm charmed by the beauty of blue-sky California under metres of white snow. >>



This page: Dog sledding at Squaw Creek. Opposite page: A skier hits the slopes at Heavenly with Lake Tahoe in the background.



Many of the seven ski resorts in Tahoe boast uninterrupted views of the lake, ranking them amongst the most scenic ski resorts on the planet.

Main image: Fresh tracks at Northstar.
Inset from top: Ice skating rink at Northstar village;
Resort at Squaw Creek; Firepit in Squaw Valley village.

Consider the stats first: Tahoe is home to seven world-class ski resorts all built around a lake so big and blue the original Indian inhabitants called it The Lake Of The Sky and which Mark Twain described as...“the fairest picture the whole world affords”. In amongst this landscape, an average of 10 metres of snow falls each season and yet the region still experiences over 300 days of sunshine in a year. The seasons here are long – running from November through to May at some resorts. Aesthetically, many of the seven ski resorts in Tahoe boast uninterrupted views of the lake, ranking them amongst the most scenic ski resorts on the planet.

But it's not just about pretty lakes and dreamy landscapes round here; there's

some serious terrain for experienced skiers – the steeps, chutes and bowls of Tahoe attract daredevils from across the globe, though there's also plenty of beginner and intermediate terrain for families.

My first stop is Truckee, a ski town that's somehow managed to remain almost completely unknown to all but the most intrepid Australian snow traveller. Truckee is one hell of a pretty place, with its antique saloon bars (many of which have now been turned into high-end wine bars and restaurants) and cobbled streets; it's like a living, breathing tribute to mid-19th century America.

But Truckee's about as far removed as you can get from the razzle-dazzle of Tahoe's other famous ski town, South

Lake Tahoe. Straddling the border with Nevada, South Lake Tahoe is where Californians come to gamble and party all night long (bars in California must close at 2am and gambling is illegal). It's not really my scene, but then that's Tahoe's strength; there are options here for every possible type of ski traveller.

The same applies with Tahoe's ski resorts. I begin my snow adventure in the high-end alpine village atmosphere of Northstar California, half an hour's drive from Truckee. Nearly a billion dollars has been spent on the resort in the past few years and it's now home to Tahoe's most high-end slopeside lodging. But there's plenty of hard skiing here too, with almost 3,000 acres of terrain and 93 ski





trails. 40 minutes west of Northstar, there are six peaks to ski down and 30 chairlifts on offer at one of the US's most revered ski resorts, Squaw Valley. Squaw Valley has just joined forces with the neighbouring Alpine Meadows Ski Resort to offer skiers a whopping 6,000 acres of skiable terrain. Squaw Valley has some of North America's best off-piste skiing for experts – but it's also the home of some of Tahoe's best top-of-mountain beginner runs. Squaw also has high-end accommodation options – I stay slope-side at the Resort at Squaw Valley and ski right to the resort where a valet takes my snowboard for me and I retreat to the day spa.

Further south, Heavenly Resort is one of the world's most unique ski moun-

tains, offering two entirely different vistas spread across two states of America. When you ski the Californian side you'll ski some of the best resort skiing in North America with uninterrupted views of the lake, while the Nevada side offers views over endless desert. Heavenly is enormous, for three days I barely do the same run twice.

But one of the real stars of Tahoe is its least flashy, Kirkwood Ski Resort – Tahoe's snowiest resort. Consistently ranked in North America's top 10 ski resorts, Kirkwood's an unassuming kind of mountain with no glitz or glamour, but with some of the best on and off-piste skiing in North America. Even on a powder day at Kirkwood you'll have runs entirely to yourself.

WHEN TO GO

Now. You are almost guaranteed good snow cover until April and some resorts or runs will be open until May. Legend has it that a *Luxury Travel* staffer even skied these resorts on July 4 one year.

WHERE TO STAY

Resort at Squaw Creek Rooms are priced from US\$279 (about A\$295) per night and suites from US\$329 (about A\$348) per night plus taxes. squawcreek.com

GETTING THERE

Qantas codeshares with Skywest Airlines to fly daily from Sydney and Melbourne and five times a week from Brisbane to Reno via Los Angeles. Return economy fares are priced from A\$1,738 and business class fares from A\$7,994. Total travel time is around 21 hours. qantas.com.au Lake Tahoe is a 45-minute drive from Reno.

SKIING THERE

For more information about all of the resorts around Lake Tahoe visit tahoemouth.com or gotahoenorth.com

Below: Kirkwood is Tahoe's snowiest resort but is rarely crowded.

