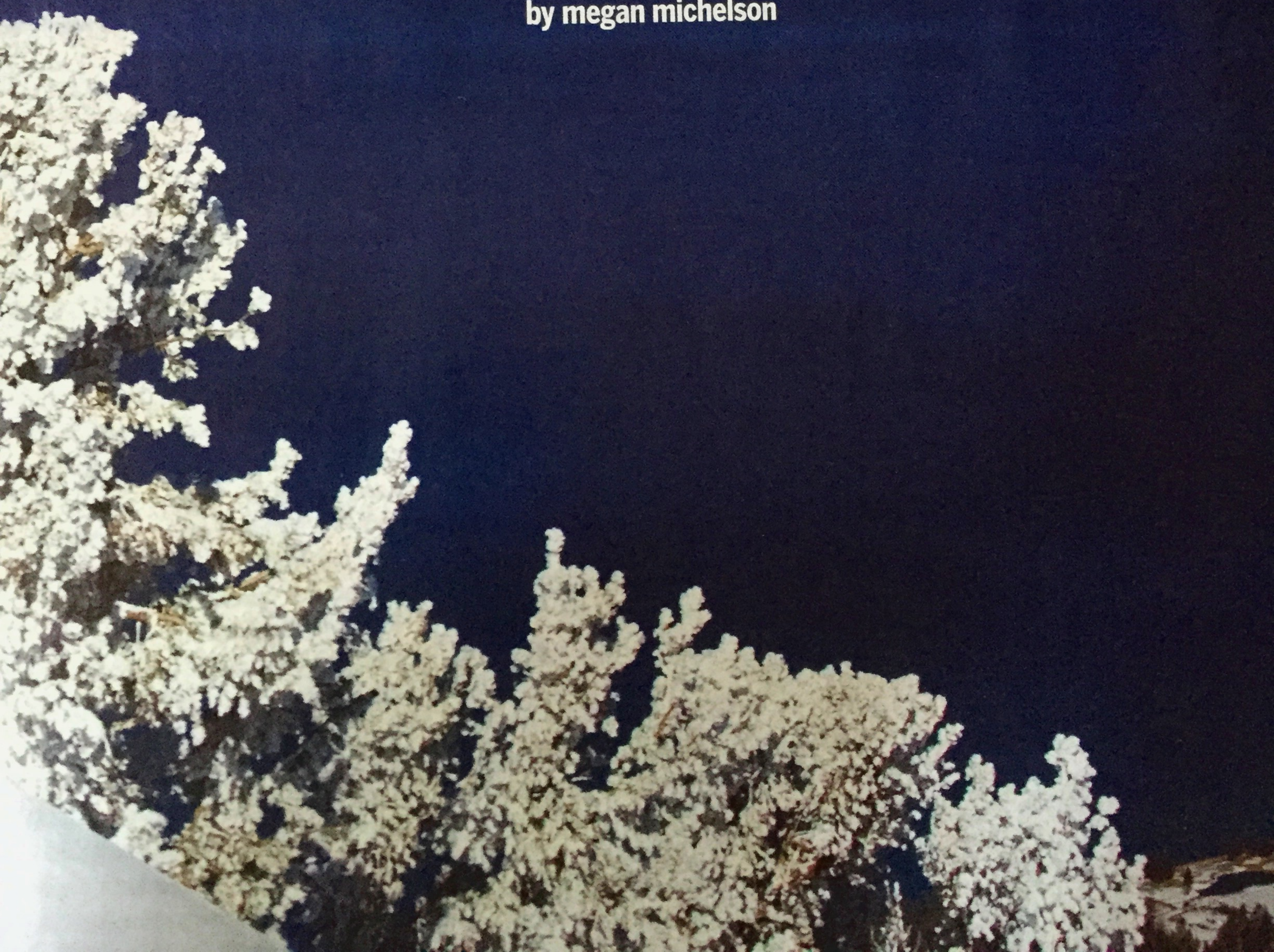




skiing on the side

How South Lake Tahoe is transforming from a has-been gambling hub to a 24-hour mountain town that just wants to have fun.

by **megan michelson**





I'm eating a vegan burger, made from scratch with green-chile pinto beans, at an Irish pub across the street from the Heavenly gondola, steps from the border of California and Nevada. I've been skiing all morning and need to refuel, and this place, McP's Taphouse, is a ski-pole's length from Heavenly's groomed paradise.

