

# Sierra Style

From Mammoth Mountain to a range of resorts surrounding Lake Tahoe, California is a winter-sports playground ■ BY BILL FINK

**I'M LIVING A SKIER'S DREAM.** Catching an early chairlift, the morning after a storm at 10,800 feet on top of Chair 23 at Mammoth Mountain, I gaze at bluebird skies above me and powder-white below. I buckle my boots tight and peer over the cornice into the formidable double-black-diamond Wipeout Chute. The prior night's winds have blown deep snow into the steep, narrow run between jagged black rocks. ■ I launch myself a few feet into the air from the lip, and land in comforting, soft powder that slows my momentum a bit. A hundred feet of bouncing turns through knee-deep snow, and I emerge safely from the chute into a vast bowl of untracked powder. Gaining speed, my wide, sweeping turns raise a rooster tail of snow behind me as I drop a thousand vertical feet back to the bottom of the lift. Still out of breath, I quickly get back on the chair, figuring I can rest on the return ride to the summit. ■ California may be better known for its beaches, theme parks and wineries, but when November rolls around and the flakes begin to fly, snowboarders and skiers like me turn their attention to the Sierra Nevada, the Golden State's winter playground. The following guide offers profiles of several sure-bet resorts for a California winter vacation.

## A Mammoth of a Mountain

The first thing you'll notice about skiing Mammoth is that the name fits—it really is a mammoth-size mountain. With 3,500 acres of terrain, 150 trails, 28 lifts and 3,100 vertical feet of skiing, it allows you to spend a weekend exploring the slopes without ever repeating a run. An epic ride up Panorama Gondola carries you close to the 11,000-plus-foot peak. As the name implies, panoramic views await those who come to the summit: 360 degrees of sweeping jagged peaks of the Sierra Nevada range.

Peering down from the peak, skiers and snowboarders are greeted by open expanses of extreme terrain, as well as the wide, groomed, easygoing Dave's Run. On a good day, the bowls beneath the peak are deep with fresh snow as fluffy as the mascot, Woolly, allowing for long, arcing turns through the powder and whoops of joy echoing across the hills.

Even when the weather doesn't cooperate with daily fresh snow, remember that this is a big mountain: Follow the locals to the powder stashes that linger in the sheltered tree-lined slopes on the mountain's far right

above Outpost 14, or the far left at Cloud Nine Express.

One of the great things about Mammoth is that, with multiple peaks and slopes facing all directions, chances are good that on any given day you're going to find some excellent ski conditions, sometimes in many different places on the slopes as the day progresses.

For advanced terrain, Chair 22 is my personal favorite. It leads to steep, powder-filled, tree-lined runs where intimidating names such as Avalanche Chutes protect the area from getting tracked up too quickly, though the runs are made safe by the ski patrol early in the day.

For beginners, a well-developed ski/snowboard school offers group and individual instruction, and plenty of gentle terrain, with a couple of moving-carpet lifts and, of course, good ol' Woolly hopping around to greet the kids.

Mammoth is also well-known for its assortment of terrain parks—a collection of seven areas of halfpipes, jumps, jibs and rails that have been winning numerous

MAMMOTH MOUNTAIN features untracked ridges, chutes and bowls for skiers and snowboarders of all abilities.

“best of” awards in the ski press. To immerse myself in the experience, I join a “Parks and Pipes” snowboard camp offered by the mountain. I figure I’ll be double the age of the next-oldest student, but several adults join me in the multiday class, which eventually splits into two parts along age and skill lines. One small 12-year-old boy proudly announces, “I’ve been snowboarding since I was little,” and joins the advanced group. I do fine on the jumps, quickly graduating from the smaller ramps to the larger kickers in the Unbound terrain park, but my expertise in rails is lacking. After careful instruction and encouragement, I’m able to tackle some of the basic park features. But when I advance to the more complex swooping, turning and downright scary features, things don’t go quite as well. I opt out of the “battle-box” challenge, and instead spend my time trying to memorize my new snowboarding vocabulary.

