

THE RESORT AT SQUAW CREEK: MOUNTAIN LUXURY IN ANY SEASON

By Anne Z. Cooke, Tribune Media Services

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TAHOE CITY, Calif. -- So near and yet so far is how I'd describe the Resort at Squaw Creek, a four-season luxury lodge and hotel near Lake Tahoe, in California's Sierra Nevada mountains.

Dedicated equally to golfing, downhill skiing, hiking, romantic getaways and spa pampering, this award-winning mountain inn, near Squaw Valley USA, the acclaimed ski resort, is one of my favorite retreats. Yet as a confirmed devotee of ski-in ski-out lodging, I never expected to be preaching the virtues of a hotel located a mile down-valley from the ski area's base village.

In this case, the distance is unimportant, since the Resort at Squaw Creek (call it the RSC) has its own chairlift loading a stone's throw from the hotel. You step into your skis, pop onto the lift, and in minutes you're skiing down to the base area.

Instead, it's the RSC's prime location that can't be duplicated. Built in 1990, the hotel and golf course occupy 650 acres at the near end of the valley, the only land available -- probably forever -- for

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commercial development. Terraced into the hillside and basking in splendid seclusion, the Resort makes the most of its perch above the meadow, site of its 18-hole Robert Trent Jones Jr. golf course.

The lobby's two-story west wall, for instance, all glass, brings the mountains into the room. As much as I like to ski, there are days when I'd rather curl up in a leather armchair beside the fireplace and watch the light play across the spires and ridges at the valley's head. Ragged, rough-cut peaks in summer and snow-capped in winter, their craggy summits look close enough to touch.

In the summer, we hike on nearby mountain trails, play golf and explore the lakeshore towns that fringe Lake Tahoe. A popular summer getaway since the 1870s, the Tahoe basin offers boat rides, fishing, beaches, horseback riding, shopping, and -- on the Nevada side of the lake -- casino gaming and glitz-and-glitter evening floor shows. We generally rent a car in Reno; but the RSC also runs airport shuttles on demand. Or you can take the bus. It's slower, but Lake Tahoe's bus routes go everywhere.

And in winter, when you don't feel like skiing? The concierge points the way to horse-drawn sleigh rides, 18 kilometers of groomed cross-country skiing, the ice-skating rink and dog sledding on the valley floor. Nor do we miss a session in the newly renovated spa and fitness center, where a workout session on the treadmill deserves to be followed by a hot rocks massage. The Resort's outdoor pool and hot tubs, kept heated all year around, stay open late for a watery nightcap.

With a 195-acre footprint, the Resort complex includes the main lodge, a nine-story guest-room tower, an upscale shopping arcade, the Six Peaks Grill, where we ate breakfast, and some meeting rooms. The Ristorante Montagne and Wine Bar, and the Sun Deck open-air grill, as well as the sports rental shop, the swimming and plunge pools, the spa and the base of the Squaw Creek chair lift are on two lower levels.

The lodge, with stylized flat roofs and faced with sandstone blocks reminds me of Frank Lloyd Wright's later designs. But the interiors, after a recent \$53 million renovation, are bolder and more rugged, to better match the mountain location. Slate tile floors and brown and tan carpets in sitting areas compliment dark tables, leather and velvet furniture, wood paneling and an over-sized fireplace.

The new restaurants are better lit and infinitely more inviting than their predecessors, with sleek furniture, warm colors and spot lighting. New chefs and revamped menus list a blend of American, Swiss and Italian specialties. My new lunch favorites: The charcuterie sampler, or the traditional fondue with bread and fruit.

The 405 guest rooms and suites, privately owned condos in the rental pool, are decorated identically. Plush furniture, pillows and carpets come in various shades of brown and cream, from walnut, cocoa and buckskin to cream and wheat, with accents in green and red. Standard guest rooms have mini-bars, bath lotions, hair dryers, flat-screen television in every room, bathrobes and separate shower and bath.

One-bedroom suites have fireplaces, equipped mini-kitchens, with sinks, dishwashers, fridge, range and microwave oven. Twelve one- and two-bedroom Penthouse Suites have full kitchens, wet bars, deluxe furnishings and spectacular views.

Since free wi-fi Internet access is available throughout the hotel, the lobby is a hot spot where you'll find at least a dozen other guests at any one time, each apparently checking the Internet while savoring the views.

If the view through the windows pales, treat yourself to a close-up experience. Take the Resort shuttle bus to the base area, buy a ticket and ride up to High Camp, in a meadow halfway up the mountain. In winter you can go snow tubing, ice-skating or take a ski lesson. In summer, sunbathe on the outdoor terrace, dine al fresco for lunch, swim in the heated outdoor pool and listen to one of the live bands that regularly entertain the crowds. Near or far, Squaw Valley's peaks are unforgettable.

INCIDENTAL INTELLIGENCE:

PACKAGES AND PRICES:

Double rooms per night for two range from \$209 to \$525. Occasional between-season specials (after the snow melts and before the golf course grass has grown) can start as low as \$179 per night. Honeymoon, romance, golf and ski packages include a combination of room, breakfast, spa treatments and/or lift tickets. Room charges include a daily \$16 resort fee per room to cover tips for maids, bellboys, doormen and ski check clerks (but not restaurant tips).

GETTING THERE:

The Resort At Squaw Creek is a 45-minute drive west of Reno, Nev., and 100 miles east of Sacramento, Calif. Fly to Reno-Tahoe International Airport and rent a car or reserve a shuttle service. At 400 Squaw Creek Road, Olympic Valley, Calif. 96146. Call 530-583-6300 or 800-327-333353; or visit www.squawcreek.com. The Resort is a member of Destination Hotels & Resorts, at www.destinationhotels.com.

(Anne Z. Cooke relives her travels at home in Venice, Calif.)

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