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Fireworks and Ice: Tahoe Beckons to Fair-Weather Skiers on July 4th

A Rare Opportunity to Hit the Slopes in a Bikini Top and Water-Ski on the Same Day

By DAVID FERRY



Max Whittaker/Prime

June skiing at California's Alpine Meadows Resort, which reopens July 4.

TAHOE CITY, Calif.—On most July 4ths, Scott Grosso barbecues with his friends and family in Cupertino, Calif. This year, he has different Independence Day plans: He's strapping on his snowboard.

"I plan on getting up early in the morning and snowboarding all day, then go down to the deck for some

barbecue and cocktails and enjoy the 70-degree weather" in Lake Tahoe, says the 38-year-old. "I keep rubbing it in to all my friends in Connecticut. They can't believe it."

Mr. Grosso can't quite believe it, either. Skiing or snowboarding on the Fourth of July is typically hard to do in the continental U.S. But in Northern California's Lake Tahoe region this summer, the mountains are still packed with snow after an extended winter pounded the Sierra Nevada range and dumped fresh powder onto the area well into June. More than 15 feet of snow still remains atop some mountains.

That means for the first time since the mid-1990s, at least four Tahoe-area ski resorts are advertising that they will be open over the holiday weekend. And that is attracting a flood of ski fanatics, many of whom consider it a badge of honor to hit the slopes on Independence Day.

"We're not so excited about the skiing—it's the bragging rights. It's the, 'Ha! We did go,'" says Suzanne Hirabayashi, a 48-year-old Homewood, Calif., resident, who last skied July 4th in 1995.



Indeed, skiing on July 4 comes with its own set of logistical problems. The quality of snow, for one, is questionable—forecasts call for 80 degrees and sunny. By afternoon, many skiers will probably be carving down trails that are getting slushy, ski resorts say.

Another concern is what to wear. A combination of hot weather and wet snow isn't conducive to thick ski jackets and long johns. Samantha Durbin, a San Francisco lifestyle writer, has a solution. "I think I have to ski in a bikini" top plus ski pants, says the 31-year-old, who is heading to Lake Tahoe. The bikini will do double duty since she also plans to go wakeboarding—a version of water-skiing with just one board—during her stay there.

Tahoe-area resorts such as Squaw Valley and Alpine Meadows are recommending that skiers and snowboarders slather on more sunscreen than usual. They are also planning to cash in on the novelty of it all in other ways. At Squaw Valley, attendees will be able to swim in a big pool and hot tub overlooking Lake Tahoe. Skiers can also compete in a pond crossing—an event in which competitors dress in silly outfits, take off down a hill, and attempt to skip across a pond on their skies or snowboard.

Meanwhile, guests at Alpine Meadows' "beach"—really a concrete sun deck at the base of the mountain—can take part in a "ski boots and swim suits" fashion show and enjoy a Slip 'n' Slide run.

"The sidebar is skiing—actually it's a Fourth of July party," says Alpine Meadows general manager Kent Hoopingarner. Alpine Meadows charged \$34 for tickets bought in advance. During the winter season, single-day lift tickets cost \$69.

Local historian Mark McLaughlin of Carnelian Bay, Calif., says the first organized July 4 skiing at Tahoe was in 1932—and skiers didn't have it so easy then. Those participating in an Independence Day ski-jump competition had to hike 1,000 feet up the mountain for each run.

"These guys did it old school," says Mr. McLaughlin, 54, adding that "today we focus on the yahoos out there with their high-tech equipment." He concedes that when he skis at Tahoe this coming weekend, he plans to actually use the ski lifts.



It might be summer in Washington state, but it's not stopping hundreds from hitting the slopes at Crystal Mountain. Because record snow has extended the season, skiers and snowboards might be able to keep going for another week or two. Video courtesy Fox News.

For some diehard skiers, skiing the Lake Tahoe resorts on Independence Day is just too cushy. Brendan Madigan, an avid back country skier who lives in Tahoe City, says some of the area's most devoted skiers may be heading 250 miles north to Mount Shasta, near the Oregon-California border, where the snow will likely be better. There, skiers can climb up part of the 14,000-foot mountain in shorts and hiking boots before carving their way down.

"People are looking at you on the trail like you're crazy, because you have skis on your back and they're just hiking," says Mr. Madigan, 33, who has to skip July 4th skiing because he has to work managing a sporting-goods store.

Some skiers are determined to make the day a little more challenging. Ms. Hirabayashi, for one, is planning her version of a "Lake Tahoe Triathlon" on Monday by skiing in the morning, biking in the afternoon and boating in the evening—with a few breaks in the middle for dog walking and cocktails.

"We're just taking advantage of Mother Nature [and] all the toys we amass and want to use," she says.