



Daddy and daughter put in some Heavenly turns

THE PRINCESS DIARIES

A spectacular, once-in-a-lifetime road trip from San Francisco to Los Angeles provides the perfect opportunity for some father and daughter bonding

Words Amin Momen

With my heart still pounding and thighs burning, I gaze back up at the imposingly steep KT-22 mountain in Squaw Valley, California. Moments before, I'd descended this legendary peak, which was given its name by resort founder Wayne Poulsen, who counted the number of kick-turns his terrified wife Sandy did when she first traversed the vertiginous face. Held in high esteem by extreme skiers, I'm thrilled to have taken it on and won. But what gives me an even greater sense of satisfaction is that I've done it accompanied by my seven-year-old daughter, Emilia.

We're here on a dream road trip from San Francisco to Los Angeles – taking in the six resorts of Squaw Valley, Heavenly, Kirkwood, Northstar at Tahoe, Sierra at Tahoe and Mammoth – and spending some quality time together.

Our first base is Squaw, three hours' drive from Frisco, to the north of the stunning Lake Tahoe, and home to the 1960 Winter Olympics. For hardcore skiers, it ticks all the boxes. But how has Emilia, who learnt to ski on the groomed slopes of the Italian Alps, made the transition from intermediate to confident freerider in just a matter of days?

The answer is... ski school. While I spend the mornings getting to know the lie of the land, Emilia joins the Squaw school. By explaining things in Emilia's language and pushing her to the next level, be it keeping her skis parallel to make tracks like railway lines, skiing without poles (like taking the stabilisers off her bicycle), or venturing into the trees to look for a harmless bear loose on the mountain, the instructors help her transform her technique. And at the end of each day, parents get a card reporting on where their children have skied, what they have achieved and what they need to work on. In fact, throughout our trip,

we find the same first-class experience at each of the resorts we visit.

In the afternoons, Emilia and I hit the slopes together, and Squaw's terrain caters brilliantly for varying-ability groups – off every extreme or bump run, there is a groomed option, too. Perfect. After two days, Emilia is tackling the easy tree runs of Shirley Bowl, and progresses quickly to the steep Headwall and Bullet trails. Before I know it, we're on the high-speed chairlift to the top of KT-22. This is a day I'll never forget. Initially, I'm anxious that it will turn into a bad experience for Emilia and her confidence will be dented. But I'm immediately reassured as she produces a series of positive, controlled turns, and shows no signs of fear. And I'm certainly not left counting her kick-turns.

From Squaw, we drive the 25 minutes to Northstar at Tahoe. This is a hidden jewel of a resort, also to the north of Lake Tahoe, with award-winning terrain parks. The features of one park, the stash, are made using natural materials from tree cuttings. But the winner for Emilia is the Magic Moguls terrain park designed for kids, where she spends hours honing her jumping skills.

As for me, Lookout Mountain, which only opened in 2008, has some superb long runs for adventurous intermediates. Perfectly groomed and, with enough pitch for dynamic, thigh-burning GS turns overlooking Martis Valley, they are great confidence builders.

But the moment Emilia and I enjoy most together is at the end of the day in the resort's upmarket piazza area, with its ice-skating rink and outdoor fires. While I enjoy a refreshing beer, Emilia indulges in her favourite activity of the whole trip – roasting marshmallows.

Heavenly, on the southern shores of Lake Tahoe, is our second base. It's the perfect resort to explore all Tahoe's resorts and you can't beat the views



In Heavenly little Emilia starts leading dad astray...



...but he puts his foot down at the skull and crossbones sign



Go faster bases – just right for the steeps of Squaw's KT-22 run



Emilia introduces Amin to the wonders of modern technology

OFF THE SLOPE TREATS...



SAN FRANCISCO

To shake off our jetlag on arrival, Emilia and I took an eight-mile, self-guided tandem bike tour, which took in the Golden Gate Bridge and Sausalito. We then caught the ferry back across the river, with great views of the Bay Bridge and Alcatraz. But Emilia's particular San Fran highlight was watching the sealions in Pier 39's marina.

SNOWTUBING

The tubing operation at Heavenly is on another level compared to most resorts. It has amazing bumps and corners so you feel more like you're on a bobsleigh course. And when you get to the bottom, the tube hooks up to a draglift that takes you back to the start.



DISNEYLAND

A trip to Cali wouldn't be complete without a visit to the world's most famous theme park. We spent an exhausting but exhilarating day here taking in a host of rides. Emilia's top attractions included the Grizzly River whitewater rafting ride and the Big Thunder Mountain rollercoaster.



SNOWMOBILING

For a high-octane adventure, try a snowmobiling tour from Mammoth. We took a half-day trip deep into the Inyo National Forest. At the Crater Flats – a huge wide expanse – I could really put the hammer down. When I turned around to look at Emilia in the rear passenger seat at the end of the trip, the huge grin inside the helmet told me all I needed to know.



