

Tahoe with Kids: How to Make Winter a Wonder

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My friends thought I was crazy to take an infant and toddler to Lake Tahoe. Not only was it winter, but my husband Mark would be occupied at a conference there. But I'm an optimist. I had visions of us happily sledding down the hill in the sun, making snow angels and snowmen while Mark spent his days indoors.

I didn't count on the storm dumping four feet of snow in two days. I didn't count on our kids not sleeping well. I didn't count on the seven hour power failure. And I sure didn't count on difficulty in booking \$20 an hour babysitter for my only ski day in six years.

No, it wasn't the easiest trip, and I'd recommend doing it with at least two adults. But once the clouds lifted and Mark dug the car out, we had a glorious time.

Kidzone Museum

The biggest gem for kids in the Tahoe area is the Kidzone Museum. Opened in its current form since 2002, the former Sierra Nevada Children's Museum has activities and toys for infants on up. Our eight month old Zachary loved the cushioned crawling area with teething toys, while two year old Dori went from the indoor jungle gym, to the train table, to the mini-grocery store, to the hands-on doctor's office, to the water play lagoon, to the dress up area. And we still didn't have time for the changing exhibit, the stagecoach, or the craft room. For locals, the museum provides a great meeting place and resource center – Kidzone was stocked with health and community information in English and Spanish. This indoor museum is open most snow days - providing you can also get there.

Info: 11711 Donner Pass Road, Truckee (between the fire station and high school – in a tent structure). (530) 587-5437; www.kidzonemuseum.org. Closed Mondays.

Historic Downtown Truckee

When the sun is out, this is the place to be with young kids. We spent a morning walking around the historic and picturesque streets of downtown Truckee. While walking tour maps are available at many hotels, we preferred to stroll by the stores, which were surprisingly nice. And most of the local eateries are kid-friendly. Toys abound at several shops, including Tree House Children's Clothing & Gifts, Truckee Variety Company, which also sells candy, puzzles and games, and the Truckee Train & Toy Co. For your sweet tooth, try Buds Old Fashioned Fountain, which sells candy, ice cream and soup (open Friday to Sunday in winter), or Sweets, which peddles caramel apples, toffee, candy and fudge. When you get hungry, try one of 57 varieties of omelets at Squeeze In, or treat your kid to a fun-shaped decorated cookie at the Wagon Train Coffee Shop. Most shops and restaurants are on two long blocks which are somewhat stroller friendly if the snow is cleared.

Sleigh Ride

Get the kids singing Jingle Bells as you ride on open sleighs pulled by horses in South Lake Tahoe or the Squaw Creek Meadow. The 30 minute rides are suitable for babies to grannies – with blankets provided to keep you warm while you take in the scenery. The rides are short enough that the kids shouldn't get too antsy. In the South Lake area, try Borges, a family run business. A ride at Squaw Creek Meadow is free for kids under two (accompanied by paying adults), with daytime and sunset rides available.

Info: Borges' Sleigh Ride (775) 588-2953 or (800) 726-RIDE; www.sleighride.com; Highway 50 at Lake Parkway (adjacent to Caesars Tahoe). Verdi Trails West sleigh rides (775) 771-2057 at the Resort at Squaw Creek.

Dog Sledding

While hearing “mush” may remind you of your grandmother's breakfast, the cold air blowing through your hair as 10 gorgeous huskies pull you through the snow will leave you refreshed. Kids love the Alaskan and Siberian Huskies pulling the toboggan sleds, and you will love the photos. Cozy up with your family (kids need to be at least 10 months old) under blankets at Wilderness Adventures Dog Sled Tours at Sugar Bowl or at the Resort at Squaw Creek. Children should be at least two for the Husky Express Dog Sled Tours, 30 minutes south of South Lake Tahoe. The ride is not recommended for pregnant women.

Info: Wilderness Adventures Dog Sled Tours at Sugar Bowl or the Resort at Squaw Creek (530) 550-8133; www.dogsledadventure.com. Husky Express Dog Sled Tours (775) 782-3047; www.highsierra.com/sst. 30 minutes from South Lake Tahoe on Highway 88.

