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KEEN ON KIRKWOOD, CALIFORNIA

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Photos courtesy of Aurora Photos/Kirkwood Mountain Resort

I find myself once more atop a seven-story-high platform ready to "zip" through a forest of trees. The unique aspect of this particular "zipping" is being decked out in my ski togs and reaching this point by chairlift. Every zipline deserves whoops and hollers, especially one set among snow-laden stands of ponderosa pine and Douglas fir, but in this case I try to stay quiet, hesitant to startle unsuspecting snowsliders as I speed above their heads.



(Photos courtesy of Zip Tahoe)

It was a tough decision to give up some afternoon turns, but harder to pass up an opportunity to see more of Kirkwood's spectacular terrain, particularly if it involved dangling from a zipline. The ridgeline above this glacier-carved valley is dominated by rocky bands plunging from surrounding Thimble Peak (9,876'), The Sisters (9,400'), Glove Rock (9,360') and Martin Peak (9,249'). It's a spectacular sight from any angle or elevation.



As a moisture-laden Pacific storm slams into the Sierra Nevada mountain range and rises towards Kirkwood's 7,800-foot base elevation, it drops snow. Lots of snow...an average of 600 inches each season, making her reputation for some of the deepest and driest snow in the Sierras well deserved.



Kirkwood's 2,000 feet of vertical includes over 72 trails; the longest is 2.5 miles in length. In case Mother Nature is stingy and fickle, snowmaking blankets four runs top to bottom, providing 55 acres of sliding arena.



Thirty-five miles and two mountain passes south of Lake Tahoe, Kirkwood terrain tops out at 9,800 feet.

Kirkwood's 2,300 skiable acres are networked with 15 lifts: three surface, one double chair, six triple chairs, one fixed grip quad, two high-speed quads, and two magic carpets. These afford easy access to most of the terrain, other than a few lines that tumble from the top of Thimble Peak. Open bowls beckon with vast expanses of untracked snow. Black-diamond chutes and long gladed runs stretch from one area boundary to the other.

The Timber Creek base area is closest to the beginner terrain, the ski school and Zip Tahoe, while Mountain Village is the center of most of the action and uphill transport to advanced and expert terrain, including The Wall.

Arguably the most famous run at Kirkwood, The Wall begins as a double-black diamond plunge skier's left off Chair 10. The Wall transitions into single-black Snowsnake Gully under the chair. When I last tackled this beast, about 20 years and two good knees ago, I tested the Snowsnake one time, then learned that veering left down blue-designated Buckboard allowed me to thrill myself on The Wall, then unashamedly bail, catch my breath, and survive to do it again.



Kirkwood_Chutes



Kirkwood Ridgeline



Kirkwood Snowboarder

Although the trail map seems heavily peppered with black diamonds, 15% of the runs are designed for beginners and half targeted towards intermediates. Advanced terrain takes up 20%, with 15% set aside for those whose adrenaline runs on overload. Most blue-designated runs will test visitors more like the more gentle blacks back home.

Riders have three terrain parks in which to test their skills. Warm up on the intermediate-level features in the Free & Easy Progression Park off Chair 7/TC Express. If that seems humdrum, try the changing array of items in Stomping Grounds on Mokelumne off Chair 5/Solitude. Just make sure you don't unintentionally venture

into Race Course park, paralleling Stomping Grounds to skier's left, unless you're ready to tackle big jumps and expert-level features.

And much to the delight of skiers and riders, trails at Kirkwood flow along the fall-line without pesky calf-cramp-inducing traverses interrupting their sinuous descent.



Kirkwood snow cat



Kirkwood backcountry

Yearning to explore beyond the typical ski/ride lesson and slope-sliding adventure? Among the offerings at Expedition Kirkwood are specialty clinics, snowcat tours, private guides, and Avalanche Certification courses.

A quarter mile from the ski base is Kirkwood's Cross Country & Snowshoe Center, with two trailheads accessing three interconnected trail systems and trailside warming huts. 80km of trails are groomed including skating and snowshoe lanes, with 60% rated intermediate and the remainder evenly divided between beginner and advanced. Even poochie is welcome to join you on the High Trail and Outer Loop routes.



Kirkwood Mountain Village

Located in the Lodge at Kirkwood in the Mountain Village, Off the Wall Bar & Grill serves Southwest and Pacific Rim cuisine with views to kill. They offer a nice selection of microbrews and wines from California, and are popular for intimate dinners on weekends and holidays. Grab breakfast or lunch at Monte Wolfe's Mountain Kitchen, or enjoy après ski at Monte's Thunder Saddle Bar or at the popular Cornice Grill across from Chair 6/Cornice Express.

Snowshoe Thompson's at Timber Creek has a varied menu, and the outdoor bar services a suitably named gathering spot, The Beach. Red Cliffs Café, in the day lodge of the same name, provides a space for families to gather and an outside deck with views of the black diamond descents in Wagon Wheel Bowl. Or grab some provisions to go at the General Store Deli. At the base of the Chair 4/Sunrise is the Outback Mountain Grill with great burgers and snacks.



Kirkwood snowboarder



Kirkwood skier

Kirkwood consistently receives high survey rankings for the quality of its snow and terrain, and for its on-mountain experience. I definitely agree, whether it be from slope-sliding level or high above the trails, Kirkwood shouldn't be overlooked.



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