McP's recently opened in this location, and the place feels glossy and new, with high ceilings, modern light fixtures, and barstools out of a design magazine. The pub used to be in a dark, dingy space a few blocks down. And this spot, where I'm enjoying my burger and side of "Irish fries," smothered in gravy, was a cavernous and depressing hole in the ground a mere 18 months ago.

For over six years, a halted construction project occupied a full city block in prime real estate neighboring the Heavenly village. It was a hollow symbol of the economic downturn, an ever-present blemish on a tourist town trying desperately to give itself a makeover.

The development was slated to be fancy shops and high-end condos, but when the economy took a dive in 2008, the property's developer went bankrupt, leaving the place desolate and in foreclosure. A fence was installed around the exterior, serving as a makeshift cover-up. Locals took to calling it, simply, "the hole."

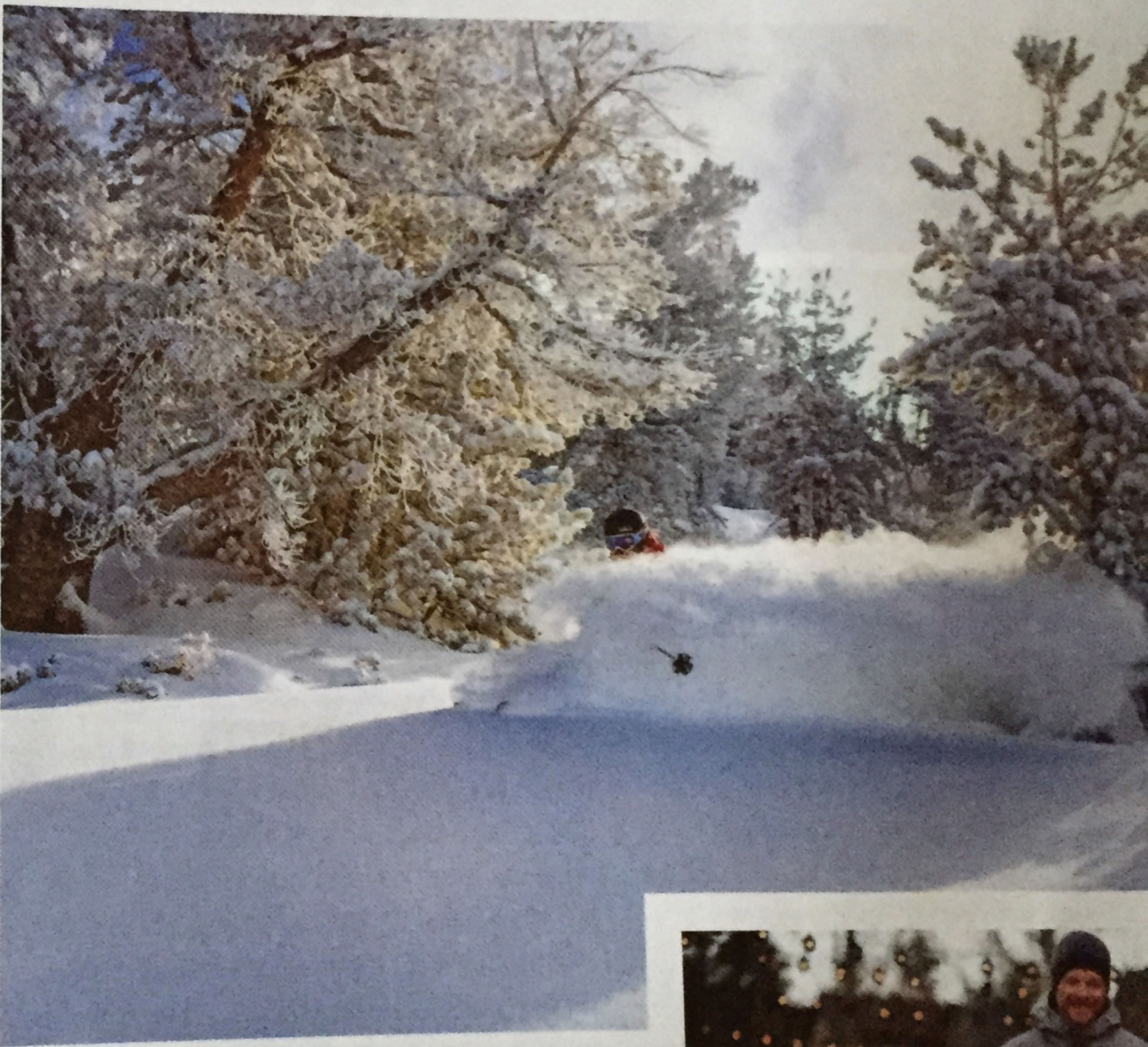
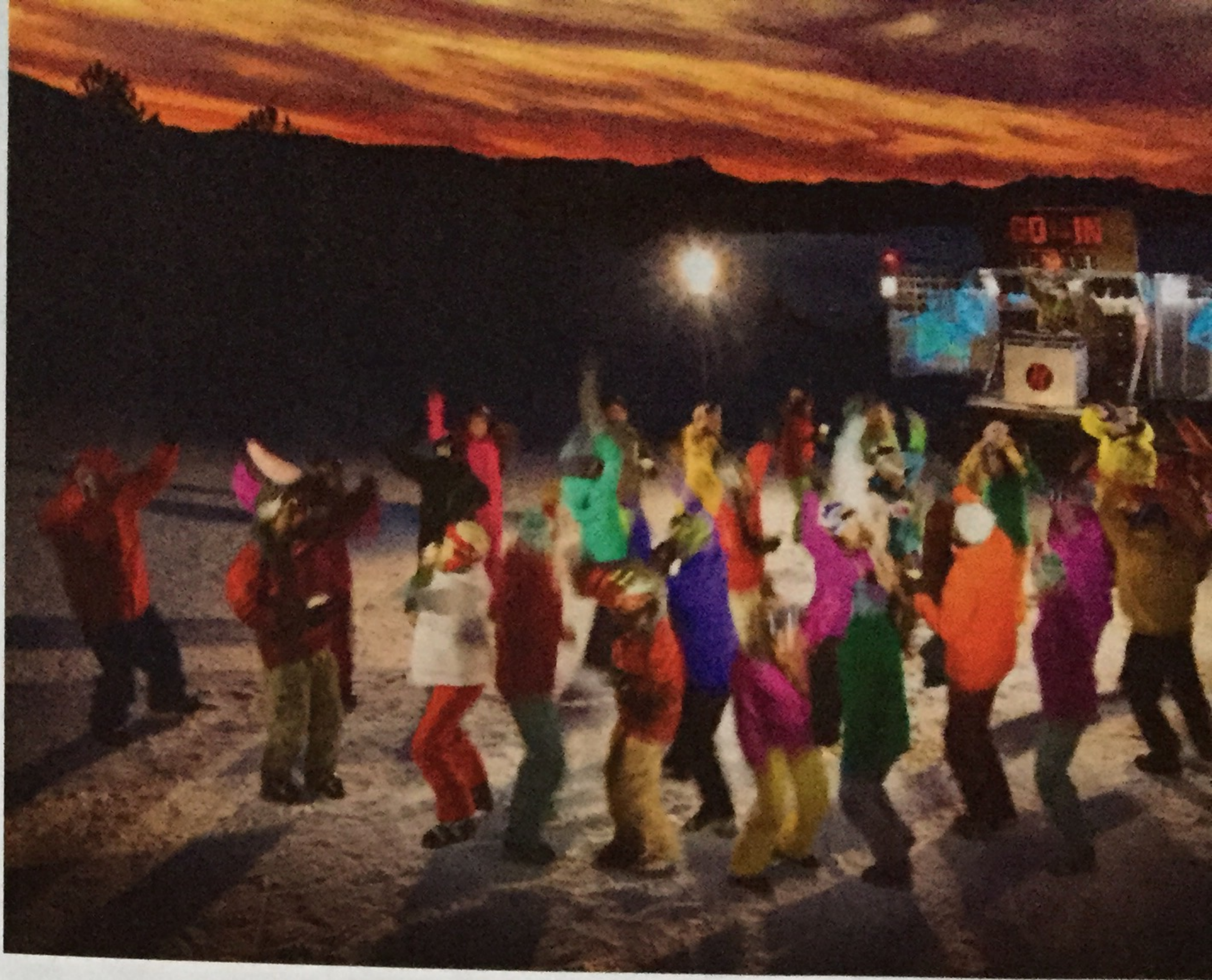
"That hole in the ground was the shining star for how dysfunctional things were here," says Heavenly's vice president and COO, Pete Sonntag.

