

Vail has no desire to change Kirkwood's vibe



Vail Resorts' wants to maintain Kirkwood Mountain Resort's character. Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Susan Wood

KIRKWOOD – The power of Vail Resorts has shown its light on the remote ski area straddling El Dorado and Amador counties since the Colorado ski industry giant took it over for \$18 million in 2012.

Upgrades and efficiencies at Kirkwood Mountain Resort range from the K Bar, an outdoor umbrella bar in the main area with views of the mountain, to permits for backcountry tours at Thunder, Avi and Reuter bowls, to a new kiosk to pick up tickets bought online, to a sign with real-time conditions, to all the safety bars that were installed on the chairlifts in year one.

“Over the past two seasons, we have focused our investment in

the areas of maintenance and infrastructure. Some of our larger projects such as the K-Bar in the village mountain plaza and the ski patrol facility atop of the Wall are both guest centric and based on operational efficiency that greatly enhances our guests' experience when they visit Kirkwood," Casey Blann, Kirkwood general manager, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Even though Vail Resorts releases the dollar figure for improvements at other resorts, Kirkwood officials were not forthcoming with the amount invested at their resort; only saying it's been in the millions.



The K Bar in the plaza has views of the upper mountain.

There are also Americans with Disabilities Act improvements, cellular phone upgrades, a new roof and windows for the Red Cliffs building, and new digs for ski patrollers – big enough to house a snowcat – at the top of the Wall chairlift.

Some upgrades are more subtle than others. New flooring was

added to the Kirkwood Inn located down the road next to the Nordic Center.

One of the biggest improvements became effective Nov. 1 – the Wood is now on the grid. Following a huge fire on New Year's Day 2010 that burned its powerhouse to the ground, the separate Kirkwood Meadows Public Utility District now gets its power for its 700 residents and the resort through Pacific Gas & Electric. The upgrade resulted from \$263 million of loans secured by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Kirkwood's power has had periods of on and off electricity issues. But that incident left the community in the dark for a few days.



Retail offerings have been expanded.

What's different is how efficient things run since Pacific Gas & Electric lined up the ski area enclave.

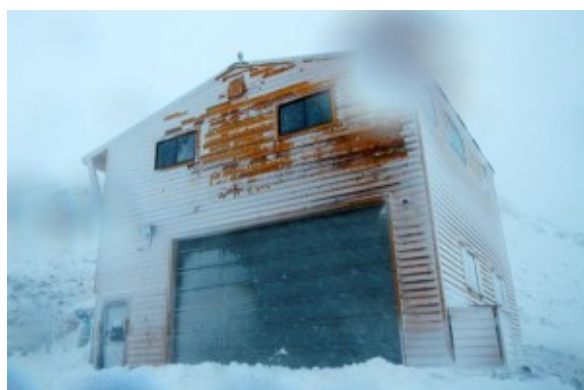
Even with the windstorm earlier this month that knocked out power to much of South Lake Tahoe, Kirkwood had power. It went down, but within a few minutes came back up – unlike its lakeside counterpart. But it had nothing to do with being on the grid. The old diesel generators are now the resort's backup supply.

"Being on the grid helps (for reliability)," Kirkwood spokesman Coop Cooper told *Lake Tahoe News*.

With all this said, upgrading Kirkwood is a different experience than Heavenly, Northstar and Park City, Utah – all resorts which Vail has bought in the last decade and poured

cash into in order to appeal to a more upscale crowd. Kirkwood is not Northstar, nor is it Park City – Vail’s latest conquest that just got a \$50 million pledge of money for improvements. A chairlift that links the northern Utah resort to nearby Canyons, another Vail property, was announced right away.

With Kirkwood, Vail has been assessing what’s needed and what the guests want. Whether that involves what’s outlined in the current master plan on file with the U.S. Forest Service remains to be seen.



Groomers/patrollers have better quarters, which expedites getting the mountain open.

“It’s Kirkwood. They know what they got. We’re going to keep the soul. But the neat thing about being in the Vail family is they’re taking a look at things and assessing (what to do next),” said Cooper, who dropped a few of the mantras the staff is working by: “operational efficiencies” and “reimagination.”

There’s even a separate mantra thrown out for single-day lift ticket buyers – “buy online, skip the line.” The kiosk sits flush with the most commonly used lift, Cornice as in Chair 6. And “real time” is used to describe the new sign next to it so guests can plan their day accordingly.

