




Take Me Home, Tahoe

 A lake studded by ski resorts, both big, bucket-list destinations and small, quirky hills, presents the opportunity to find yourself—or get totally and wonderfully lost.

By Megan Michelson



Brennan Lagasse descends towards Lake Tahoe's ethereal blue waters at Diamond Peak.
Photo: Ryan Salm

“Should we take them into Solitude Canyon?” my husband, Dan, asks at the top of Diamond Peak’s Crystal Express lift. He’s pointing toward a sign indicating expert-only terrain in a mysterious-looking forest ahead of us. A few inches of snow fell last night, with the storm still circling overhead, and Lake Tahoe spans out moody and dramatic in the distance.

Between lockdown, quarantine, and forced homeschool due to Covid-19, the last year of my life has felt like its own kind of solitude canyon. Maybe exploring a place called that is just what we all need to help us recover.

“Sure,” I say. “Let’s do it.” So, that’s how we ended up bringing our two kids—ages four and six but surprisingly adept on skis—into a semi-steep, gladed canyon filled with widely-spaced trees, mini gullies, and rock outcroppings. It’s fair to call this Diamond Peak’s most demanding terrain. As promised, the place is empty. We score fresh tracks and nearly get the kids cliffed out but manage to exit without tears. It’s hardly the first questionable parenting decision we’ve made during this pandemic, but at least it’s better than Zoom PE. My daughter, Nora, declares it the coolest run she’s ever skied and asks to go back.

We’re here at Diamond Peak, Nev.—a community-owned ski area on Lake Tahoe’s north shore that’s managed by the district that oversees parks and recreation—to get ourselves the right kind of lost. You know, that feeling of exploration that comes when you don’t exactly know where you are, but you’re not going to miss a meal finding your way back. We live nearby in Tahoe City, Calif., (30 minutes away) but I haven’t skied Diamond Peak since I was a kid.

It is small by Tahoe standards—just 655 acres and six lifts, including several creaky double chairs that appear to rarely operate—but it has an impressive amount of vert—1,840 feet—the fourth biggest in Tahoe. This is the kind of old-school place where your lift ticket flaps in the wind, bag lunches are consumed on the deck, and lifties ask about your day. Everyone is friendly, including the guy in a blow-up shark costume who apparently isn’t hired by the resort but still stands atop the mountain posing for photos with kids throughout the season.

At Diamond Peak, skiing feels like the one thing on offer—whether you’re wedging down the beginner slope or crushing the glades off the top. Sure, you can get a falafel with a lake view from the Snowflake Lodge, but that’s not why you come. Though nothing about skiing is affordable, if you’re a local, you can score a ticket for \$25, and kids six and under ski free.

Another reason I'm here today is to experience the differences between Tahoe's big, flashy destination resorts—the ones on mega passes like Northstar, on the Epic Pass, and the renamed Palisades Tahoe, on the Ikon Pass—and the area's lesser known spots, the laid-back, family-centric ski areas like Diamond Peak and Sugar Bowl. What do you gain by going to the sprawling, glitzy resorts, I wonder, with their gondolas, wine bars, and impeccable grooming? And what can you get from the quainter ones, with their offbeat charms and slower lifts, that you can't find elsewhere? I aim to find out.

The day after Diamond Peak, we ski the endless cruisers and backside trees of Northstar—just 15 miles away across the state line in California—not repeating a run all day in order to make our way from one side of the vast 3,170-acre mountain to the other. The kids love the grom-sized terrain parks and gentle slopes; I appreciate the powder stashes, zero crowds off Lookout Mountain, and the views from the deck of the mid-mountain Zephyr Lodge.

We zip from one high-speed express to the next (the place has a whopping 20 lifts), whizzing through our day like

there's a finish line at the end. By the time we race down the 1.4-mile Logger's Loop to end our day in the village, a fire-side gelato by the ice rink is in order, because that's the kind of thing you do here. At Northstar, skiing is just one of the amenities. Here, you can drink champagne mid-slope, ski up to a barbecue at the Ritz, or make candles in the village.

Next I spend a day at Sugar Bowl—a quaint, underrated spot atop Donner Summit. As Tahoe's original ski area, opened with help from Walt Disney in 1939, the place is steeped in history, with an old-timey gondola and an endearing snowbound hotel that feels like the Alps.

But Sugar Bowl is modern, too, with a liberal uphill policy, backcountry gates, and guided outings into some of Tahoe's most stellar out-of-bounds terrain. I spend the morning lapping steep chutes off Mount Lincoln with friends, and the afternoon plowing sun-baked gullies on Mount Judah with my kids, with a break for a gooey waffle on the deck of the village lodge. The pace is mellow, like nobody here is in a rush.

Just 19 miles away is my next destination: Palisades Tahoe. It's a stark, fast-paced contrast to Sugar Bowl, with

LODGING

Value:

Base Camp Hotel

There are two locations, South Lake Tahoe and Tahoe City, with affordable rooms and breakfast and happy hour in the lobby.