South Lake Tahoe was developed as a ski

town after the 1960 Winter Olympics at Squaw Valley, but soon it became a gamblers' hub. Harvey's Casino opened in 1963, Sahara's Tahoe in 1965, and other major casinos soon followed. At one point, it was the third-largest gaming destination in the U.S. behind Las Vegas and Atlantic City. By 2004, gaming was bringing in \$338 million in revenue to the area, attracting high rollers in expensive suits and private jets as well as blue-hairs looking to work the penny slots.

Eventually the south side of Lake Tahoe became known as a place where you could stay up all night playing roulette and sleep all day in cheap motels with in-room Jacuzzis. You could wake up hungover, eat bacon and eggs at a casino buffet, then start drinking Bloody Marys at the local dive bar. Skiing wasn't on the to-do list for many of the town's visitors.

But over the last decade, the rise of Indian gaming closer to California's major cities drew gamblers elsewhere. That, coupled with economic decline, saw casino revenue sink to \$208 million in 2011, a 38 percent drop from just seven years prior. Strict building regulations limited redevelopment, and among locals a complacency set in. The highway that passes through town, dotted



with liquor stores, dilapidated motels, and fast-food joints, makes the place feel more like a strip mall than a ski town.

But let's get back to my vegan burger for a moment. The mere fact that this gastropub not only exists but thrives is testament to the change at hand in this town. Skiers have rediscovered the place, and entrepreneurs and investors are bringing big money and big ideas to match. The local government is pumping dollars into road improvements, shabby motels are transforming into boutique lodges, and new restaurants are popping up where old ones went dark.

"There's a sense of optimism now," Heavenly's Sonntag says. "For a long time, there was really no investment going into the town. But now people are thinking, 'What's next? How do we raise the game for the entire destination?'"

And that huge hole? It's almost filled. Last winter, the first phase of construction—15,000 square feet of retail space dubbed the Chateau—was completed and now there's a ski-rental shop, restaurants, and boutiques selling cowboy boots and socks in its place. And of course good old McP's, in its sleek new 6,000-square-foot space with 20 flatscreen TVs, 40 beers on tap, and a varied,

Clockwise from top left: The Hard Rock Hotel & Casino opened in February of last year with a 25,000-square-foot casino; grooving to the DJ Cat at a pop-up dance party; the trees beckon off the Sky Express quad; gather 'round the fire pit at Fire + Ice for a proper après warmup.

COURTESY OF HEAVENLY MOUNTAIN RESORT (3)



eclectic menu designed to satisfy hungry skiers.

“The South Shore has always been the red-haired stepchild of the lake,” McP’s co-owner Pete Joseph tells me when he stops by my table. “It’s really not anymore. There are nice places to stay now, versus people just coming up to flop in a crappy motel room. We’re heading in the right direction.”

But can a town really change? And what does it take to turn a faded casino burg into a skier hot spot? I’m here to find out.

E skiing down a smooth, rolling run at Heavenly, and in front of me the turquoise water of Lake Tahoe expands for miles, bordered by white-capped peaks. Tahoe’s suffered from low-snow winters in recent years, but it doesn’t seem to matter here, with creamy groomers that go on forever and plunging tree skiing off high-alpine peaks.

Vail Resorts purchased Heavenly in 2002, and on the mountain the place has a distinctly high-end feel to it: speedy lifts in every direction, impeccable grooming across 4,800 acres of sprawling terrain, and salmon pita wraps for lunch in a LEED-certified lodge hung with chandeliers. It feels woodsy yet pristine, a true resort experience and a far

cry from South Lake Tahoe’s grittier vibe.

But after the skiing come the go-go dancers and conga lines, and this is the moment when Heavenly shows its underbelly. At the Unbuckle après-ski party on a Saturday afternoon at the midmountain Tamarack Lodge, the Heavenly Angels—basically the ski-town version of Victoria’s Secret models—dance in pink spandex atop pedestals next to a spinning DJ. Michael Jackson’s “Billie Jean” blares through the speakers, rendering conversation pointless, so you may as well dance.

