

Expedition: Kirkwood cranks it up a gear for riders

By Jessie Marchesseau

KIRKWOOD – It is the day after a powder day, another blue bird day at Kirkwood. The sun is shining and not a cloud in the sky. No lift lines in sight and plenty of fresh tracks still to be had.

Untracked snow can often be found here for days after a storm. This general lack of crowds is part of Kirkwood's appeal. The terrain is the other part: the cornices, the chutes, rock drops and steeps. Kirkwood has the look and feel of a backcountry ski adventure, most of it accessible by chairlift. This is what Expedition: Kirkwood director Jon Copeland calls the "wow factor."

It was also the inspiration for the only resort-based all-mountain skill development program in the Tahoe area, aptly named Expedition: Kirkwood.

"We step out of the front door and we're 50 feet away from phenomenal terrain," Copeland said. "As far as the backcountry side, you step out of the classroom and you're immediately in avalanche terrain."



Difficult
terrain like
the drop into

Vista at
Kirkwood
attracts
Expedition and
non-Expedition
riders.
Photos/Jessie
Marchesseau

Kirkwood has an open boundaries policy that allows riders access to backcountry terrain directly from the resort. Expedition: Kirkwood guide Adam Marshall explained that this policy is directly related to their programs.

“You gotta remember, with open boundaries comes responsibility,” he said. “Our job is to make sure people are going out educated and prepared.”

Now in its 10th season, Expedition: Kirkwood started as a way to provide backcountry awareness and avalanche courses to advanced skiers and snowboarders. Copeland estimates they had about 165 participants the first season, a number that has grown to between 1,200 and 1,500 in recent years.

And people come back again and again. Marshall said he has had guests return for Expedition: Kirkwood tours two, three, four times. It is in these return clients who he and the other guides often witness the greatest progression.

“We see them becoming more and more like the riders we are,” he said. “We see them having fun and exploring the mountain like we do.”

Expedition: Kirkwood’s offerings have also expanded over the years. The program now includes snowcat tours, private guides, women’s camps and clinics, multi-day backcountry courses, and American Institute for Avalanche Research and Education (AIARE) avalanche certification courses, among others.

“The thing we try to focus on in every one of our programs, whether it’s just a two-hour private guide in-bounds or a full-day/multi-day avalanche course is there’s a huge education component to everything,” Copeland said. “Whether it’s based on your skiing or equipment or leave-no-trace ethics and that kind of stuff, really what we try to promote is the safety education aspect in all of our programs.”

To accommodate the expanding program and growing number of participants, Kirkwood recently opened Expedition: Kirkwood Outfitters. The spacious facility located next to Bub’s Pub has a modern mountain look to it with a combination of corrugated metal and natural woods throughout. Directly across from the entrance is a conference room complete with flat-screen TVs which will be used for avalanche and backcountry awareness courses. A retail store is off to the right offering high-end ski and snowboard gear and backcountry/all-terrain equipment, and a demo center exclusively for all-terrain, and avalanche equipment is on the left. Both are fully stocked with everything from avalanche beacons and shovels to seriously fat powder skis.

Copeland said he expects Expedition: Kirkwood Outfitters will enable the resort to provide better services to guests and allow more flexibility in its programs. They can now schedule classes at the spur of the moment and accommodate more custom courses, something Copeland estimates already makes up around 25 percent of Expedition: Kirkwood’s business.

Riders will also have a place to congregate, relax and connect with fellow ski and snowboard adventurers. Since it opened in January, Copeland said he has already seen a greater comradery forming among participants. After all, they all have something in common to start with: a love for the sport and for the mountains.

Marshall describes Expedition: Kirkwood guests as people who want to “ride anywhere, anytime in any conditions.” They

already had the ability to form friendships on the hill, now they have a place to gather and get to know one another off the slopes, too.



Expedition:
Kirkwood
Outfitters
demo center
offers a
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Since the program is geared toward intermediate and advanced skiers and snowboarders, most Expedition: Kirkwood participants are Kirkwood regulars. They generally come from Tahoe, Reno and the Bay Area, and are often passholders wanting to take their skills to the next level.

“The way we explain it to a lot of people is: it’s your higher level of education. If ski school is high school and college, this is your doctorate degree or your Ph.D.,” Copeland said.

But the education opportunities and recognition of Expedition: Kirkwood do not stop with locals. The word is spreading.

“It’s definitely getting to where Expedition: Kirkwood is noticed all over, even at other mountains,” Marshall said. “If I go to Mammoth or even Colorado, people know when I say I work for Expedition: Kirkwood. It’s become more than just a brand, and it’s actually a new way for people to advance from intermediates to advanced and advanced to expert.”

So with a guide as a professor, and Kirkwood's awe-inspiring terrain for a classroom, Expedition: Kirkwood could be well on its way to becoming one of the most sought after schools for a Ph.D. in ski. After all, who would argue with fresh powder turns for homework?