Efficiencies were also enhanced. One of them involved the new

2,048-square-foot “hut” on top of Chair 10, aka the Wall. The new one replaced the old structure that nearly tipped over in one of Kirkwood’s notorious windstorms. Now groomers starting their day at 6am can have the mountain from Palisades to Eagle Bowl ready by 9:40am.

Still, Cooper emphasized how Vail is dedicated to maintaining the undaunted character of the resort. Kirkwood is known for deep snow and expansive terrain with a hint of mountain funk that many old-timers want to see kept intact.

With his father-in-law Dick Reuter being one of the founders more than four decades ago, Cooper knows what that personality looks like. He even mentioned the bar and restaurant located across the street from the resort going back to the original name when Reuter frequented the place. It’s the Cornice Grill again.



It's often frosty at the Wood.

Kirkwood may mean deep snow and challenging terrain to many. It's also a place for families to get away.

"Kirkwood is everything. We do have diverse terrain. It's not just America's deepest snow. We would alienate a lot of people that way," Cooper said, referring to the Timber Creek beginning area set aside from the rest of the mountain.

A family of 21 people assembled at Kirkwood one recent Saturday seeking that special Kirkwood experience.

"We came here for one thing – to get our butts whipped," said Alex Simon, who learned to ski 15 years ago at Kirkwood at age 6 and never forgot the feeling. As a self-identified

intermediate skier, the Jupiter, Fla., resident insists Vail keep Kirkwood's character. "We like just that rustic mountain vibe and that everyone's friendly," she said, while taking a break in the new K Bar.

The bar, which can collapse its umbrella with a push of a button and keep its windows erect, sits in the village on top of where the chiller that froze the skating rink once was located. Her father, Ron Simon, agreed about the need to keep Kirkwood, Kirkwood.

"No (big) changes (to the character) are why we keep coming back. We've been coming here as a family since the '70s. It's all about the skiing," Simon said, while walking up to the bar table. The bar was picking up about 11am during a snowstorm with skiers and boarders seeking refuge and libations.



Signs alert riders to what is open.

"If Kirkwood becomes another Northstar, I'm not coming," Charles Christolini of San Francisco said, making his preferences known at the bottom of the Cornice Express. Christolini comes up about every week in the winter and has no desire to get Champagne served at 3pm like Northstar's offering.

"We expected Kirkwood would be modernized. But Kirkwood needs to be about the mountain. People come here to ski first. It's

not about the après,” he said.

Christolini has noticed his favorite resort is more crowded with the coordinated Epic Vail pass that connects the Colorado, Utah and California resorts on one, as well as the pass for the three California resorts. Still, the buzz heard most often from the diehards is of accepting Vail’s piecemeal improvements that maintain the integrity of this resort known for its terrain, snow base and counterculture.

‘Traditional’ families no longer the norm

By Rebecca Adams, Huffington Post

When picturing the typical American family, you can forget about a “Leave It To Beaver”-type image. Currently, 54 percent of kids in this country don’t live in a home with two heterosexual parents in their first marriage, according to a recent Pew Research Center report.

“It’s important to keep in mind that what many define as ‘traditional’ is based on a 1950s-style family,” Gretchen Livingston, Senior Researcher at Pew and author of the study, told HuffPost in an email. “But in many ways, the 1950s and early 1960s were an anomaly, especially in terms of the fact that people were marrying quite young and also having relatively large families.”

Nowadays, only 46 percent of kids live in that aforementioned “traditional” family. Instead, 15 percent of today’s kids are living with two parents in a remarriage, 34 percent live with an unmarried parent, 4 percent live with cohabiting parents

and 5 percent don't live with either parent.

Read the whole story

Kids' first sip of booze likely to be in Dec.

By Christopher Ingraham, Washington Post

Here's a holiday tip for parents of teens: Keep a close eye on the eggnog.

Data from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration show that 12- to 17-year-olds are more likely to take their first sip of alcohol in December than in any other month except July.

In December, an average of 11,400 teens try alcohol for the first time each day of the month, which works out to about 353,000 new drinkers by month's end. By contrast, in February the daily number of new teenage drinkers is less than half of that.

