

# SKI PRESS

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# PERFECT

CELEBRATING PERFECTION ON SNOW

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# THE YEAR OF THE SNOWS

“Sierra Snowstorms Bury Lake Tahoe!” the headlines screamed. Susan Schnier was there, undercover. Literally.



At the east end of Donner Lake, just below Donner Pass, the 20-foot Pioneer Monument stands as a reminder of the extreme snows that stopped the Donner Party from their migration westward in the winter of 1846-47. Freezing and starving, some of the intrepid explorers died, and some who didn't, resorted to cannibalism.

A century and a half later, Donner Lake is now a fixture of the town of Truckee, where around 15,000 people live comfortably with more than enough snowplows and Mexican restaurants to keep them from eating each other. But as 2004 began to roll over into 2005, a series of back-to-back-to-back Sierra storms pounded the region, leaving 20 feet of snow in their wake. Twenty feet in 12 days.

The overwhelming accumulation led to unusual behavior... and unfathomably good ski conditions.

But first, a word about Buddhism.

Buddhism teaches that the key to enlightenment lies in avoiding extremes, in following the Middle Path. But as Zen-like as we diehard skiers feel in the peak of a powder turn, we'd never take the concept of moderation to the extreme of applying it to snowfall.

Most visitors to the Lake Tahoe area during the Christmas-New Year holiday would have preferred a fresh infusion of a few inches here, a foot or two there. That way, the roads could open and they could actually get from the airport to their hotel, gas up their car, drive to the resort and do some skiing.

But this holiday period, the snow gods took one too many hits of ecstasy at the planning party, and moderation wasn't on the agenda.

North Lake Tahoe ski bums rang in the New Year getting hammered somewhere cozy while the snow hammered outside. It dumped two feet overnight, on top of three feet that had fallen over past three days, and they set the Middle Path aside in favor of raucous all-out indulgence.

When it comes to relentless dumpage of juicy fat flakes, skiers have a hard time knowing when to say when. Which raises the question, when it comes to snow, can there be too much of a good thing? Most real skiers would say no, but when resorts are closed and backcountry is out of the question because of avalanche haz-

ard and you can't shovel out your driveway because you can't launch the shovel's contents over the nine-foot banks, well... the issue becomes a little grayer.

As the drifts started to creep up toward the top of the Pioneer Monument, even hardened snow warriors began to fret. There was just no place to put all of the snow. Towering piles of dirty snow chunks commandeered parking spaces and entire traffic lanes, making actually seeing while driving physically impossible. Going to school or work would just have to wait; since the trucks couldn't get into town, all the gas stations were dry.

In the eye of the storm, I was trying to sell my condo, conveniently located at the top of a long walkway at the highest elevation in town. The door was completely buried by at least 10 feet of wind-blown snow, and I had to climb in through the back porch. Several potential buyers who wanted to check out the place during the big holiday called, but they mysteriously changed their minds when I described the access route.

**Still, with all this snow, how was the skiing?** Well, when you could get to it, it was fantastic. Pretty often, you couldn't. High winds forced mountain closures and extremely low visibility. The flip side was that the wind filled in your tracks as soon as you made them, so every single turn was creamy fresh luxury. And since sketchy roads and rugged conditions kept the crowds away, the ski areas were the private backyards of the hardcores who could best appreciate them. When the clouds finally cleared and the mountains emerged, blanketed in snow, the superlatives started flowing. Every Tahoe skier had a least one, and probably more like four or five, "best ski days ever" last season.

So was it too much? In retrospect, not at all, but at the time, the never-ending flakes were tinged with a slight uneasiness. Rarely did a conversation go without a reference to the Donner Party.