Sledding or Tubing

If your child has a sense of adventure, consider sledding or tubing. We bought an \$18 plastic sled at a gas station, though many hills rent sleds, saucers or tubes, and dragged the kids out in the middle of a wet snow dump. Since Zachary looked bored sliding down the hill in Mark's arms, and Dori was happiest just tromping through the snow, Mark and I took turns sledding by ourselves. After 30 minutes we were drenched, Zachary was screaming, Dori cried every time she fell in the snow (which happened frequently) and Mark's nerves were shot. At least I was still having fun.

Info: Many ski resorts have their own sledding and tubing hills with rentals. A list of tubing and sledding hills can be found at www.tahoevacationguide.com/Activities/sledding.html.

Ice Skating

To those of you living in warmer climates: you don't know what you're missing if you haven't ice skated outdoors. For scenic skating, take the tram to the top of Squaw Valley and skate while overlooking the lake. Fearful of heights? Go to the outdoor Resort at

Squaw Creek rink, open daily in winter, or the newly opened rink at Heavenly Village. For an indoor rink, the South Lake Tahoe Ice Arena is open year round.

Info: Squaw Valley USA (530) 581-7246; www.squaw.com; located at High Camp, 1960 Squaw Valley Road. Outdoor rink opens November 17 for the season. Resort at Squaw Creek (800) 327-3353 or (530) 583-6300; www.squawcreek.com; 400 Squaw Creek Road, Squaw Valley. Weather permitting, the outdoor rink opens, mid-November. Heavenly Village, www.theshopsatheavenlyvillage.com; 1011 Heavenly Village Way, South Lake Tahoe. Rink opens November 22. South Lake Tahoe Ice Arena (530) 542-6252; <http://www.recreationintahoe.com/icearena.htm>; 1180 Rufus Allen Blvd, South Lake Tahoe. Open year-round.

Lake Cruise

On a clear day, the lake is a great place for unobstructed snow capped mountain views, especially since the lake does not freeze in winter. Take the kids on a 2 ¼ hour narrated cruise in Emerald Bay with Lake Tahoe Cruises. It runs daily at 1:00 p.m. with lunch and drinks sold on board. Crawling babies may find the floor a bit dirty, so bring a stroller or carrier.

Info: (800) 238-2463, www.zephyrcove.com; 900 Ski Run Blvd, South Lake Tahoe.

Donner Memorial State Park & Museum

Combine California cannibal history with snow play at Donner Memorial State Park and Museum in Truckee. Spend an hour at the Emigrant Trail Museum, which shows the area's history including inhabitants like the Native Americans, the Donner Party and transcontinental railroad builders. The museum has a slide show, movies and exhibits. And in winter, there is plenty of snow in the park for snow angels and snowball fights.

Info: (530) 582-7892; www.parks.ca.gov; On I-80 in Truckee – just west of downtown, on the south side of the freeway.

Ski Slopes

The key element to a successful day on the slopes with young children is babysitting. Many of the slopes offer half or full day care or ski school, though the minimum age is usually two or three – some require that kids be toilet trained. While my diapered daughter was welcome at several places, Zachary was too young for all but Heavenly, which takes babies as young as six weeks. The programs aren't cheap, but they *are* fun for the kids, often including snow play, songs, crafts, playtime, lunch and snacks. Call ahead for reservations.

If you and your partner want to take turns watching the kids during the day, spring for an interchangeable ski ticket at Alpine Meadows, Northstar, Homewood or Tahoe at Donner. For the same price as a single adult ski ticket, the interchangeable ticket is good all day, no matter who uses it.

Teaching Junior to ski is another way to pass a day. At most Tahoe ski resorts, kids five and under ski free. I met a dad and his four year old son on the Homewood lift. It was the boy's first day on skis and his dad was taking him to the top of the mountain for their second run (on his first run he learned to wedge). Getting down the hill was as simple as promising the boy hot chocolate at the bottom.

