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Lake Tahoe

Somewhere over Lake Tahoe's ski resorts, the sky and earth become seamless and only an occasional skier, spraying a fan of snow in passing, splits the difference.

That skier could be you. Lake Tahoe, Nevada, is where nature's scenic grandeur serves as your backdrop. You can hardly keep your eyes off of it while whisking by the frosted pines lining any one of the numerous trails in one of North America's largest ski areas.

High atop Heavenly Mountain, the mightiest summit, you'll take a skier's minute to marvel first at Lake Tahoe, and then admire the Sierra Nevadas, before coming back to earth. A quick launch and you're soaring through that picture in exhilarating style.

The lake stretches 22 miles to the north and 10 miles from left to right, beginning at the base of the mountain, but both are dwarfed by the canopy-like sky.

Lake Tahoe's southern shore features 15 alpine and 13 crosscountry ski areas. Heavenly boasts a stretch of white real estate for a 5.5-mile-long run in one section. Half of its trails attract intermediate skiers, and another third draws the experts.

Equally impressive are the neighboring ski areas of Squaw Valley and Northstar-at-Tahoe. Squaw Valley, site of the XIII Olympic Winter Games, offers night skiing, while Northstar attracts the daredevils to its Ground Zero Terrain Park.

Heavenly Mountain is the area's biggest attraction. With a 10,100-foot summit, the snow-covered rock offers you steeps and canyons, tree skiing and snowboarding parks. You can test your abilities at the electronically-timed slalom course as well.

Cityscape

When the lifts shut down, shift gears and enjoy Lake Tahoe's Vegas-style establishments. For your early evening hours, try your luck at blackjack, roulette or video poker. Gambling has a way of energizing you after a satisfying day on the slopes.

For dinner, pick from any number of restaurants. If you're still on top of a mountain, opt for elk. If you want to forget that spill on the bunny hill, have mood-altering sushi. If you conquered the wildest ride on Heavenly, treat yourself to a championship steak.

The night means music and entertainment in Lake Tahoe. You could buy last-minute tickets for big-named acts. Regulars performing here include Wynonna, Harry Connick Jr., and Jackson Browne. Check out the local marquees for a cabaret review or stand-up comedy act for a second option.

For an adventurous evening rivaling the thrill of the hill, dip in and out of the area's popular nightclubs for a taste of local and live blues, jazz, country and rock music.

Diversions

Other winter sports are also available for those wanting to give their skis a rest for a day. Rent a snowmobile and enjoy the breath-taking vistas one turn at a time. Go crosscountry skiing for a little invigorating exercise. Put on a pair of snowshoes and trek across a serene slice of the forest.

If you find yourself drawn to the majestic lake, like so many are, go on a hot-air balloon ride high above its mirror-like surface. For breakfast or dinner, climb aboard a paddlewheel boat.

By trip's end, you'll regret that this backdrop of beauty won't be your permanent wallpaper.

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