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## Altitude, not attitude

**At Idaho's gleaming new Tamarack resort, beginners and hard-core skiers who have softened a bit find their comfort zone, as well as civility and sophistication.**

By Amanda Jones  
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If you are a skier of a certain age, you might remember a time in your life when you woke with the sun, chowed down on a bowl of Cocoa Puffs and dashed out the door to beat other skiers to the first turns of the day. Then you grew a little older. Your knees started to hurt. A good breakfast became critical. You had children. Features like the kids' ski program, the exuberance of employees, the wine list at lunch and the distance to the parking lot mattered more than vertical feet and chairlift capacity or the ratio of beautiful people gracing the *après-ski* scene.

At about this point, small, intimate ski resorts — places with short lift lines, high-end hillside accommodations and no attitude — start to become alluring. California has few, but there are some a short flight away. Tamarack, an all-season resort in west-central Idaho that opened in December, is the newest among a handful of public U.S. ski resorts to be developed since 1981.

Tamarack, named for the tree, is an easy, meandering two-hour drive north of Boise, in Donnelly just south of the tranquil lakeside town of McCall. Aiming for the high-end family market, its goal is to recreate the intimacy and exclusivity of yesteryear's ski resorts, when there was a convivial, club-like feel to the crowd and everyone grinned as they swooshed down the hill.

As a former hard-core skier who now has two young children and a bad knee, such boutique ski areas hold great appeal for me. Looking at the resort's website, however, I knew that my husband, who never lost his obsession with vertical drop, was not a Tamarack kind of guy. The hill simply does not offer heart-thumping double-black diamond runs. It's not about adrenaline here. It's about civility, convenience and sophistication.

So leaving the husband at home, I lit out with my older daughter, Indigo, 7, and a friend, Jennifer Chapin. We flew into Boise, rented a car and drove through the Idaho Rockies for a four-day girl getaway at Tamarack.

When we pulled into the ski resort, my first impression was of an impermanent, oversized igloo encampment. The reception area, the restaurant, the bar, the children's ski school and the equipment center are housed in huge white domed tents made of a durable vinyl-type fabric. The tents are like those used in the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics, but once you're inside them, it's like being in a luxurious

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hotel with art on the walls, carpet on the floors, chic leather furnishings and mood lighting.

The domes last as many as 15 years, said Heather Stolz, head of reservations, and that buys time for the resort to build more guest lodging and to better tailor the permanent structures.

Hanging on a wall in the Sports Dome is an illustration of what Tamarack's owners envision for the future. An entire village for starters, but that's a good 15 years away. Today, Tamarack has 62 slope-side chalets and cottages. A 28-room lodge and more chalets are slated to open next year.

"We've got big plans," Craig Panarisi, the ski school supervisor, told me. "Next season there will be another lift, and we're opening more trails."

For now the resort has only two high-speed quad lifts on the mountain and 700 skiable acres, so management limits lift tickets to 1,500 a day. That means a lot fewer people on the slopes, and if you get out early enough, you can have runs all to yourself. It makes you feel as though you're a member of an elite, restricted alpine club.

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### **New is good and bad**

On our first morning here, we woke to cornflower blue skies and snow crystals powdering the trees. We were staying in the ski-in, ski-out, two-bedroom Owyhee cottage, an attractive stone-and-timber mini-home with a full kitchen, hot tub, fireplace and large-screen TV.

We merely had to walk out our back door, step into our skis and take a Poma lift to get to the main lifts. Once there, there was no fooling around buying lift tickets; they're included in lodging packages. But non-skiers can pay a straight accommodation fee.

One advantage of the resort's newness is its leading-edge technology. There's no need to root around for your lift ticket and have it hand-checked: A Rapidtron gate can read the chip embedded in the pass through your jacket pocket. The lifts are high-speed and padded, the snow makers are the latest and greatest, and the grooming machines leave perfect corduroy each night.

The disadvantages of Tamarack's newness are expected ones: construction noise and unfinished details. Our cottage did not have a functioning hot tub, which was frustrating. Although the staff members are welcoming and kind, some seem to have been trained in a hurry. I had to show the young man who escorted us to our cottage how to turn on the gas fire and the lights, and he neglected to show us our outdoor ski locker, which, once we discovered it days later, was a fabulous feature that obviated the need to schlep skis.

During our first two days, Indigo was booked into the children's ski center, a cheerful place with bouncy, shiny employees who seemed genuinely excited about spending the day scooping little people off the snow. She was scheduled for a group ski lesson, but because so few children were enrolled in the ski school she had an instructor to herself.

I also like to engage the services of a ski instructor for myself when I'm on a mountain for the first time. It's always fun; they take you to hidden runs you'd never know about; and it removes the risk that you'll ski off-trail and end up at a highway two days later. Besides, instructors can teach old dogs new tricks.

On that first day, Jennifer and I headed out early with ski instructor Panarisi, who had previously taught

at Vail, Colo., Snowbird, Utah, and Jackson Hole, Wyo. — resorts many times the size and with more cachet than Tamarack. Like all other employees we met, he'd bought into the Tamarack dream. "It's so beautiful here," he said. "Plus, I couldn't pass up the opportunity to be a part of creating something totally new. We're making history."