At the end of a day of skiing, riding or just sightseeing on the slopes, visitors can drop down to the Main Lodge area for après-ski food and drinks in the lodge, the cafes or the always-popular Yodler chalet. Or visitors may ride a gondola back to the main village, an extended pedestrian area of shops, restaurants and hotels. For this season, the improved and regraded Village Ski Back Trail offers skiers the chance to skip the gondola and just slide back to the village over a bridge and through the woods.

Nonskiers will find their own share of activities around Mammoth Mountain, such as the snowmobiling tour I took last season. Our convoy of five snowmobiles took off from the slopeside lot and followed marked paths into the forests around Mammoth. The guide kept us to sensible speeds, although it still required some power and balance to guide the machine around tightly banked turns. Then it was playtime: We found a wide-open meadow filled with a couple of feet of untracked fresh powder, and the guide let us spin around to our hearts’ content.

For a more culinary treat, take a snowcat tour up the side hills around Mammoth to a picnic table perched on a scenic overlook. The staff hops out to serve a multicourse meal, paired with wine, while you sit back and enjoy the expansive scenery. You can also take an evening snowcat ride up to the midmountain restaurant for dinner. The adventurous may want to sign up for full-moon snowshoeing or cross-country skiing tours.

With a combination of massive annual snowfall and one of the most substantial snowmaking systems in North America, Mammoth has one of the longest seasons of any resort, often ranging from mid-November through June. The resort hasn’t missed a Thanksgiving opening in 20 years, and in 2010 Mammoth even stayed open for some Fourth of July—celebration skiing. Late in the season, keep a lookout for the Mammoth “3-Way,” a \$99 package combining skiing, mountain biking and golf in a single day pass.

NORTHSTAR-AT-TAHOE is a family-oriented resort with terrain parks and some of the best glade skiing in the Tahoe area.



COURTESY: NORTHSTAR-AT-TAHOE RESORT

Alaska Airlines’ sister carrier, Horizon Air, launched direct service to Mammoth Yosemite Airport from Los Angeles a couple of years ago, and has added nonstop flights out of San Jose, as well as one-stop, same-plane service out of Portland. Free shuttles connect the airport to slopeside hotels, from which you can get around the village on local shuttles.

### California’s Cool Collection: Lake Tahoe

The Lake Tahoe area of California, bordering Nevada, has more than a dozen ski resorts scattered around the famous lake. The resorts range from mega destination ski areas with ski villages and an array of facilities, to those with little more than a ticket booth and a few ski lifts. There’s something for just about every price point, skiing ability and vacation style. The profiles of four resorts, below, offer a few enticing variations on the Tahoe ski scene.



COURTESY: MAMMOTH MOUNTAIN

SNOWCATS take guests into the scenic hills around Mammoth Mountain for picnics.

MT. ROSE offers fantastic views of north Lake Tahoe from its 9,700-foot summit. Reno is only about 20 miles north.



SCOTT SADY

### The Glamour Spot: Squaw Valley USA

Home of the 1960 Winter Olympics, and of more recent Olympic golden boy Jonny Moseley, Squaw Valley has some of the most extreme skiing in California, as well as the most extreme attitudes in the area. Whether you're waiting to drop into a chute, a mogul run or the terrain park, you're likely to overhear conversations between skiers and boarders about upcoming competitions, the latest ski-video shoot and, of course, who's getting sponsored by whom this year.

Once you strap on your helmet, it's all about the world-class skiing. For my money, the best lift in North America is Squaw's KT-22 and the varied array of long, steep slopes to which it leads. When conditions are right, I also enjoy the semihidden Broken Arrow lift, which offers access to a wilderness of bowls, glades and chutes far away from the crowds. But even during busy holiday weekends, Squaw's 33 ski lifts and 4,000 acres of skiable terrain provide enough room for everyone to get their turns in. The Shirley Lake lift is always a favorite with intermediate skiers because of its wide, groomed runs. If that area gets busy, traverse to the opposite side of the mountain for the long, rolling slopes below the Squaw Creek lift that drop into the Resort at Squaw Creek.

Located at the base of the gondola and funitel, the Village at Squaw Valley offers a full-service collection of bars, restaurants, lodging and shops.