Read the whole story

USFS reworking where to play

in Sierra snow

By Benjamin Spillman, Reno Gazette-Journal

There's a reason why during winter it can be hard to find a parking place along Mount Rose Highway near the Tahoe Meadows and Chickadee Ridge.

The short stretch of road is the best place to access some of the most scenic backcountry in Nevada, an area that includes snow-covered meadows, alpine peaks and Lake Tahoe views.

It's also the epicenter of a debate over winter access to public land in the Sierra Nevada as U.S. Forest Service units throughout the range are in the process of reworking their winter travel management plans.

Six separate Forest Service units, Lake Tahoe Basin, Tahoe, Eldorado, Lassen and Stanislaus, and Plumas are in varying stages of reworking their plans, some of which haven't been updated for decades.

The result could be new boundaries that limit where people can ride snowmobiles and set aside areas that are restricted to human-powered recreation such as snowshoeing and backcountry skiing.

Read the whole story

Skiing becomes a present for

many in Tahoe



Mother Nature delivered a package of fresh powder to Sierra-at-Tahoe on Christmas. Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

TWIN BRIDGES – New and untraditional traditions – that’s what skiing on Christmas Day is all about.

“We don’t see snow every day. That’s what Christmas is all about,” Andrew Benavides said as he sat at the bar at West Bowl at Sierra-at-Tahoe with his dad, Mike Withers.

The two live in Orangevale, so an easy day trip to the resort on Highway 50. They had a big Christmas party the night before, invited others to ski, but they were the only two to make it up the hill.

“Tahoe is just awesome,” Withers said. He learned to ski at Sierra, so he still has a fondness for the resort.

Skiing on the holiday is becoming a tradition for the Dawsons

who live in El Dorado Hills. First they unwrapped what Santa brought and then they loaded the vehicle for an afternoon on the slopes.

Six-year-old Christopher had opened a present on Monday so the family of four could ski that day, too. Fluorescent green ski pants were in the box.



Pyramid Peak popped in and out of the clouds as flurries blew and the temps never got above 40 degrees Dec. 25.

More people than usual on Thursday were in the plaza at the base of the ski resort in footwear other than ski or snowboard boots. Anna Venhan of Palo Alto had her hood on to ward off the chilly breeze. She was focused on her book.

“It’s kind of relaxing,” she told *Lake Tahoe News*, especially knowing her kids were in ski school.

Being six months pregnant is keeping her off the slopes this season.

Bobbie Bennett and a group eight have been here since Sunday from the Houston area. Another nine from Houston were arriving in time for a big Christmas dinner.

“We are here because Heavenly didn’t have enough snow. We are happy here. The staff is very friendly,” Bennett told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Her legs were too sore to strap on equipment, but her teenage sons were out shredding. Bennett was perfectly content to keep warm by the fire pit in the plaza.



David Kim relaxes at Sierra's plaza.

David Kim of Folsom was stretched out in one of the lounge chairs at the plaza. His daughter and wife were skiing while he hung out in the sun. Knowing it had rained at their house the day before they were in search of freshies on Christmas.

Sierra did not disappoint with the 4 inches it received overnight. Stashes of powder could still be found in the afternoon – another present to unwrap.

More than 13,000 expected at Colossus poker event

By Associated Press

The prizes will no doubt be plenty but so will the competition when the 46th annual World Series of Poker returns for 49 days next year.

The premier poker tournament with more than 60 separate events

produced by Caesars Entertainment is returning May 27 to July 14 to the Rio All-Suite Hotel & Casino in Las Vegas.

Organizers announced a new event will join the lineup in 2015. Dubbed “the Colossus,” the no-limit Texas Hold ‘Em event will have a \$565 buy-in – the lowest, organizers said, for an open event in the tournament in 35 years – with a guaranteed total prize pool of at least \$5 million. Organizers expect more than 13,000 entries.

The closely-watched Main Event that attracts several thousand players battling for a one in nine chance to win \$10 million is scheduled for July 5 to July 14. The buy-in is \$10,000 and the final nine players return in November to vie for the top prize.

This year’s winner, 27-year-old Sweden’s Martin Jacobsen, was one of three Europeans at the final table who spent hours of intense head-to-head gameplay over two days to eventually take home \$10 million.

More than 82,000 people entered the 2014 World Series of Poker’s 65 events in 2014. The event got its start as a small single table in 1970 at Benny Binion’s Horseshoe Casino, where the players ultimately voted on the winner in the end.