Skiers and boarders scoot around the dance floor in their clunky boots, sipping half-priced cocktails at 9,150 feet. A girl wearing goggles hula-hoops nearby, while a bachelor party dressed in superhero costumes swigs from the shot ski at the bar. At one point, the entire staff of the lodge, including the busboy and the burger fryer, bust into a choreographed flash mob. And this is all before 5 p.m.

South Lake Tahoe has always been a late-night town, and no number of shiny cafés slinging almond-milk lattes will change that. When the sun sets, music seems to pour from every corner, and in the village there’s a guy strumming a guitar by an outdoor fire pit at nearly every restaurant.



Top: Working the edge of the glades on the California side of the resort. Fingers crossed for more pow days like this one. Inset: A Heavenly Angel does her thing at Unbuckle at Tamarack.

At the new, improved Heavenly, the dining scene alone might tell the most promising resurrection story yet. South Lake isn’t just a burger-and-buffet town anymore. Cold Water Brewery opened in 2014 in the spot where the iconic Swiss Chalet restaurant stood. It even serves a fondue made with beer and Swiss cheese in homage to the building’s previous occupant. Elsewhere I dine on divine seared ahi tuna in coconut broth at the Gunbarrel Tavern

by night and wake up to delicious lemon ricotta pancakes at Jimmy's Restaurant in the morning.

Jimmy's is inside the new Landing Resort and Spa, which opened in 2014 just steps from the beaches of Lake Tahoe. This four-and-a-half-star property epitomizes South Lake's new direction, with complimentary glasses of champagne proffered at check-in, gas fireplaces in rooms and suites, marble bathrooms with heated floors (and toilet seats!), and the loveliest waterfront views.

"What used to be here, before this hotel?" I ask the bellhop.

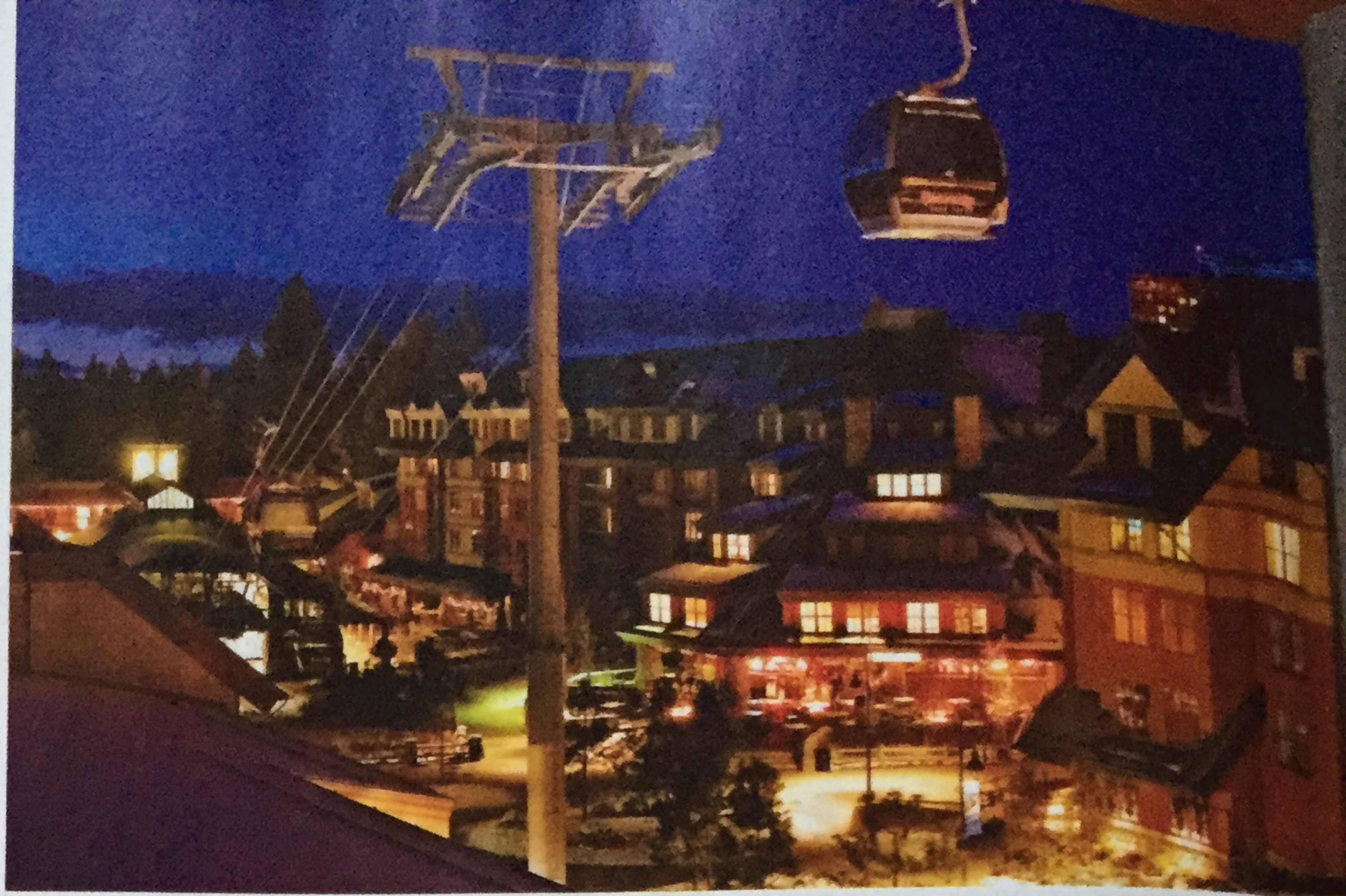
"It was an old motor lodge," he says. "It was pretty run-down. You're lucky you're staying here instead."