### The Locals' Choice: Mt. Rose

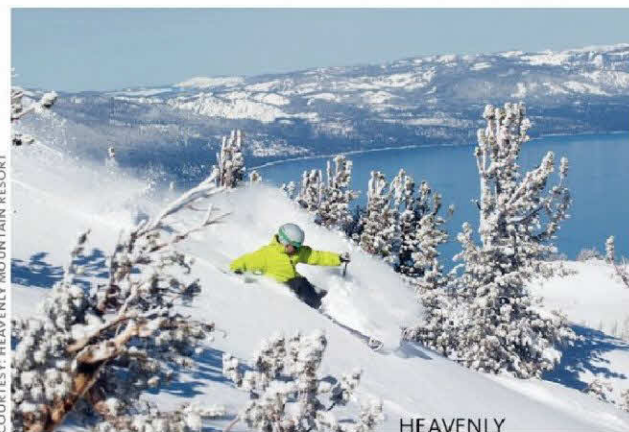
Located between Reno and Lake Tahoe, by the side of winding, twisting U.S. Route 431, Mt. Rose is an old-school mountain without a village, a hotel, covered park-

ing, valets or mascots. It's your basic show-up-and-ski sort of place. While it has only six chairlifts, Mt. Rose's incognito status and its 60 runs mean there's rarely a wait for a lift, or crowds on the runs. And with Tahoe's highest base elevation—8,950 feet—Mt. Rose will have snow at the bottom when others don't.

Mt. Rose has a steep (but not treacherous) section called the Chutes that challenges advanced skiers, and a couple of terrain parks on the back side to entertain boarders (and the people on the lift above). Half of the mountain is dedicated to beginner and advanced trails, so newbies have space to learn.

With cheaper lift tickets than the big-name resorts, Mt. Rose is more affordable, even before its assortment of promotions such as 2'fer Tuesdays, Ladies Day Thursdays and the Elvis Birthday celebration. But this is no minor league operation: High-speed lifts whisk you up the hill, and the new Winters Creek Lodge is a scenic and stylish on-mountain dining upgrade for 2010. At Mt. Rose's old-school main lodge, the bar area feels like a neighborhood pub where locals and tourists hang out to chat.

Day trips to Mt. Rose from Reno are easy, with \$10 shuttles leaving from the major hotels, meaning you can drop into Mt. Rose's Macho Bowl beneath the Zephyr lift,



COURTESY: HEAVENLY MOUNTAIN RESORT

HEAVENLY skiers find deep powdery snow in a resort that straddles the California-Nevada border.

then drop some pins in one of the 78 lanes of Reno's National Bowling Stadium later that night. Route 431 from Reno up into the hills is scenic, but can close on bad-weather days, so be sure to watch the weather—a good tip no matter where you're skiing.

**Family Room: Northstar-at-Tahoe Resort**

From the village ice-skating rink surrounded by couches, fire pits and the smell of s'mores, to the extensive ski school, day-care program and snow-tubing, Northstar continues to solidify its reputation as one of the family-friendliest Lake Tahoe ski choices. The base village is full of kid-friendly stores, and the lavish on-mountain Ritz-Carlton gives the area a feeling of luxury.

On the mountain, many of Northstar's 93 ski trails are heavily groomed highways for beginning to intermediate skiers. Twelve chairlifts and a handful of rope tows and magic carpets fan out across the area, giving skiers many choices. Advanced skiers can hit the bumpy runs below the Lookout Mountain peak, or try tight powder turns through the glades on the back side of Mt. Pluto—one of Lake Tahoe's top ski experiences. Cross-country ski enthusiasts can venture out on Northstar's network of trails.

In general, Northstar has more of a mellow feel than other Tahoe mountains: no early-morning races to get to



JEFF ENGERETSON

SQUAW'S 4,000 acres of terrain offer enough room for everyone.

the powder stashes, no yelling at slowpokes puttering down the Village Run, just a little chaos at the midmountain lodge at lunchtime when families try to manage kids, equipment and huge bowls of chili fries—perhaps Northstar's true black-diamond challenge.

