

Heavenly redefines summer fun in the forest



Looking back toward the start, the coaster winds through the forest at Heavenly. Photo Copyright 2016 Carolyn E. Wright

By Kathryn Reed

Knees against the metal, hands on the cables, helmet securely fastened, nervous chit-chat – and then screams of fun.

This is the ritual at the Hot Shot Zipline at Heavenly Mountain Resort as four people at once fly through the air at at least 30 mph.

For Kiana Gamble, this was the perfect way to spend her 11th birthday – with her parents and 14-year-old brother playing on the mountain that is better known for winter fun. The foursome came from Virginia City for the day.

The coaster ride is what the birthday girl was most excited about. And with good reason.



Lake Tahoe is hard to miss from the coaster. Photo Copyright 2016 Carolyn E. Wright

While the coaster only goes 25 mph, that was fast enough for two in our group to not even notice Lake Tahoe whizzing by in the distance. We went up again – and again – and then they saw it.

It's one of those rides where once is definitely not enough.

It starts off with a slow, straight ascent up the mountain into terrain that was never a groomed ski hill. The metal maze of the course crosses overhead, with the spiral loop-de-loop to the side. People are whooping it up as they zip by.

Then there's a shack at the top and the worker signals now is the time to thrust the handles forward – leaving them up is

the same as breaking.



Siobhan Stack fastens Kiana Gamble to the zipline rig, while Aiden Gamble waits for the gate to open. Photo Copyright 2016 Carolyn E. Wright

It's this first curve where the lake comes into view. And from there on it's all about whizzing through the forest. This coaster is considered a bit more advanced than Vail Resorts' other ones – and of course it's the only one with a view of that alpine lake.

For anyone who likes rollercoasters, this is a must-do. But Heavenly officials stress it is not a rollercoaster – and it's technically not, but it sure has the fun factor of one.

The whole ride is 3,000-feet long, with a descent of 300 feet. It's actually one of the least active attractions, making it

good for all ages and ability levels.



Every 10 minutes four people fly on the Hot Shot Zipline. Photo Copyright 2016 Carolyn E. Wright

This play land is part of Heavenly's expanded summer offerings. Epic Discovery is available at Vail Resorts' Colorado properties in Vail and Breckenridge as well. The Broomfield, Colo.-based resort owner has invested \$25 million on Epic Discovery so far, though the breakdown at each resort has not been provided.

While the company has said it plans to spend as much as \$100 million on summer programs across its eight major U.S. resorts, Pete Sonntag, COO of Heavenly, told *Lake Tahoe News* there are no immediate plans to expand operations at Northstar or Kirkwood.

Some of the attractions at Heavenly are not new. The **longer**

zipline has been operational on and off for more than eight years. The **ropes courses** opened in 2014. **Hiking and tubing** have been around since at least 2011.



Coop Cooper of Heavenly explains educational features of Epic Discovery. Photo Copyright 2016 Carolyn E. Wright

The **2011 Ski Area Recreational Opportunity Enhancement Act** allowed the U.S. Forest Service, which owns most of the land ski reports operate on, to permit summer activities.

The longer zipline wasn't open when the four of us went up there earlier this month. Staffing has been an issue – as it is at a lot of Tahoe businesses. (Companies can't find reliable help.) Nonetheless, the two of us who have been on

both ziplines believe the smaller one is actually more fun and seemed to go faster. Pyramid Peak is in the far distance, while it looks like the roof of Tamarack Lodge could be the landing spot.

A drawback, though, to the Hot Shot Zipline is carrying the 20-pound apparatus on the incredibly slow Easy Rider chairlift and then walking up stairs to the launch pad. This is going to be a problem for some people.



Views of Lake Tahoe are prominent along the 4x4 guided ride. Photo Copyright 2016 Carolyn E. Wright

Right next to the zipline is the tubing hill. It's possible to link tubes together or have the workers to spin the rider for a more exhilarating ride down. The coaster is next to the tubing hill.

All of the attractions are accessed from the top of the gondola. An information station is at the bottom of the stairs to point people where to go. To the right is a loop trail that is accessible to the disabled. Heavenly even has wheelchairs

with super fat tires to accommodate people.

While there is plenty of physical stuff to do, there is also an educational component. The dozen pathway stones talk about lake clarity, animals in the forest and other pertinent information involving the environment.

USFS rangers also lead tours of the mountain. They may also be enlisted to help with crowd control. This is a work in progress for the mountain as it copes with growing pains in this first summer with so many activities. Rangers may pull people out of line to give them a tour, while their spot is reserved in line.



