

Alpine Meadows understands what true skiers want

By Susan Wood

TAHOE CITY – I felt a kinship skiing the slopes of Alpine Meadows. We're about the same age. We're both no frills. We're both a little rugged.

In its 50th year, Alpine's philosophy of "it's just the mountain" appeals to me in this day and age of carnivals, villages, casinos and caviar in relation to ski resorts.

The employees know this philosophy. So do the skiers and boarders. Both celebrated at a party Alpine threw on Jan. 8. It sounded like an understated gathering. More is in the works throughout the year, spokeswoman Rachael Woods hinted.



Alpine is full of bowls and steeps.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

When I got on the mountain on Presidents Day, I soon came to believe a mountain of this magnitude deserved more than one party.

The terrain is full of knobby, jagged peaks circling the base. It reminded me of Alta in Utah – which in effect also shows a

different personality from its nearby, more glamorous neighbor Snowbird. Up the road, Alpine has the glitzier Squaw Valley – home of the 1960 Winter Olympics.

A quick ride up on Roundhouse Express chairlift at Alpine Meadows, down the Rock Garden run to the Scott lift over to the Lakeview chair gave way to some of the most stunning scenery available in the Lake Tahoe Basin. Several people gathered at the plateau on top to take pictures of the lake we call home.

A simple snow skate over the knoll below Ward Peak at 8,637 feet brought me to another mind-blowing view of wide-open faces and runs on the backside the Sherwood Express lift services. The snow was soft and even during a holiday weekend the crowds were sparse on this side.

There's room for everyone here. And from the looks of the tracks cutting into cliffs, hillsides and runs between trees, everyone had thought of a variety of ways to schuss down the multi-angled mountain.

No boredom here at Alpine. This was downright fun, and I wondered what took me so long to get here after living at Tahoe for 10-plus years.

On the Scott chairlift, a New York tourist admitted to having impeccable luck to choosing his ski vacation week months ago. He flashed a smile as if all were right with the world.

Maybe timing is everything. The skiers and boarders seemed giddy with excitement after the series of recent storms a week ago had delivered 106 inches to the mountain with 400 acres of groomed intermediate and expert off-trail terrain and serviced by 13 chairlifts. February's windfall became the icing on the cake, after Alpine received its biggest opening day ever on Dec. 10. Mother Nature summoned many feet of snow in November and December to provide a hefty base.

The Outer Limits run off the Lakeview chairlift provides an incredible view before dropping into the backside. At the top of the Sherwood Express chair, a humbling double-black run called Our Father gave credence to prayers and ability for those who grace its slopes. Some of these runs drop so steep, you'd think you're free falling.

From there, the wide-open expanse came into sight. The entire Sherwood Face was covered with fluffy white stuff. I traversed over to it from the groomed Robin Hood. Get the theme? Little bounces on the baby moguls, and I was in heaven. It was tame, but challenging at the same time. You have to love the Zen of a great ski day.

The front side is another experience in itself. The Summit Express whizzes riders from the 6,835 base to the 8,000-plus foot ridge where Idiot's Delight marked double-black land off to the right. We ventured to the left where the Alpine Bowl allowed us to select our own fall line.

Alpine Meadows is generous with its space – especially when that space involves snow cold enough to stay soft.

While peering over the edge, I was reminded of a T-shirt I saw at Vail Village – “If it's too steep, you're too old.” I grinned, as all ages found the glee that day of powder in the steeps – whether it was chopped up or not by mid-afternoon.

For a ski area that prides itself on maintaining its primary “just the mountain” focus, it is making efforts to attract a younger demographic with its advertising campaign “Mountain Head,” and all that it implies. The Concept Farm of New York boasts a client list of TRW, American Heart Association, TNT, MSNBC, ESPN and Greenpeace.

“We think it's an awesome campaign and one that will really connect with skiers across the West,” Alpine Meadows General Manager Kent Hoopingarner said in a statement. His tone said it all. You're as young as you feel at Alpine Meadows.

If you go:

Alpine Meadows is tucked in the landscape off Alpine Meadows Road, which is south of the Squaw Valley turnoff off Highway 89 on the North Shore.

From South Lake Tahoe, it can be a long ride if Highway 89 is closed at Emerald Bay – but scenic, and worth a day of skiing.

The direct route from the South Shore calls for going north on Highway 89. Go to Tahoe City. Turn left at the Y in Tahoe City. Alpine Meadows will be on the left a few miles up.

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