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LUCKY SEVENS IN TAHOE

Seven ski areas in seven days
 Story and photos by Lee Juillerat
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Peter Hines photo

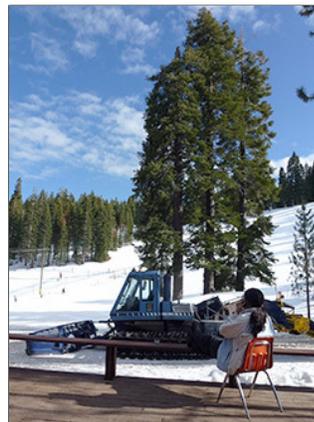
I blew it. Looking back, I should have spent some time and money in the casinos, or at least bought a stack of lottery tickets. Seven was my lucky number after, unexpectedly, skiing seven Lake Tahoe area ski areas in seven days.

Making it happen required some creative thinking. Six of the seven—and the Tahoe Basin boasts 18 downhill ski and snowboarding resorts—were major destinations, such well-established high-powered ski areas as Heavenly, Kirkwood, Sierra-at-Tahoe, Homewood, Squaw Valley and Alpine Meadows.

The seventh just made sense. As part of a week-long trip with other snow sports journalists, I spent five nights at Harvey's Lake Tahoe and two at often overlooked Granlibakken, which, unknown to most people, was the region's first downhill ski area. With its blend of housing units, conference rooms, dining facilities, cross country ski trails, easy access to ski areas and proximity to Interstate 80, Granlibakken is an excellent choice for families and weekenders.



Riding the Granlibakken poma lift



Granlibakken from the lodge deck

Steve Giordano photos

Granlibakken, which in Norwegian means "a hillside sheltered by fire trees," is living history. Skiing in the Tahoe area began in 1893 but it wasn't until 1928 that Granlibakken offered overnight winter lodging, skiing, snow play, toboggan slides and horse-drawn sleighs. Immediately popular, its "Olympic Hill" hosted national ski jumping competitions in the 1930s. Granlibakken's remaining ski hill is miniscule. Its 300 vertical feet to the top via a poma lift, one of those antiquated manhood-threatening platters. Grab the platter, jab it between your legs and, with skis grounded, balance for the uphill tow.

We weren't scheduled to ski at Granlibakken, but the temptation was irresistible. After a talk with the manager, he agreed to open the runs early. Several of us took advantage. I squeezed in two runs before driving to nearby Alpine Meadows, making it seven in seven.

Heavenly Beginning



Heavenly dog



Heavenly sun

The Tahoe tour began a week earlier at Heavenly, the sprawling area that's so expansive it takes in portions of two states, California and Nevada. Low snowfall, combined with whipping winds that closed some lifts, reduced the skiable terrain, but at Heavenly—which covers 4,800 acres, has 29 lifts and 97 trails. There's always someplace to explore. And, of course, along with its incredible mix of runs that offer something for everyone from rank beginners to daredevil experts, many of Heavenly's California runs offers, fittingly, heavenly views of Lake Tahoe. I joined others touring Heavenly on two different days, both times finding the best snow conditions on the Nevada side.



Snowboard with a view

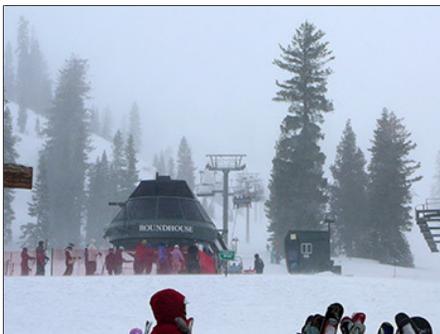


To California *Peter Hines photo*

Part of the pleasure was accessing Heavenly from Harvey's. Wearing ski boots and my helmet, with my skis teetering on my shoulders, I walked from the hotel to the downtown gondola terminal for the scenic ride to Adventure Peak and onto the Tamarack Express, which opens up googolplex possibilities.

Another day we rode a bus to Kirkwood Mountain Resort, a longtime favorite ski area. Even though high winds combined with a lack of snow to close large chunks of the mountain and limit our choices, we managed a full day, taking runs off the Solitude, Cornice Express and Hole 'N Wall chairs, and, just for fun, even snuck in some beginner runs off Funny Bunny.