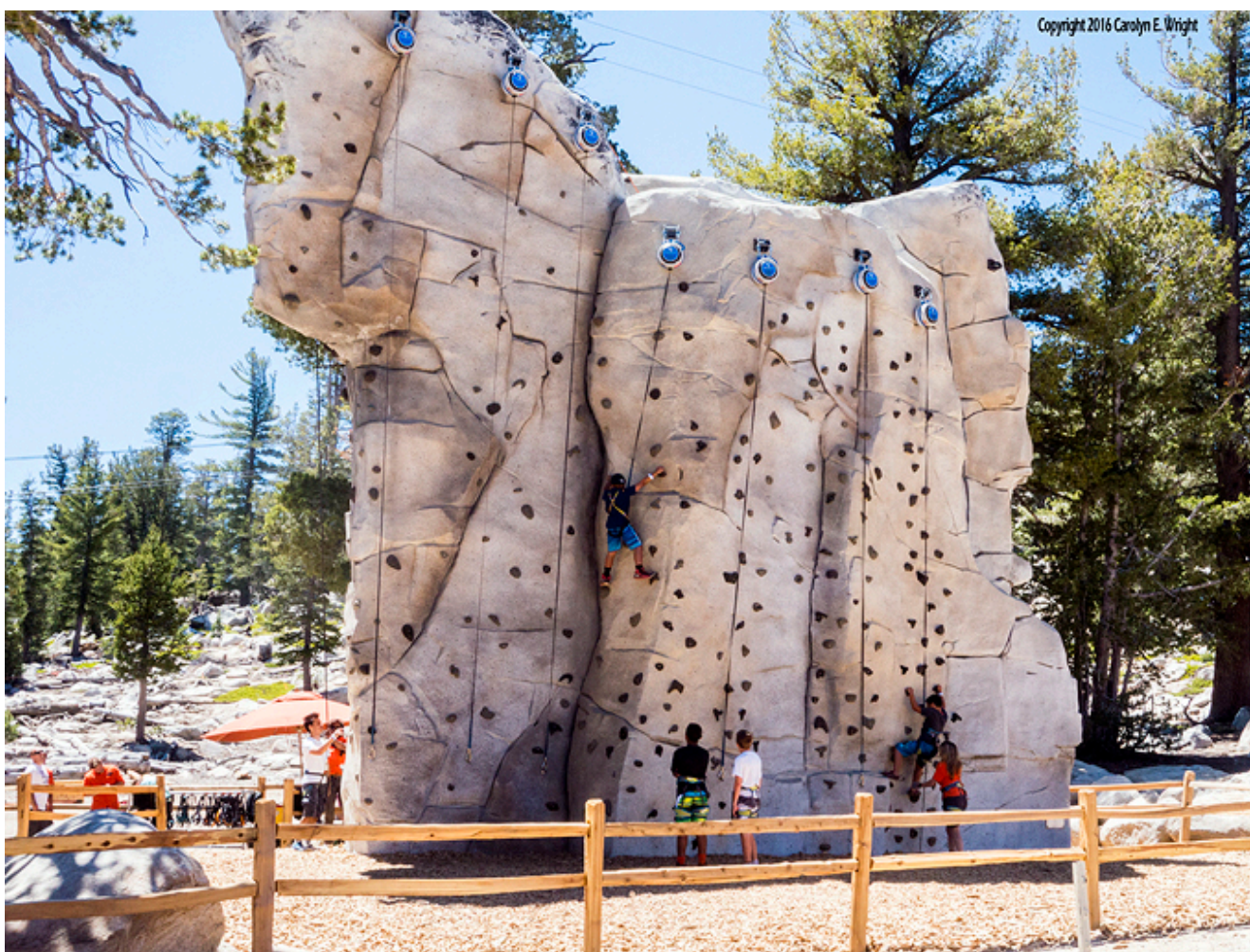
The 4-wheel drive excursion takes people to an elevation of 10,000 feet. Photo Copyright 2016 Carolyn E. Wright

A four-wheel drive tour is an ideal way to see the mountain without exerting energy. It is a bit bumpy, so people with bad backs might want to think twice. The 10-seater vehicle is not

likely to be a hit with those who ski or hike the area, but it will be ideal for everyone else. A guide who talked less (and didn't share personal medical stories) would make for a more pleasant excursion. There needs to be time to let guests absorb the serenity of the scenery.

Plan to spend the day on the mountain and not just a few hours. The ropes courses can take 2½ hours, canopy tour 3 hours, and expedition tour 1½ hours. Plus, Tamarack Lodge is open offering a full complement of food and beverages.

Heavenly isn't done with creating summer fun. The bike park is still a few years off. It will be more of a trail system and not the downhill adventure that **Northstar** has. Next summer a fire lookout will be at East Peak to teach people about fire in the backcountry. There will also be fishing available on that side of the mountain.



Various pitches on the climbing wall cater to different skill levels. Photo Copyright 2016 Carolyn E. Wright

Notes:

- For \$89/adults, \$49/kids: Gondola, Ridge Rider Mountain Coaster, Hot Shot Zipline, Granite Peak Climbing Wall, tubing, three adventure ropes courses.
- Additional costs: Skyway Canopy Tour \$189, Blue Streak Zipline \$68, Summit Expedition tour \$37.
- The resort is still assessing whether any of the summer attractions will be available in the winter.
- A closing date for the activities this season has not been set.
- Some attractions have age, height and health limits.
- Epic Discovery is open 10am-4:30pm.