A few blocks from my room at the

Landing is the Base Camp Hotel, which opened in 2012 and is currently a symbol of sorts for South Lake's potential. Base Camp is known for offering a room with a canvas tent over the bed and a mock campfire surrounded by cozy chairs. It feels like a log cabin in the woods, but with plush towels and iPhone docking stations.

Base Camp used to be a place called The Block, a party-centric motel that had Yelp reviews along the lines of "I would have felt safer sleeping alongside a Dumpster behind the Harrah's casino." The Block got shut down in 2008 for unpaid taxes.

Soon after, 38-year-old hotelier and avid skier Christian Strobel bought the property and completely renovated it, turning it into an upscale lodge with granola breakfasts, communal fondue dinners, and a monitor in the lobby to share your GoPro footage from the day. By 2014, bookings were in such high demand, Strobel bought the old Capri Motel next



door and nearly doubled Base Camp's size.

"This town has some of the best adventure skiing in the winter. And yet every hotel was either a bad motel or a casino," says Strobel. "But town is slowly changing. People are realizing that in order to make the shift from a casino town to a real destination town, more investment needs to go into lodging."

What's become of the casinos? Good question. They've been the slowest to renovate, but they're coming around. The former Horizon Casino, which had pinecone carpets and smoky dive bars, underwent a \$60 million renovation and reopened last winter as a glittering Hard Rock Hotel & Casino, with DJ-fueled pool parties and a lineup of major musical acts. The Mont Bleu casino is enjoying a \$24 million renovation of its rooms and casino floor.

Change is slow around here. But it's moving along, one project at a time. Collectively South Lake has a more polished and outdoorsy vibe than it did just a few years ago. It feels less like a place you'd drive through and more like a place you want to stay for a long weekend. Mind you, it's not trying to be Park City or Vail, or any other ski town. It's something entirely its own—a strange blend of skiing and nightlife that makes you feel you can have it all.

Late one night, I order a dozen oysters from the 24-hour oyster bar inside the Hard Rock Hotel, just because I can. I feel like I'm at a swanky club in L.A. or New York (aside from the sound of 500 slot machines). But unlike in L.A. or N.Y.C., I'm skiing first thing tomorrow morning, and that's a bet I'll take any day of the week. ●

Top: Marriott's Timber Lodge boasts a winning location at the base of the gondola, with easy access to the shops and dining in Heavenly Village. Below: The faces of Lake Tahoe's lodging scene, rustic chic at Base Camp (right) and high-end living at The Landing (left), the lake's only luxury property.