**Vegas Meets Tahoe: Heavenly Mountain Resort**

Can't decide between a day spent testing your luck in the casinos and a day spent outdoors enjoying nature? Then South Lake Tahoe's Heavenly is for you. A mountain that actually straddles the border of California and Nevada, it gives skiers the ability to walk from a lift base into one of a half-dozen lakeside casinos. But don't be fooled by the flash—Heavenly's 4,800 acres of ski terrain offer enough

loosen  
your bindings

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★★★★★ **Mary M. — Kalispell, Montana** As a three time Subaru owner, I am thrilled that I made my last purchase at Dick Hannah Subaru! Everything about the experience was fantastic I called the dealership, got the price I wanted (which was the BEST PRICE around), and flew out to pick up my new Subaru. It was cheaper to fly to Vancouver, WA and drive back to Montana than it was to buy locally. The transaction was smooth and easy, the paperwork was seamless. They even had my accessories installed for me before I got there to pick it up! The trip was well worth it, and I love my new Subaru. Thank you Dick Hannah Subaru. I will be back!

★★★★★ **Jana G. — Hazleton, North Dakota** I decided to purchase from Hannah Subaru initially because they had a better selection than there was at home. The Customer Service was outstanding, and they really went out of their way to make the transaction as easy and painless as possible. Even though I live in North Dakota, I would recommend Dick Hannah Subaru in Vancouver, WA to anyone I know.

★★★★★ **RW — Boise, Idaho** Just a quick note to express my appreciation for your kind attention in handling the purchase of my new Subaru Forester. After my early morning flight from Boise to Portland it was very nice of you to meet me at the airport and drive me to the dealership. The transaction was remarkably efficient. I think I spent under an hour in the showroom and was on my way. The 450 mile drive back to Boise was a pleasure in the new Forester. Thanks for the full tank of gas, the breakfast and the good conversation.

★★★★★ **Aris G. — Scottsdale, Arizona** Dick Hannah Subaru impressed me with their professionalism and transparency during a recent purchase of a 2010 Outback. I am an out-of-state buyer who had to complete the transaction long distance, after closing the deal in person. Dick Hannah Subaru acted timely in completing all the steps of their already streamlined transaction process, gave me extraordinary attention, and surprised me with a very competitive sale price. I most certainly recommend them and I will return to them for my next purchase.

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scenery, challenge and variety to make you forget you're anywhere near a slot machine. The views from the summit are indeed heavenly, with a jaw-dropping perspective over Lake Tahoe, and a surprising desert view of Nevada.

Heavenly's 95 runs and 19 ski lifts offer the full complement of downhill fun, from groomers to bump runs, hike-in chutes to long, sweeping cat tracks. Try Sky Express for glade skiing; Mott's Canyon for the steep; or the infamous Gunbarrel run if you want to show off on Volkswagen-size moguls right under a crowded ski lift.

At the base of the gondola, Heavenly Village contains an array of shops and activities, including its own ice-skating rink. Just around the corner are the large casinos, and a Vegas-meets-the-mountains strip of bars, restaurants, shops and motels. Those more interested in the ski scene than the nightlife will like the huge supply of rental properties dotting the hills, with close access to lifts from which you can indulge in yet another day of pure skiing.

FOR MANY SKIERS AND BOARD RIDERS, HOWEVER, one more day may not be enough. If the five ski areas mentioned here have you wanting more, check out the extensive list of Western ski resorts—seven states' and two Canadian provinces' worth—that follows. That should keep you busy for a while. ▲

Author Bill Fink lives in San Francisco.

### Ski Resorts of the West

**Alaska Airlines** ([alaskaair.com](http://alaskaair.com); 800-ALASKAAIR) and **Horizon Air** ([horizonair.com](http://horizonair.com); 800-547-9308) offer access to ski resorts throughout the western United States and Western Canada. Following is a list of options for your winter travels. For a complete Alaska Airlines Vacations package to Whistler, visit the Web or call 800-468-2248.

#### WESTERN UNITED STATES

##### ALASKA

**Alyeska Resort** Lifts: 7. Skiable terrain: 1,500 acres—20% beginner; 50% intermediate; 30% advanced/expert. Vertical rise: 2,500 feet. Trails: 73. 907-754-7669; [www.alyeskaresort.com](http://www.alyeskaresort.com).

**Eaglecrest** Lifts: 4. Skiable terrain: 640 acres—20% beginner; 40% intermediate; 40% advanced/expert. Vertical rise: 1,400 feet. Trails: 36. 907-790-2000; [www.skijuneau.com](http://www.skijuneau.com).