Info: Squaw Valley (530) 581-7166; www.squaw.com. Northstar at Tahoe (800) GO-NORTH; www.skinorthstar.com. Heavenly (775) 586-7000 x 6912; www.skiheavenly.com. Sugar Bowl (530) 426-6776; www.sugarbowl.com. Diamond Peak (775) 832-1130; www.diamondpeak.com. Kirkwood (209) 258-7274; www.kirkwood.com. Sierra at Tahoe (530) 659-7453 x 270; www.sierratahoe.com. Resort at Squaw Creek (800) 327-3353; www.squawcreek.com.

Babysitting

Once you get over the sticker shock of \$20 an hour babysitting for two kids (holidays cost more) you'll find several services. Most nannies will come to your lodging, bringing toys, games and sleds if appropriate. The hourly cost of babysitting does not include the services' \$10-30 referral fee, and similar travel fee if the sitter lives outside your area.

The good news is that babysitting rates at home now seem downright cheap.

Call ahead for babysitting – up to three weeks for Fridays and Saturdays. I started calling services on Wednesday morning for a Thursday or Friday sitter. I had no luck. Fortunately Mark had Saturday afternoon free, and for the sake of our marriage agreed to watch the kids so I could ski. He's a keeper.

Info: North Lake Nannies: (530) 550-8550. Neta's Nannies: (530) 583-3579. North Lake Tahoe Resort Association's website has listings of providers at <http://www.puretahoenorth.com/vacationplanning/specialservices/110> or call the North Lake Tahoe Chamber of Commerce at (530) 581-6900 for a list.

Nanny and babysitting agencies are required by law to perform a TrustLine background check, though not all agencies do them (at \$134 per sitter, they're not cheap). TrustLine checks include fingerprinting and California Department of Justice checks for criminal convictions and substantiated child abuse reports. To confirm a caregiver's status, ask the agency for the sitter's full name and driver's license number, and call TrustLine at (800) 822-8490. These status checks are free for consumers.

Info: Trustline (800) 822-8490; www.trustline.org.

Housing and Food

The biggest mistake we made was booking a studio instead of a suite or condo. We stayed at Granlibakken, by Tahoe City, and shared one room with a sleeper couch,

Murphy bed and hotel crib (which was only slightly larger than a bassinet). An extra bedroom would have been ideal, if we had only thought to ask for it.

Granlibakken also has a large buffet breakfast, though getting to the dining room in another building before the 9:00 a.m. cutoff with two kids to bundle up wasn't easy.

We scored by booking a room with a kitchen. There were no restaurants in walking distance of our hotel, and after two days of solid snowfall, our car was hard to dig out. Most of Tahoe's larger cities have grocery stores.

Info: Granlibakken (800) 543-3221 www.granlibakken.com.

In the end, with the sun was shining, ski tickets on our jackets, beautiful snow capped trees and mountains, photos of the kids sledding, and the happy memory of Mark digging the car out for me, it was a great trip. The next conference is in Banff, and I've already told him to book a condo. Now if I can only get a babysitter...

Deborah Abrams Kaplan is a freelance writer living in Northern California.

Tips:

- Book a hotel suite or a condo, with a separate bedroom for the kids.
- Bring flashlights or candles (with matches) in case of a power outage.
- Bring a shovel in case you need to dig your car out (many hotels can lend them to guests)
- Book a room with a kitchen, so you don't have to eat out. If you don't have a kitchen, be sure there is a restaurant in walking distance of your hotel, in case you get snowed in.
- Bring a bottle of snow cone syrup for a special kid treat – pour it directly in the snow and eat up!
- Call several weeks ahead for a babysitter, especially for weekends. Ask about **all** fees (i.e. referral, travel and cancellation) to avoid surprises.
- Bring a copy of your child's birth certificate in case the ski resort child care asks for proof of age.
- Check if child needs to be toilet trained if you want ski slope day care.
- The childcare programs at the ski resorts offer different levels of activity. Check the websites or call the programs to be sure your child will be comfortable.
- If you bring your child to ski resort child care, be sure to get a list of what you need to bring (i.e. mittens, lunch, sunscreen, change of clothes etc.)

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