This year, the tournament handed out more than \$227 million in prizes, in addition to coveted gold bracelets awarded to the top winner in the tournament’s individual events.

Buy-ins at the 2015 event range from \$75 to \$111,111 and feature niche events for seniors, women and one that promises at least \$1 million to the winner. The full schedule of events is expected to be released in January.

Opinion: Giving up Christmas – a new tradition

By Kathryn Reed

I have struggled with Christmas for a number of years. This is the first year I've chosen not to celebrate it. Leading up to this day has been liberating, we'll see if I feel the same way when the day is over.

It's been liberating because there are no decorations, no year-end letter to write, no shopping, no baking. Every day is just another day. And it's a day in Tahoe, so that's pretty darn special already.

I will be working on a story today, ironically, with a bit of a Christmas theme. But working on the holiday is nothing new. That's the hazards of the news business. And personal beliefs must be cast aside when it comes to work.

For many years, Christmas was not celebrated on Dec. 25 in my family because of my schedule or my sister's – she is in the medical profession.

But this will be the first Christmas I have chosen not to be with family.

If memory serves me correctly, I was 30 the first time I didn't spend the holiday with my parents. They went off to see my sister in the Midwest; I was living in Las Vegas. I admit it was hard. A new tradition I wasn't quite ready for.

I'm wondering how my mom and sister are reacting to me not being with them today when originally I said I would be there. A new tradition for them.

My struggles with Christmas are that I'm neither religious, nor do I believe in Santa. So, that leaves me asking the

questions – What am I celebrating? And why?

I don't need Christmas to appreciate my family and friends. I certainly don't need to be buying presents for them or receiving any to show appreciation or feel appreciated.

I asked my mom, who is religious, years ago about why people give gifts at Christmas. Her answer didn't satisfy me. If gifts are to be given to someone, why not do so on their birthday – when it's all about them?

I don't need Dec. 25 to signify having some special meal. I can do that whenever or on other occasions that I believe are worthy.

I like receiving cards from family and friends – more as a year-end wrap than to wish me a Merry Christmas. I actually like receiving snail mail.

I'm skipping sending out correspondence this year – for reasons that go beyond giving up on Christmas. My plan is for 2016 is to send out new year's cards; or maybe in 2015 I'll send something out on my birthday – the start of my personal new year. Whatever I decide, it will be another new tradition.

I still like seeing all the lights on buildings and friends' houses decorated – even if I don't truly get the point of it. And the holiday parties are wonderful – who doesn't like a good party?

What I don't expect to change is to wish people Happy Holidays, Merry Christmas, Happy Hanukkah and Happy New Year. Nor am I offended when any of those greetings are said to me. No one means anything mean by expressing good times, good wishes upon someone. I won't be offended in whatever way they are said to me.

Whatever you are or are not celebrating today or this December, enjoy. And don't begrudge others their time to

celebrate what is important to them on whatever day that may be. And don't judge those who for whatever reason are not celebrating what you are celebrating.

Drought drives bears into Tahoe-Reno area

By Kyle Roerink, Las Vegas Sun

Ernie Feld makes apple strudel, cookies and poppy seed pastries.

His Incline Village bakery is also known for bear claws – but not the confectionary kind.

Feld's scarred storefront – gouged by a black bear drawn by the scent of baked goods in October – is a glaring sign of the bear problem in the Reno-Tahoe region. The drought plaguing the West has diminished the natural supply of water and food at higher elevations where black bears normally roam. The dearth of provisions and a sense of smell 2,100-times better than humans have prompted black bears to forage among civilization.

In 2014, NDOW captured and released 93 bears – a more than 130 percent increase from 2009 and 34 percent increase from a decade ago. Last year, NDOW captured and released 97. Those numbers are the highest on record save for 2007 – a drought year that saw 159 captures. After bears are trapped, wildlife officials tag and relocate bears to the wilderness as part of an ongoing study. Research suggests bears will often return to familiar locations once they are released and continue previous behavior.

This year, the state handled an additional 45 bears that were either hit by cars, killed during hunting season or died from natural causes. NDOW euthanized three bears: the bear that wandered on the beach and two that killed livestock. The department says there are at least 300 bears in the Reno-Carson region of the Sierra.

