



Home
Features
Entertainment
Recreation
Events
Arts
Dining

Features



Ski Divas

Photo: Nicole Cheslock

By Nicole Cheslock

We're at Alpine Meadows looking down Werner's Schuss, a well-groomed intermediate run. Mo Visser 't hooff, a potter, mother and nursery school teacher, skis 20 yards down the hill. The next woman peels off from our group. She turns around Mo, makes another turn and tilts her edges into the hill. The pattern continues as eight more women slide away from the group and turn around the ones who stopped before them, creating a human slalom.

It's a warm Sunday afternoon and everyone in the For Women by Women ski camp has improved their skiing over the last day and a half.

"So many people give up skiing as they get older and more involved in family or careers. There is nothing like skiing in beautiful scenery under sunny, blue skies. The

weekend gives me a chance to try advanced terrain that I would not try by myself," says Deb Henken, one of the program's many repeat participants.

"I get to challenge my sense of limits and move beyond them."

Our next activity? A side-by-side, adrenaline pumping run through the recreational NASTAR racecourse off Kangaroo chair.

For Women by Women

The single and multi-day ski camps are about more than skiing. For Women by Women is about pushing boundaries, camaraderie and budding friendships. Started by a legendary ski instructor who spent half the year teaching in North Tahoe and the other half in Australia, For Women by Women began more than 25 years ago. Alpine Meadows was the first resort in North Tahoe to launch tailored instruction just for women.

Marijane Rees, known as MJ, taught during the first camp and has been running the program at Alpine Meadows for nearly a decade. Her positive energy and passion for skiing and Tahoe living are infectious.

"Women support one another in a unique way and also challenge one another," says Rees. "Some women love it so much they come back. I've had some students return for 10 years in a row. It's such a great and supportive environment."

The ski camps feature top female instructors who share insights about melding the essential skills of skiing – balance, edging, rotary and pressure. Students get tips and guidance as they navigate steeper, tougher and gnarlier terrain. There might be 10, 25 or 55 attendees, but the on-the-snow ski experience is limited to six skiers or less per instructor.

What's a diva to do?

Register. Sign up on your own or grab a bunch of friends. Alpine Meadows customizes the experience for each skier, making the camps a fantastic option because everyone is sorted based on their comfort level and skiing ability. You don't have to worry about waiting for those who are less

Tahoe divas

For Women by Women, March 6 or March 19-20, \$177 or \$369,

www.skiapine.com, (530) 581-8200.

Just for Women, March 9-11 or

March 25, \$520 or \$175,

www.squaw.com or (530) 452-7263

Ladies Clinics, Every Thursday

beginning March 3 with video every

third Thursday of the month, 10 a.m.

or 1p.m., 1.5 hours, \$10. Free for Mt.

Rose pass holders, www.mtrose.com

or (775) 849-0704, ext 220.

Women's Camps, March 3-4 or

March 5-6, \$269 includes lift tickets,

www.skihomewood.com or (530)

525.1265

Women of Winter (WOW), March 2,

16, 30, 10 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., \$65 per

session, www.squaw.com or (530)

452-7263

Women teaching Women, Every

Friday, \$199 includes lift ticket,

www.northstarattahoe.com or (530)

562-3470

Women's Wednesdays, March 2, 9,

16, 23, 30, 2 hours at 10:30 a.m. or

1:30 p.m. Free, www.sugarbowl.com

or (530) 426-6772

Prices do not include lift ticket unless

advanced. If you're less experienced, don't worry about having to keep up – you'll be matched with a group for your comfort level but, if you're not, switch groups. As one participant explained, "This a great way to ski terrain I like and still be on vacation with my friend." *noted.*

Après-ski entertainment and ski-specific stretches bring the whole group together. The camps also include big group lunches with tasty treats like Portobello Paninis, overflowing salad plates, Ahi chips or your choice of savory treats and snacks. The new sweet potato fries with a light dusting of powdered sugar are worth the trip.

