

TRAVEL

World Cup ski racer Travis Ganong calls Truckee, Calif., home and spends his free time on the slopes of Squaw Valley Alpine Meadows.



RESORTS

If You Build It, They Will Come

SQUAW VALLEY ALPINE MEADOWS IS POSITIONING ITSELF TO BECOME THE NEXT MEGA-RESORT AND YEAR-ROUND ADVENTURE HUB WITH POTENTIAL FOR NEARLY ENDLESS SHREDDING.

By Megan Michelson // Photos by Jeff Engerbretson

A large red sign forbids us from going beyond the gate. “Stop. Ski area boundary. Terrain beyond this boundary is closed to the public,” the sign reads. I’m a rule follower, so, naturally, I throw my skis sideways and come to an abrupt halt. Fortunately, I’m with the one guy who has exclusive permission to dip into the forbidden zone: Adrian Ballinger, founder and lead guide of Alpenglow Expeditions, a worldwide mountain guiding company based right here at the bottom of California’s Squaw Valley ski area.

I’d signed up for a day of ski touring with Ballinger out the gates of Squaw, a service they began offering in 2017 after nearly a decade of attempting to gain permission and finally securing the proper permits from the Forest Service and the resort to lead guided skiing back here. This zone—called Tram Ridge—has dreamy north-facing bowls that run 1,000 vertical feet from below Squaw’s tram toward the pristine wilderness area of Shirley Canyon.



There's powder for days, and yet not a soul in sight. Technically public land, backcountry skiers are allowed to tour here using their own two feet, but Squaw has never allowed guests from the resort to leave the boundary—until now. Later in 2017, they also opened up a second zone for guided ski touring into National Geographic Bowl, steep, picturesque, 1,500-vertical-foot lines northwest of the resort's legendary in-bounds Granite Chief area.

"This is all part of the big picture," Ballinger tells me. "I would one day love to see public gates at Squaw, so the public can go out into these zones, too."

I've been skiing Alpine Meadows my entire life, but since Alpine and Squaw Valley joined forces in 2011, the place has a different feel to it. Sure, the epic, ski-movie-worthy terrain—steep chutes, empty hike-to bowls—is still the same at both mountains, which sit about a mile from each other as the crow flies yet aren't actually connected for skiers. But the vibe is different—in a good way. With the addition of the Ikon Pass, which debuted in 2018 and offers unbridled access to Squaw and Alpine, as well as 38 other destinations, more skiers are coming to Squaw from farther away and staying for longer.

What used to be a weekend warrior mountain—with mini-vans of families arriving from the San Francisco Bay Area each weekend for race programs and ski leases—is now becoming a true destination resort. The village at the base of Squaw isn't a ghost town on a Tuesday night anymore. Condos in the village are booked for week-long stays at a time. Nine airlines now offer 130 daily flights from 22 non-stop destinations directly into

TRIP PLANNING

Stay

Squaw Creek Resort (from \$199; destinationhotels.com/squawcreek) has condo-style rooms, outdoor hot tubs overlooking the valley, and its own chairlift that tends to open even on the biggest of storm days. Or get an **Airbnb in Squaw Valley** and use the resort's **Mountaineer app** to request a free shuttle to pick you up and deliver you to the lifts.

Eat

A new, order-at-the-window café called the **Hideaway** opened at the base of Alpine Meadows' Subway Chair last winter and serves the best rice bowls and Bahn mi sandwich in Tahoe. At Squaw, grab a cup of chili and a chocolate chip cookie from **Wildflour Bakery** and you'll spot all the pro skiers who call Squaw home.

Drink

Start your day at **Coffeebar** in the village at Squaw with finely-made coffee and a chocolate croissant or breakfast burrito and end your day there, too: They serve beer, wine, and raclette for après ski. Or head to the **Auld Dubliner** for a pint of Guinness and a round of fast-paced bingo.

the Reno airport, an hour from Squaw, which means you can fly in and be booting up at the base of KT-22 on the same day.

It's all part of a lofty master plan to draw people in and to change the scope of Squaw Valley Alpine Meadows. "Our long-term vision is to enhance the infrastructure that helps us better engage with this ultimate alpine playground," says Ron Cohen, CEO of Squaw Valley Alpine Meadows. "We want to find innovative ways to open more of the mountain during inclem-

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Former college ski racer-turned-freeskier Todd Ligare splits his time between Tahoe and his native Utah.

ent weather, add more lodging variety to invite longer stays, mitigate long-time traffic and parking issues, and build out a greater variety of mountain activities."

