



Valley

Deep

White-knuckle ride:
the infamous KT-22
run at Californian ski
resort Squaw Valley

A black and white photograph of a snowy mountain slope. The mountain is covered in deep snow, with several ski lifts visible. The lifts have poles and cables extending across the slope. There are many evergreen trees scattered across the mountain, some standing alone and others in small groups. The sky is dark, and the overall scene is serene and majestic.

Highs

Mountain

Guy Wilkinson straps into his snowboard and releases his inner powder hound at Lake Tahoe's ski resorts.

I

AM standing in a bar, nursing a pint of Guinness, as icy sheets of rain sweep in from storm clouds shrouding the upper peaks of Squaw Valley, the largest ski field in the North Lake Tahoe region. A fierce storm has been forecast and, along with it, a huge dump of powder. Around me there's a real sense of anticipation; many will be up before sunrise to be first on the lifts.

Crowned by a dozen jagged peaks encircling a sheer vertical chute, Squaw has long been a magnet for eccentrics and daredevils. Host of the 1960 Winter Olympics, it's located within an area featuring a vast freshwater lake surrounded by 15 ski resorts straddling the border between California and Nevada. Though it's not exclusively suited to expert riders, the vertiginous upper peaks of Squaw's western face almost certainly have contributed to its hardcore reputation.

Next morning, with the mountain covered in 25 centimetres of fresh powder, North Face guide Billy Hauptert and I strap into our snowboards and hit the Red Dog chairlift at the central foot of the ski fields. Hauptert, formerly part of an elite team of firefighters who parachuted out of planes to extinguish wildfires for the US Forest Service, now works with Squaw Valley to offer small-group tours of the best ski areas.

The air is crisp on the mountain. There's a strong wind at the summit but lower down the sky is a spotless blue. From the lift we can see across the sprawling alpine ranges towards Lake Tahoe in the east, a smear of cobalt amid the brilliant white peaks.

Following Hauptert's lead, I carve my way down a crisscrossing network of immaculately groomed runs, from tight tree-lined avenues like Champs Élysées and Poulsen's Gully (named after star skier Wayne Poulsen, who founded the resort) to the wide-open bowls of Montezuma's and Strainer. Sometimes we veer off-piste, making the most of the fresh powder. Weaving between clusters of pine trees, my board skates over snow so light it's like gliding on feathers.

A network of 29 lifts includes a 28-person gondola, the Funitel. The more we explore, the more Squaw's tough-guy reputation is shattered – it has terrain to suit all abilities.

"A lot of folks, when they first arrive at Squaw, see massive cliff walls in all directions at the base of the mountain and it gives the place a reputation for being extreme," says Hauptert. "But there's actually thousands of acres of beginner and intermediate terrain here; it just happens to all be located at the top of the mountain, where it can be accessed by [an aerial] tram or the Funitel."

This is one of Squaw's more unusual characteristics. With many learner slopes located higher up, novices enjoy some of the finest views over Lake Tahoe rather than being stuck at the base of the mountain. With plans underway for a base-to-base gondola that will connect Squaw with neighbouring Alpine Meadows, the options could soon explode.

We round off our day at the infamous KT-22 run. A wide-open, 610-vertical-metre zone of steep cliffs and chutes, it's famous among the world's snowboarding fraternity. The peak earned its moniker in the 1940s when Wayne Poulsen – who'd purchased the mountain – took his then-girlfriend, Sandy, for a ski date. In her terror, rather than plummet vertically, Sandy traversed the mountain by making 22 clumsy kick turns before eventually emerging, unscathed.



Estelle Bowl (left) at Alpine Meadows; there are plans to link the alpine resort to Squaw via a gondola



Ice Age relic:
modern Lake Tahoe
was shaped by
glaciers some one
million years ago

Although we choose an infinitely easier line, it's nerve-racking all the same. Looking down at the steep drop, my heart thumps. When I edge my board over the lip of the mountain, I rapidly pick up speed, putting in hurried tight turns over the mogul-smothered terrain. Before long, I lose control and begin cartwheeling like a rag doll but, thankfully, my helmet ensures the only damage is to my ego.