The camp experience

After a warm welcome and introductions over coffee, 10 participants hit the slopes with three instructors. We warm up with a few intermediate runs and divide into three groups. I join four other women with big mountain skier Lynn Kennen who began teaching almost 20 years ago when she was 13-years-old. She kicks off the camp by hearing our expectations for the weekend.

"I want to be able to take what comes at me," says Erica Breneman, a return participant.

This sentiment was echoed by nearly everyone who sought smoother, faster skiing off the groomers. The emphasis for the weekend was set – work on a balanced stance and turn initiation, practice on the groomers and take skills off-piste.

Lynn led us through a stationary exercise by encouraging us to bend at the ankle. She said, "Feel the front of your boot. Feel it. Let me see you bend at the ankle."

We used this feeling – our shin against the tongue of the boot – and put it into motion.

From the first morning it was obvious that this would not be a clinic where you spend more time hearing from an instructor than moving down the hill. The drills were targeted and useful – we isolated skills by keeping one ski flat and pressuring the outside and then inside edge of the other ski to make turns; we dropped our downhill pole in the snow to exaggerate pressuring the downhill ski and avoid banking; we practiced pivot slips down steep terrain and learned to do kick turns.

Most of the day was spent skiing on varied terrain. Explanations were saved for the chairlift ride. I especially enjoyed having a mountain guide. Emerging from the little hut encasing the top of Alpine Bowl Chair (ABC) was an adventure in and of itself. A short hike from the top of ABC and we were skiing Big Bend Bowl, Sun Bowl and CB Chute, which is not really a chute but a sweeping run with phenomenal panoramic views.

On Sunday morning there was an incredible, early morning, optional yoga session led by Tanya Aghazarian. The ski inspired poses related to using "ski feet," opening up the hip joint and stretching fingers, wrists and toes.

Before hitting the hill with Lynn on Sunday, we watched bursts of video footage that she had taken the previous day. From the comfort of the lodge, we observed what was working and what was not. Comments included, "What I see is that I'm comfortable going into my turn and then I fall back," "So what is your suggestion on how to correct to that" and "Hmm, so that's what I need to work on." Observations set the stage for improvement on day two.

Here's a warning. You can't be afraid of being cut down or scrapping old habits to make room for more efficient movements.

What's to learn?

Participants return within the season and year after year because they have such a great time, improve their skiing and get to explore what MJ refers to as the "Yikes factor."

Erica, a Berkeley resident, returned because her skiing changed so much.

"My skiing so utterly and incredibly improved. It's fun to do something adventurous in your mid-40s."

After skiing a particularly challenging off-piste section on the backside of Alpine Meadows, Suzanne Sylvester from Pleasanton said, "I get it. Before I would have looked at that and said, ugh. Now I can ski it. This is really cool."

Perks

You will not wait in a line – ever. Other perks include the hearty lunches, après-ski gathering, individual feedback, video analysis and ski-specific yoga stretches. You can also demo any skis at a 50 percent discount.

We wrapped up Saturday with après-ski treats on white linen and stories galore – about the day, children, passions, work, relationships and personal experiences. There's a lot to love about a supportive, instructional women's-only ski experience, and few other things effectively bring together an attorney, Ob/Gyn, artist, homemaker, corporate training marketer and controller. It's about more than the skiing.

Alpine Meadows' For Women by Women camps include individualized tips on the snow, video analysis, lunch, après-ski wine and appetizers, ski-specific yoga and more. Camps will be offered March 6 for \$177 and March 19 and 20 for \$369. For more information, visit www.skialpine.com or call (530) 581-8200.

Nicole Cheslock fully enjoyed participating in For Women by Women. She learned the correct pronunciation of Armenian (it's three syllables, not four), gained insights on fertility (after all, the group was full of moms), found out she likes ski-yoga and can't wait for another chance to join a diverse group on the hill.

The Weekly Magazine • P.O. Box 67 • Carnelian Bay, CA 96140 • (530)546-5995

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