Couples:

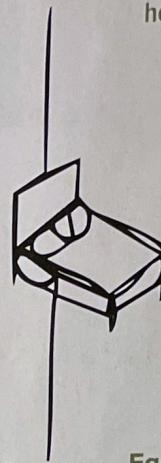
Cedar House Sport Hotel

This modern hotel was built using green design and recycled materials, and has electric car charging stations and outdoor hot tubs. Grab breakfast or dinner at the on-site restaurant, Stella.

Family:

Hyatt Regency Lake Tahoe

You'll love the close proximity to skiing at Diamond Peak and Northstar, and the kids will love the heated outdoor pool, free S'mores kits, and in-room bunk beds.



The legendary Palisades at Sugar Bowl have inspired decades of skiers and filmmakers.

Photo: Ming Poon



Lagasse and Dan Shannon backpack in search of blue skies in the Lake Tahoe backcountry
Photo: Ryan Salm



4 WAYS YOU CAN ACCESS THE BACKCOUNTRY FROM THE RESORT IN TAHOE

1. Homewood Mountain Resort offers backcountry touring workshops that include private guided outings with instruction (from \$499 per group), as well as three-day AIARE Level 1 and single-day introductory backcountry courses. All tours lead into Homewood's varied backcountry terrain, including 8,740-foot Ellis Peak.

2. The gates at **Palisades Tahoe** are closed to the backcountry—unless you're with a guide from Alpenglow Expeditions, which leads half-day and full-day guided backcountry tours (from \$179) that explore zones like the rarely-skied Tram Ridge and National Geographic Bowl. They also teach avalanche courses for all levels.

3. If you want to learn about the backcountry and get some tips on skiing off-piste terrain, start at Expedition Kirkwood, which leads big-mountain skills clinics, private and group backcountry expeditions, and avalanche courses that start inbound at **Kirkwood Mountain Resort**, south of Lake Tahoe.

4. Sugar Bowl has some of the best backcountry ski access of any ski resort in Tahoe. Get there responsibly by hiring a guide from Alpine Skills International, which leads guided day outings (from \$189) out the gates of Sugar Bowl, plus Level 1 and Level 2 avalanche courses.

DINING

Susie Sutphin, a skier and founder of the Tahoe Food Hub, a nonprofit that connects farmers to restaurants, picks her favorite, most sustainable, farm-to-table eateries in Tahoe.

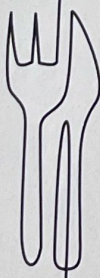
Red Truck, a food truck and café at the Truckee Tahoe Airport. “Red Truck has outdoor seating with a beautiful view and a love of food that has made them a staple in the local community for years now,” Sutphin says.

Old Town Tap, in downtown Truckee. This locals’ favorite dinner spot uses all seasonal ingredients. “It’s the place to go in Truckee for pizza and craft cocktails,” Sutphin says.

22 Bistro, in the village at Palisades Tahoe. “After a powder day, KT-22 looms in the background and you’ll come here for hearty, fresh food like sweet potato fries or bison chili,” Sutphin says.

MOGROG Food Truck and Café, at the base of Subway chair at Alpine Meadows ski area. “Their European-inspired fare like goulash and bratwurst are favorites amongst skiers during and after a day on the hill,” Sutphin says.

Sage Leaf in Incline Village. “At this farm-to-table brunch spot, don’t miss the braised slab bacon tacos with pickled onions, humanely raised eggs, and green salsa,” Sutphin says.



Brandon Craddock drops into Broken Arrow at the recently renamed Palisades Tahoe.

Photo: Ryan Salm

an energy that radiates from the KT-22 liftline, challenging you to step up your game or get out of the way. With 29 lifts and 3,600 broad acres, it is over twice the size of Sugar Bowl. The day I show up, again with my kids in tow (remember, schools are closed due to Covid-19 and I am, apparently, their reluctant P.E. teacher), it is half-raining, half-snowing, but nobody seems to care. It’s a tough breed of skier who hangs out on these hallowed steeps.

There’s slushy powder under the Headwall chair and slick groomers on Shirley Lake. We zig-zag all over the mountain until my four-year-old ball of energy is wiped out, then we cruise down Mountain Run to the village, where camp chairs and a pre-packed thermos of hot chocolate await in my car (remember,

this is a pandemic and après-ski looks different). Normally, skiers here squeeze into the Slot Bar or drink pitchers at the Chamois after skiing, but this year, the parking lot is where it’s at.

As I sit in my camp chair staring up at the majestic amphitheater that is this iconic mountain, I wonder: What do these big resorts and the small, quirkier ones have in common? The answer is you can get lost or find yourself—depending on what you’re after—at all of them. For me, I know there’s allure to both. Some days, I want to disappear into the trees and not see another soul. Other days, I want to feel the energy of those around me. In other words, sometimes it’s nice to be in a solitude canyon and sometimes it’s not. Either way, in Tahoe, you can find generous helpings of it all. □