Whacky-Happy at Sierra-at-Tahoe



Sierra-at-Tahoe



photos by Peter Hines

But the most fun awaited us at Sierra-at-Tahoe, where the snow gods cooperated by dumping several feet of fresh powder overnight and through the morning. That allowed me and others to feel like heroes on black diamond runs like Castle, Rerun, Preacher's Passion, Upper Dynamite, Clipper and others that wouldn't have been skiable a day earlier. My ski partners and I were bushed but whacky-happy by the time we tumbled into the Baja Grill for lunch. And after a devouring a meal and brew or two, hungry to keep it going.

After another day at Heavenly, fun of a different style followed at the Homewood Mountain Resort on Tahoe's western shore. The skiing was exceptional, but getting there was otherworldly. Usually, the skis packed along on boat rides are for water skiing. Not this time. The skis that our group schlepped to the waiting boat were the downhill variety.



A different ski boat



Skis on dock

After a 12-mile boat ride across Lake Tahoe—and how many people, especially in winter, travel on the lake?—we retrieved our skis, booted up, disembarked, strolled across Highway 89 and hopped onto the Madden Triple Chair at Homewood.

"People really like this," said Anne Marie Prudente, reservation manager for Bleu Wave Cruises, the company that offers the boat-to-ski cruises. "It's easy."



Homewood view from the boat

Easy it was. That morning, a shuttle bus for passengers and a pickup truck for skis and snowboards retrieved us from our casino-hotels and drove us two miles to the Round Hill Pines Beach marina to board the Bleu Wave. The 70-foot yacht takes up to 49 passengers on two-hour, informative, narrated Tahoe cruises. The ski cruises are part of an effort to give skiers and riders a chance to leave the car behind, experience the lake and ski Homewood, a family-oriented resort Ski Magazine calls "The Gem of Lake Tahoe's West Shore."



Skiing the 'Gem' *Peter Hines photo*



Tahoe view from Homewood

Fittingly for a gem, Homewood sparkles. It's deceptively large and offers a variety of terrain. Its lifts, including the Old Homewood Express, a high-speed quad, provide access to a variety of beginner to expert runs. But what genuinely sets Homewood apart are its jaw-dropping views of Tahoe. From atop the Old Homewood Express, its 1,650 vertical feet to the base area, which is only five feet higher than the lake level. From east-facing runs like The Glades, High Grade and Rainbow Ridge, Tahoe's azure waters seem just a fingertip away.



Après ski



Bleu Wave

On to Granlibakken

Others retreated to the Bleu Wave for the cruise back to South Tahoe, but our group—suitcases and luggage in tow—rode shuttle buses to nearby Granlibakken for lodging and dining. It served as home base for a full day at spacious Squaw Valley, a final day at Alpine Meadows, and a couple of originally unscheduled just-so-we-could-say-we-did-it, Granlibakken runs.



Tahoe's oldest *Steve Giordano photo*

Granlibakken may be the region's oldest, but Squaw Valley is the quintessential American ski area. It achieved its icon status hosting the 1960 Winter Olympics, the first ever televised. It has remained relevant with its innovate upgrades and improvements. During our day, despite ever-present winds and blustery conditions, we had no problems finding everything from smooth cruisers to challenging steeps while touring some of the 3,600 acres of skiable terrain, which has 170 trails, 18 bowls and a run that goes 3.2 miles.



Skiing Alpine *Peter Hines photo*

I finished my seven for seven at Alpine Meadows, after two quick Granlibakken runs. Snow, wind and low clouds made conditions less than ideal, but mountain guides helped us make it a great outing. Founded in 1961 by skiers who had been at neighboring Squaw Valley, Alpine Meadows has a couple of claims to fame: it's home to the Jamaican Ski Team, was the site of the fictional "Alpine College" in the 1966 movie, "Wild, Wild Winter," and, less cheerily, was in 1982 the site of the most deadly and destructive avalanche, which killed seven people.

My wild, wild winter week at Tahoe ended more happily with an avalanche of good fortune. At Alpine, I was rolling a lucky seven.

When You Go

Information about Lake Tahoe's South Shore is easily available from the Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority, either by calling toll-free 800-AT TAHOE (800-277-2463) or by visiting their website at tahoe.south.com. Each ski area also has individual websites: www.skiheavenly.com, www.kirkwood.com, www.SierraAtTahoe.com.

For information on the Homewood Ski Shuttle Cruise, call 775-588-9283 or visit their website at www.tahoebleuwave.com. Information about Homewood is available at 530-525-2992 or www.skihomewood.com; Granlibakken at 877-552-6325 or granlibakken.com, and Squaw Valley at www.squawvalley.com.

About the Author

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