DAUGHTER SHREDS THE NATURAL TERRAIN OF SNOWSNAKE GULLY

here – lake on one side, Nevada desert on the other. We both enjoy discovering the huge intermediate ski area, particularly our adventures in the fir trees, which are wide enough apart to ski between. That night on our way to dinner, Emilia wins a toy in the children's area of a casino. It's a – rather unnerving – joy to see the delight on her face.

An hour's drive south from Heavenly is Sierra at Tahoe, a resort that goes out of its way to be family friendly. Its themed adventure zones – Gold Rush, Bear Cave, Pony Express and Teepee Town – use rollers, mini jumps and banked turns to boost kids' technique. They're a sure-fire hit with Emilia, and it's a struggle to tear her away at the end of the day.

Our second day trip from Heavenly is to Kirkwood. After a winding drive on hairpin bends, we reach the resort – a sunny amphitheatre which is a magnet for storms coming in off the Pacific, and so gets the best powder in the area. While dad's kept happy diving off the three-mile open ridge, daughter shreds the natural terrain of Snowsnake Gully, the Ditch of Gloom and the Drain halfpipe. Even the names are appealing to children.



Our last port of call on the way to LA is Mammoth. A two-and-a-half hour drive through beautiful scenery leads to this visually striking resort. Eighty per cent of the terrain here is above the tree line. Unfortunately for us, we only get to see the other 20 per cent, due to too much snow. However, we had those slopes almost entirely to ourselves.

A five-and-a-half-hour drive to Los Angeles takes in the Mojave Desert – the landing zone for the Space Shuttle – and cactus-like Joshua trees. We had packed DVDs and a games console to keep Emilia occupied on the journeys, but there's so much to look at she doesn't use them. I'm thrilled that all she needs is a camera to capture the spectacular sights.

But my greatest reward comes on our last day, when Emilia presents me with two pine cones she collected from the woods in Mammoth, saying, "Daddy, thank you for a great holiday." What more can you ask for? ■

DETAILS DETAILS

A seven-night California Flydrive tour with Virgin Holidays (www.virginholidays.co.uk; 0844 557 3875), including return flights, taxes and car hire, starts from £499 per person.



Clockwise from top: Toasting marshmallows in Squaw – s'more please; Counting pistes in Mammoth obviously works; "Hey Dad, got any more quarters?"



CALIFORNIA DREAMIN'

The Golden State's resorts in handy bite-sized form



Heavenly

With slopes that cross the border from California to Nevada, Heavenly has something for everyone. On powder days the trees are fabulous, when clear the vistas are spectacular. Numerous casinos provide late-night entertainment.

Resort 1900m

Slopes 2000m to 3060m
Lifts 29 **Pistes** 4800 acres.
20% green, 45% blue, 35% black **One-day pass** \$68

Snowmaking 73%
Tourist office 001
775 586 7000;
www.skiheavenly.com



Kirkwood

This uncrowded resort has some of Tahoe's most challenging slopes. There's also a decent beginner area, and some good intermediate runs. There are three terrain parks and, new for 2009/10, a boardercross course.

Resort 2377m

Slopes 2377m to 2987m
Lifts 14 **Pistes** 2300 acres.
15% green, 50% blue, 35% black **One-day pass** \$69

Snowmaking 4 lifts
Tourist office 001
209 258 6000;
www.kirkwood.com



Mammoth

Large, sprawling resort that boasts terrain to suit everyone. It also has an impressive snowfall record and is home to some world-class terrain parks. And, due to its proximity to LA, it's a favourite with the stars.

Resort 2425m

Slopes 2425m to 3370m
Lifts 28 **Pistes** 3500 acres.
25% green, 40% blue, 35% black **One-day pass** \$87

Snowmaking 33%
Tourist office 001
760 934 2571; www.mammothmountain.com



Northstar at Tahoe

A modern lift system (including a new gondola for 2009/10) provides access to varied and woody slopes. Northstar also has seven terrain parks, and a new village at the upmarket base was added in 2008/09.

Resort 1929m

Slopes 1929m to 2624m
Lifts 19 **Pistes** 3000 acres.
13% green, 60% blue, 27% black **One-day pass** \$64

Snowmaking 50%
Tourist office 001
530 562 1010; www.northstaratahoe.com



Sierra at Tahoe

Situated to the south of Lake Tahoe, Sierra is a relaxed resort with a sunny atmosphere. Freestylers are well catered for with half a dozen terrain parks, and there's loads of backcountry to explore.

Resort 2225m

Slopes 2024m to 2698m
Lifts 12 **Pistes** 2000 acres.
25% green, 50% blue, 25% black **One-day pass** \$69

Snowmaking Four guns
Tourist office 001
530 659 7453; www.sierraatahoe.com



Squaw Valley

A mecca for experts – with double black bowls, chutes and huge mogul fields in plentiful supply – this extensive north shore resort also has excellent beginner slopes, plus the three-mile top-to-bottom blue Mountain Run.

Resort 1890m

Slopes 1890m to 2760m
Lifts 33 **Pistes** 4000 acres.
25% green, 45% blue, 30% black **One-day pass** \$83

Snowmaking 15%
Tourist office 001
530 583 6985;
www.squaw.com