Among the plans include a massive village redevelopment, which would add 1,500 more hotel rooms (it's being held up in an appeals court, but that's a whole other story). Plus, there's the plan to connect the two resorts with a base-to-base gondola, which recently completed its environmental impact report and will soon be up for approval. The gondola would turn Squaw Valley Alpine Meadows into a true 6,000-acre resort, just shy of 8,171-acre Whistler Blackcomb and Park City Mountain Resort, which merged with neighboring Canyons in 2015 and now has 7,300 acres total.

PlumpJack Squaw Valley Inn, an iconic hotel and restaurant near the base of Squaw's tram, is readying to undergo a full transformation—it'll close down in spring 2020 and reopen with a modern look an estimated 18 months later.

But those major changes are still years out. Other updates,

however, skiers will see much sooner. This winter, Alpine Meadows is getting a major lift upgrade with a \$10 million new high-speed quad to replace the slow triple Hot Wheels chair. The new lift will go higher than the current lift and carry skiers in five minutes to the top of Sherwood Cliffs, an expert zone with gladed steeps and north-facing powder pockets. If the upper mountain is closed due to storms or wind—which, let's face it, happens a lot in Tahoe—the new lift is in a more wind-protected corridor and should, theoretically, be able to operate.

At Squaw, High Camp—the upper terminus of the tram that houses a recently renovated restaurant, market, Olympic museum, and access to beginner terrain—is undergoing a \$500,000 addition of a rope tow that'll whisk skiers from a flat zone right into the lodge.

In the 2018-'19 winter, Tahoe got a whopping 682 inches of snow, including a record-breaking number of inches (300, to be exact) in February, a month of relentless storms where entire cars got swallowed up by snowbanks and chairlifts had to be dug out before they could spin. Squaw was open for skiing until July 7. And unlike old Squaw—where summer was the slow season and midsummer visitors would flock to nearby Lake Tahoe instead of the ski resort—summer at the mountain is bustling, too, thanks to a growing number of events and festivals, free weekly outdoor yoga, and live music throughout the warmer months.

Last fall, Alpenglow Expeditions opened Tahoe's first via ferrata, a European-style bolted climbing route that scales 600 feet straight up the Tram Face and serves as an exhilarating, rock-climbing-like experience for visitors and locals.

Having summer and winter guided experiences adds to the area's year-round destination appeal. "We have clients who come to us and ski for a couple of days in the resort. Then they want to explore some backcountry powder. It's very European-style," says Sean Kristl, Alpenglow Expeditions' director of marketing.

So, instead of those quick weekend getaways to Tahoe you've always done, consider this a new chapter. Because the new Squaw Valley Alpine Meadows, and the adventure hub it's evolving into, is a place you'll want to dig in and stay a while. ●

Top to bottom:
At play in Jackson's immense backcountry playground; plans are afoot to overhaul the Village at Squaw, adding up to 1,500 more hotel rooms plus dining, après options, and more.



5 RESORTS WITH GREAT BACKCOUNTRY ACCESS

1

Jackson Hole, Wyo.

One of the first resorts to swing open its gates, Jackson Hole led the charge on resort-accessed backcountry terrain and is still the Holy Grail today. Don't venture into the classic zones of No Name Peak or Cody Peak (nor anywhere else on this list) without the skills, equipment, or, if needed, a guide.

2

Jay Peak, Vt.

Touring into the wilderness of Big Jay Peak feels so remote, it's hard to believe the resort is so close. With steep pitches, natural obstacles, and super-tight trees, this is Eastern backcountry at its finest.

3

Powder Mountain, Utah

Ease into the out-of-bounds on a guided backcountry experience into Pow Mow's challenging Wolf Creek terrain. Full-day tours provide up to six 3,000-vertical-foot runs into this zone known for its steep pitches and abundant snow.

4

Stevens Pass, Wash.

Walks from the peaks of Big Chief and Cowboy mountains reward skiers with a sampling of Stevens Pass's abundant and varied backcountry offerings. Be prepared to hike back along Route 2.

5

Stowe, Vt.

There are many options, but we're partial to the Teardrop Trail, a Mt. Mansfield classic chock-full of natural obstacles, glades, and cut-backs, ending in a double fall line that will challenge the most confident of skiers.

