

Royal Gorge ready to return to its glory days

By Kathryn Reed

NORDEN – First impression – a muddy parking lot and tired looking lodge – is not the lasting image of Royal Gorge.

Endless open terrain. Rolling hills. Pines scratching the sky that is as blue as Lake Tahoe. Sun beaming down to where short-sleeves are all that's needed. A choice of skiing in tracks or skating outside of them. A bit of exhaustion from not being accustomed to this much skiing.

Those are the lingering memories of Royal Gorge.

At 6,000 acres, it is the largest cross country ski area in the United States. With routes for all ability levels, it is seemingly an endless network of trails near Donner Summit. Some are nestled among the pines, others take skiers to otherwise hidden alpine lakes and then there is the 4,414-foot deep Royal Gorge that is due east of Summit Station – the starting point.



Trails go in nearly every direction from the Summit Station Lodge at Royal Gorge. Photos/Kathryn Reed

Royal Gorge had fallen on rough times. Owners changed. Money was scarce. Development proposed. The Wilderness Lodge was completely destroyed by fire in 2004 and never rebuilt.

Then came a massive fund-raising campaign led by the Truckee Donner Land Trust. In December, the property changed hands again – this time with the trust taking over.

Six leases are involved in the whole trail system, with the trust having control of 3,000 – or half – of the acres. There are 200 kilometers of groomed trails, with some loops allowing dogs.

It cost \$11.2 million for the trust to buy Royal Gorge. Armed Forces Bank had taken over when the previous owners defaulted. With about \$13 million being raised, it means there is money leftover for improvements.

And while \$700,000 was spent at the start of the season on wayfinding signs, grooming machines and cleaning up the lodge, more improvements are in the works.

They are needed. At least one warming hut looks unstable. Signs are broken off. Employees of the base lodge couldn't say if the upstairs bar would open any time soon.

The amenities at Royal Gorge are anything but royal. But that is destined to change as a recreation and forest management plans are created.

Sugar Bowl, which by vehicle is just down the road, but on a map is the Nordic center's next-door neighbor, is operating the cross country area. And talks are under way for the downhill company to take over operation of the lodge.

Royal Gorge has never been available to the public for summer use. That is about to change.

"We could do cross country biking. We are looking at a mix (of ideas)," John Monson, spokesman for Sugar Bowl, told *Lake*

Tahoe News. A network of bike trails created mostly by locals already exists.

When the Crows Peak lift at Sugar Bowl goes in – which could be this summer – it will “bridge the gap between Sugar Bowl and Royal Gorge,” Monson said.

Today it is possible to ski across the Van Norden meadow to get from one ski area to the other.

Also new this season, Truckee has added a bus stop at Summit Station at Royal Gorge so people don't have to drive.

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