

Northstar striving to be California's premier ski resort

By Susan Wood

TRUCKEE – Could Northstar-at-Tahoe be the next Beaver Creek? Or a Deer Valley?

Those are the questions Vail Resorts is posing as it plans to invest \$30 million in capital improvements into the Truckee-area resort for the 2011-12 ski season. Upgrades include a mid-mountain lodge at the top of the Tahoe Zephyr Express chair, more snowmaking off the Drifter run and another lift off the backside that services two new runs.

Once considered a modest family resort years ago, “Northstar has come a long way” in the last few years, Chief Operating Officer Bill Rock told *Lake Tahoe News* on a recent media ski day. “That’s what attracted Vail.”



Adding a lift next season will allow access to more of Northstar's backside.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

Vail bought Northstar a few months ago from Booth Creek partners, who maintain ownership of Sierra-at-Tahoe on the South Shore. The acquisition comes on the heels of consistent minor- to-moderate upgrades and a major one that includes the building of the first five-star hotel in the Lake Tahoe region – the Ritz-Carlton situated off the Highlands Gondola.

Rock admitted the improvements were already on the drawing board but would have been finished years in the future. Now, the plans have been fast-forwarded with bringing a ski conglomerate like Vail to the North Shore. The Colorado-based company expects to sink at least \$83 million in improvements in all its resorts for next ski season.

“That’s what Vail brings to the table,” Rock said.

Vail also owns Heavenly Mountain Resort on the South Shore, along with Vail, Breckenridge, Keystone and Beaver Creek in Colorado. These resorts are considered to be some of most upscale by most U.S. standards. At some, tissue is handed out at the lodges, along with warm chocolate chip cookies and gourmet hot chocolate at the base and summit.

“We’re not interested in being a cookie-cutter resort,” Rock said, noting how travelers are seeking “the California experience” when they arrive. He hinted a chef with the reputation of the Ritz-Carlton’s Traci Des Jardins would be running the menu at the new lodge. It’s still unclear who will own the lodge at this point because Vail holds a 40-year lease to operations of the resort, while CNL Lifestyle Properties owns the land.

The aim is to relieve congestion at the top of the popular Big Springs Express Gondola, where hundreds gather at the day lodge or in front of three mid-mountain, high-speed lifts – Vista, Arrow and Tahoe Zephyr.

“From here (at the top of Tahoe Zephyr), you could ski the backside without ever returning (to the base),” Rock said.

While this “California” experience calls for amenities that go way beyond skiing the snow surface, it doesn’t mean Vail isn’t seeking uniformity in some of its properties. The signs of the new 500-seat, on-mountain restaurant show images that look precisely like Heavenly’s Tamarack Lodge, which was completed in February between its Tamarack chairlift and gondola.

Northstar’s is expected to break ground in June and will serve gourmet pizza, specialty soups and sandwiches, with a large salad bar.

Although the lodge cannot be seen off the mountain, the 200-foot deck will jut out from the ridge for a view that still excites veteran planner Tim Beck, who’s worked for Booth Creek for 13 years before becoming the chief planner for Vail Resorts.

With all the changes, Beck views Northstar as a ski resort that splits its appeal and attention between the day skier coming up from the Bay Area feeder market and the destination skier who stays longer and spends more. The latter visitor expects more in venues as Beaver Creek has shown.

“We think this is a special spot,” Beck told the media group at the site. A sign marks the spot. Northstar has already started tree thinning. About 60 will need to be removed, and still more thinned.

“I’d like them to focus more on the mountain,” said Carson City resident Mike Johnson, who has skied around the lake at the various resorts for years. Northstar answered his call for more terrain opportunity with the other part of the improvements – a lift and two runs.

The project makes way for a detachable quad that runs through a wooded area overlooking the Martis Valley and Sawtooth range. One new run will be more traditional, while the other is tree lined. The runs will provide tree islands that add to the fun – much like its black diamond clad Martis run.

Placer County, Lahontan Regional Water Control Board and the California Department of Fish & Game oversee the resort. The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency has no jurisdiction on Northstar's plans. But with the extent of them, Beck and company enlisted the early support of Sierra Watch and other environmental groups, which have a watchful eye on Martis Valley development. The Sierra Watch website has called the collaboration "another great example of our strategic foresight." No authority for the group agreed to comment.

Northstar is in the process of creating the environmental-related documents.

Plans for the village include the opening of retail outlets Patagonia and Burton as well as an expansion for the North Face store.

Northstar-at-Tahoe is located off Highway 267 between Kings Beach and Truckee.

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