After checking to make sure we could stand up on skis, Panarisi took us to what was marked on the map as an expert run, smothered in light, untracked powder. It wasn't what people who ski Squaw Valley or Jackson Hole would call double black, but it was plenty challenging for me, and we whooped through the trees, with Panarisi giving us pointers along the way.

Although there wasn't a lot of ungroomed snow, there was plenty of powder to be had in the trees at the top. And the view from there on this clear day was magnificent — a 360-degree white-peaked majesty of nature. Below was Lake Cascade, a large reservoir filled with glinting blue Rockies runoff. To the south I saw the Sawtooth Mountains, and west as far as Oregon.

Later, when I went to collect Indigo from ski school, I found her barreling over a series of ski jumps with a confidence that made me shudder. At the pace ski schools teach kids these days, it wouldn't be long before my baby would be plunging off cornices.

For a change of pace, Jennifer and I tried out a stretch of the 14-mile Tamarack cross-country track. While renting gear we met Alison Bradley, director of the nordic ski school and another example of an über-qualified ski pro attracted to Tamarack. After competing on two Olympic teams, winning the Nordic World Championship, and 10 years teaching at Sun Valley, Idaho, Bradley came to Tamarack. Why did she leave the larger, better-known, glitzier ski resort?

"Because I fell in love with the beauty of Tamarack, and life is so peaceful and easy here," she said. "We have everything — challenging [nordic] trails, great beginner runs and the best grooming available."

It was a peaceful time gliding through aspen groves, on top of what in summertime is a Robert Trent Jones II-designed golf course. Tamarack will be an all-season resort, and there are plans for two golf courses, kayaking on Lake Cascade, hiking and mountain biking.

This year-round use has led to a high demand for the real estate. Cottages, cabins and home site prices have skyrocketed. A 2,400-square-foot, three-bedroom chalet cost \$800,000 a year ago and now sells for more than \$1 million.

Tamarack's up-market attitude also extends to the food. The resort has two restaurants: Morels, a fine place with a staggering wine list and such dishes as venison or sea bass. For more casual fare there's the Canoe Grill, where skiers can order gourmet panini sandwiches, stir-fry on brown rice, wood-fired pizza, homemade soups or mesclun salads all for reasonable prices. That's a pleasant surprise when compared with the astronomical amounts you have to fork over for a mediocre burger at other resorts.

All of Tamarack's facilities are designed for expediency without forsaking the sybarite — down to the espresso bar in the rental shop and the gourmet food market in the parking lot.

### **Family affair**

For the last days of our trip, Indigo, Jennifer and I skied together. Tamarack is the perfect mountain to ski with children, especially if they can cope with intermediate runs anywhere else. There is plenty of

terrain to keep them challenged and parents from being bored. And when Indigo was antsy to get on the snow while Jennifer and I were still lounging over coffee in the morning, we sent her out the back door for a couple of runs on the Poma-lift. There are not too many hills where you can do that and still keep an eye on them.

On our last night, we headed to the china-and-crystal atmosphere of Morels for dinner. It was an ill-conceived plan. After three long days of skiing, Indigo was tired, and halfway through dinner my normally sweet child turned into a shrew, demanding that we leave dinner immediately and play chess with her in the lounge. Just as her whining reached full crescendo, a Tamarack employee who was having a drink in the bar swooped in, distracted her and whisked her off for a game of chess, leaving Jennifer and me in peace to eat our venison.

In my book, any place with employees who voluntarily devote part of their Saturday evening to playing with a 7-year-old is worth its weight in snow.

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(BEGIN TEXT OF INFOBOX)

Potato-state powder

GETTING THERE:

**From LAX**, Alaska has nonstop flights(operated by Horizon Air); Southwest flies direct (stop, no change of plane), and Delta, Northwest, Alaska, America West and Continental have connecting service (change of plane). Restricted round-trip fares begin at \$198.

**From Boise airport** take Interstate 84 west to Idaho 55 north toward McCall and Donnelly. In Donnelly, turn left on West Roseberry Road, left on Norwood Road, right on Tamarack Falls Road, and left on West Mountain Road. The drive is about two hours.

THE RESORT:

**Tamarack Resort**, 2099 W. Mountain Road, P.O. Box 840, Donnelly, ID 83615; (877) 826-7376 or (208) 325-1000, <http://www.tamarackidaho.com> . The resort has 62 two- and three-bedroom cottages and chalets priced at \$300-\$505 per night.

**Packages**, which include lift tickets and nordic ski and snowshoe passes, start at \$109 per person, per night, with a minimum of four people.

THE MOUNTAIN:

**Tamarack** has 700 skiable acres, with 18% beginners, 55% intermediate and 27% advanced. Lift tickets are \$55 per day for adults, \$28 for children ages 7-17.

TO LEARN MORE:

**Idaho Travel Council**, 700 W. State St., Boise, ID 83720; (800) VISIT-ID (847-4843), <http://www.visitid.org> .

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