In need of a stiff drink, we head to Le Chamois – also known as “The Chammy” (squawchamois.com) – a loft bar near the back of the ski school that's popular with locals. The room is cluttered with framed photographs, old wooden skis and retired snowboards.

In one nook, I notice a picture of Shane McConkey, a legendary local figure who pioneered ski-BASE jumping – skiing off the edge of a cliff before seamlessly transitioning to a BASE jump – a pursuit that, sadly, proved fatal for him.

We're handed beers and whiskey shots, which we race down with the barman. It's a welcoming scene and I'm soon surrounded by half-

cut snowboarders and skiers emphatically discussing the best lines of the day.

The snow continues to fall on subsequent days while I explore more of Lake Tahoe in my four-wheel drive. The tree-lined roads around the water are impossibly picturesque. Encircled by the gargantuan Sierra Nevada ranges, the rocky shore of the second-deepest lake in the United States is fringed by thousands of hectares of pine trees. Innumerable wooden jetties stretch towards timber lakeside cabins.

Though there are 15 resorts amid 9000 hectares of skiing and snowboarding terrain around Lake Tahoe, next I opt for Homewood, a lesser-known alternative, 25 minutes south-east of Squaw on the lake's western shore.

At the West Shore Café and Inn (westshorecafe.com), there's a log fire flickering beside reception and floor-to-ceiling windows reveal sweeping views over Lake Tahoe. A scattering of patrons sip martinis at the swish oak-panelled bar. With only seven rooms – including two luxury villas – the vibe is upmarket hunting lodge meets boutique winter retreat. My room upstairs overlooks the lake.

Unlike the boisterous scene at Squaw, Homewood is more of a laid-back, locals' mountain with a charming, almost clandestine feel. A simple wooden hut at the base of the mountain hosts a no-frills bar, restaurant



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The Gold Coast
Funitel delivers
skiers to Squaw
Valley's easier runs

Carve up the slopes at these Lake Tahoe resorts

Heavenly

Enjoy outstanding views of Lake Tahoe over 2000 hectares of terrain that covers two states. With three terrain parks and nearly 100 runs, Heavenly (skiheavenly.com) is the place to ski hard and party harder. The après-ski scene is legendary, with happy hour, DJs and fire pits to warm the cockles.

Mount Rose

The closest resort to Reno, Mount Rose (skirose.com) has about 50 per cent advanced terrain and some of the steepest slopes in the country, spanning 500 hectares. Its convenient location between two major hubs makes it a popular spot to kick off or wind down a ski trip.

Northstar

More of a luxury resort – complimentary Champagne is served on the mountain daily at 2pm – Northstar (northstarcalifornia.com) is owned by Vail Resorts so you can use your season pass at its other resorts, Heavenly and Kirkwood. With seven terrain parks and 56 per cent intermediate terrain, it's ideal for those looking to progress.



Travel Insider

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and hire shop, unlikely to have changed much since the resort was founded in 1961.

Riding the Madden Triple Chair up the mountain, I discover that I have a staggering number of wide-open powder runs to myself. And Lake Tahoe is so close, at times it feels as though I might ride into the water at the end of my run.

"It's a lost diamond in the field out here – a goldmine – and that's exactly what it used to be," says ski school supervisor Garry Cox, now in his 54th year of ski instructing. "It's not isolated but it's a little out of the way. Most people have to drive by the larger resorts to find Homewood and they usually just stop [at those]. Homewood is a smaller resort with a laid-back mentality. The competitiveness isn't here. You don't need to go out smashing gates or anything; you just go out and have fun."

And that's the beauty of Lake Tahoe, whether you choose the time warp that is Homewood or the rock'n'roll edge of Squaw. ●