The bear influx has spurred a debate about how communities can cohabitate with animals that can reach 400-plus pounds in a region known for tourists and metropolitan vacationers who think bears are a cute novelty.

Read the whole story

Calif. DMV prepares for undocumented residents

By Nathan Rott, NPR

California residents who are living without documentation soon will be eligible to apply for driver's licenses, thanks to a new law that takes effect in the new year.

The state's Department of Motor Vehicles is expecting 1.6 million immigrants to apply in the first few years, and law enforcement, community groups and others are preparing for the surge.

They're driving all over the state – in California's cities, in rural areas, commuting to work and school or just traveling. Like most people do – only in the shadows.

California isn't the first state to have this kind of law – Connecticut is implementing a similar one now, and a handful

of other states already allow undocumented immigrants to apply for driver's licenses or card equivalents – but it's is certainly the biggest. The expectation of 1.6 million new applicants has spurred the state's DMV to add 800 employees to help with the transition.

Read the whole story

SnowGlobe entertainment goes beyond music



Professionals demonstrating ski and snowboard tricks is part of the SnowGlobe experience. Photos/Andrew Jorgensen

By Jessie Marchesseau

Dozens of music artists on multiple stages for three days. There is no question the SnowGlobe Music Festival offers plenty of music for ticketholders, but the entertainment doesn't stop there.

In addition to regulated decibel levels and ground-shaking bass which can be heard for blocks, festival-goers are also exposed to a variety of visual stimuli. They may witness fire dancers performing flame-entwined choreography, sculptors creating fresh artwork, and skiers and snowboarders soaring 30 feet above the crowd while executing finely tuned McTwists, backflips, 720s and inverted whatnots.

"People are coming here to experience not just the concert, but Tahoe. So whether they get on the hill or not, it still exposes them to that snowsports environment," Rob Giustina, big air producer for OnCourse Events, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Giustina said the inclusion of winter sports was part of SnowGlobe's design from the beginning. It was a way to incorporate the overall Tahoe atmosphere, add more visual stimuli and encourage sponsorship from local companies such as ski resorts. He also pointed out how other music festivals are incorporating sports, too, such as the Warped Tour with its skateboard and BMX demonstrations.



Snowsports events bring the mountains to the music venue.

Giustina puts together a roster of about 15 local riders who perform three to four 20-minute segments each night – Dec. 29-31 – on the ball field next to Lake Tahoe Community College in South Lake Tahoe.

“We get to showcase skiing and snowboarding to people who aren’t familiar with it, or at least not familiar with it at that level,” said professional skier and South Lake Tahoe local Kyle Smaine. He will be part of the snowsports demonstration for the third year.

He told *Lake Tahoe News* he views it as a cool way to showcase local talent and give concert-goers a taste of the true Tahoe atmosphere: being outside and having fun.

Situated off to the side of the main stage, the setup consists of elevated scaffolding from which riders start their runs. They drop down about 35 feet to the jump takeoff, then fly over a 30-foot gap before the landing.

Besides sheer visual entertainment, part of their job is to distract the crowd in between music sets. When the music ends, instead of everyone immediately rushing to the next stage, some will stay to take in the air show, a rather ingenious form of crowd control.

South Lake Tahoe local David Rodriguez has been part of the SnowGlobe crowd twice and thought the Big Air demonstration was cool, but seemed a little out of place.

“I felt like it was kind of a side note just because we’re a mountain town,” he said. His wife said she barely noticed it.

An avid snowboarder himself, Rodriguez would like to see the snowboarding become an even bigger part of the festival. That, however, is unlikely since Giustina said it was never intended to be a main attraction, more of just a filler between events. But this doesn’t stop the riders from putting on the best show they can.



Local athletes give flatlanders a taste of what Tahoe is about.

Snowboarder Nathan Owen will be part of the Big Air for the second year in row and said riders will be treating viewers to a show of high-flying acrobatics with a variety of flips, twists, turns and spins. He said the crowd will also be seeing a lot of smiles “because we’re all out there just having a good time.”

Owen believes the demonstration really brings everything together.

“Music is a huge part of snowboarding. It’s only fitting to have the two together, especially in Tahoe,” he said.

So while most people are really there for the music, smaller events like the Big Air Demonstration give a little hometown flair to the SnowGlobe Music Festival. Plus, as Giustina put it: “You gotta have snow-related activities inside the snowglobe.”