

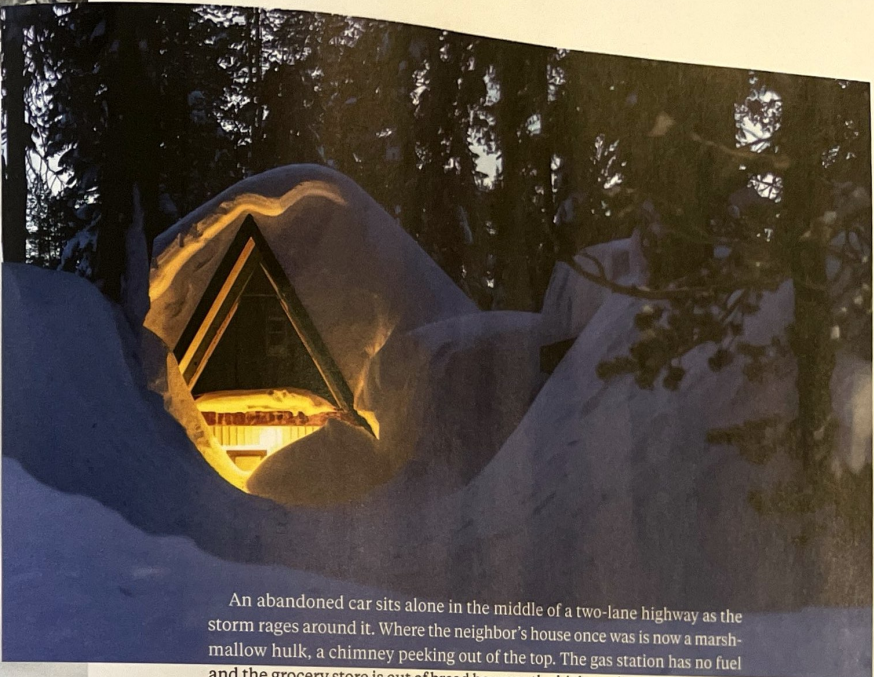


Lake Tahoe

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...to lead a nice game of
BOTTOM: In the winter of 2022/23, basic transportation became
necessary for survival. Photo: Ming Poon



An abandoned car sits alone in the middle of a two-lane highway as the storm rages around it. Where the neighbor's house once was is now a marshmallow hulk, a chimney peeking out of the top. The gas station has no fuel and the grocery store is out of bread because the highway into town has been closed for days. The sheriff rides a snowmobile. School and the sun don't exist anymore. The days feel like nights—windy, cold and dark. If you can get out of your driveway and make it to the ski area, and if the resort staff can manage to dig out and operate a chairlift, then it is the deepest snow you've ever skied.

What does 754 inches of snow look like? Picture four stacked giraffes. Or the colossal heads on Mount Rushmore. Now dump that 62 feet of snow atop a mountain, a town, a home. The Lake Tahoe area is known for its big winters (average snowfall is around 350 inches), but 2023 was monstrous by all accounts. It was the area's second snowiest winter on record, with data going back to 1946. (The only winter that had more snow was 1952, when Tahoe received 812 inches.)

First, let's talk snow removal. Or snow relocation, because eventually there was nowhere else for it to go. During a storm, my front steps were like the never-ending paint job on the Golden Gate Bridge: By the time I'd finished shoveling out the front door, it had snowed so much I had to start over. Decks collapsed and beams in houses broke. The awning on the market down the street caved in, and my kids' school was canceled due to snow load on the roof. The snow water equivalent was so heavy, a 20-square-foot deck could be weighed down by over 8,000 pounds. "I had nightmares about my snowblower breaking," ski photographer Ming Poon, who lives in Tahoe City, told me. A friend made T-shirts that said: *I survived the winter of 2023.*

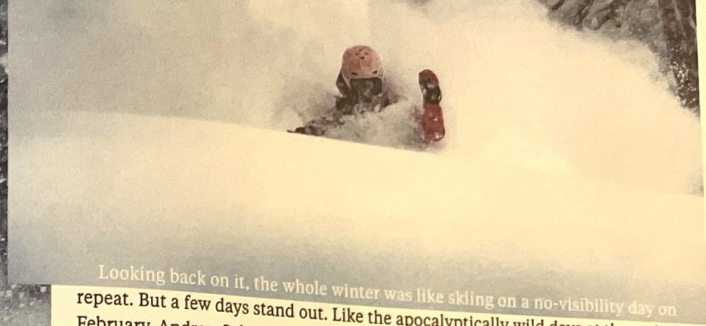
This magnitude of snow is magical on many levels, but it doesn't always come in peace. The storms pounded relentlessly without breaks. Usually, you get time to recoup after a wallop, a few days or a week to dig out before another one rolls in. But in 2023, back-to-back-to-back storms slammed into the Sierra Nevada range. As Will Paden, Palisades Tahoe's director of ski patrol put it, "Winter started quickly—with one big storm that opened the entire mountain—and never quit."

BY MEGAN MICHELSON



TOP: Elyse Saugstad's dissertation on Powology argues that skiing neck-deep snow is way better than shoveling it. We tend to agree. Tahoe backcountry, California. Photo: Ming Poon

LEFT & BOTTOM: One small turn for Drew Petersen, one giant face-shot for ski-kind. Tahoe backcountry, California. Photos: Ming Poon



Looking back on it, the whole winter was like skiing on a no-visibility day on repeat. But a few days stand out. Like the apocalyptically wild days at the end of February. Andrew Schwartz, a snow scientist who lives at the Central Sierra Snow Laboratory atop Donner Pass, walked out his door on snowshoes on February 28 and sank in five feet deep. "I had this 'oh no' moment, total panic. I was alone and up to my eyeballs in snow," Schwartz recalls.

He was able to swim upward and wiggle out, but after that he didn't leave the house without his emergency call button. From that storm alone, his snow lab received a whopping six feet of snow in a day and a half. At one point, it snowed seven inches in an hour, an unprecedented rate. The ski resorts were reporting 30-plus inches of snow day after day.

Ski patrol and mountain ops at every ski area in the region worked overtime, logging 70-hour weeks and sleeping at the hill to avoid having to drive in yet another squall. Rather than digging out impossibly deep rope lines, patrol would put in a new rope line, so at the end of the ski season—which didn't come until midsummer, mind you (we skied until July 4)—layers of ropes emerged from the snowpack.

Then, there was the skiing. Oh, glory. On the good days, it was nostril deep—cold, light, and billowing. On the great days, it was transcendental, like what I imagine skiing on the moon might feel like, weightless and free.

Amidst a powder-hogging season, one line sticks out in my memory. A friend and I skied to my favorite stash at my local hill after a whale of a storm, and nobody had been there for days. Though it was familiar terrain—a slope I've skied a hundred times—it looked completely foreign, whole cliff faces and trees buried and the mountain itself bulging and full. We dropped in one at a time and everything went blank. The snow swelled overhead, like a surfer in a big wave. Instead of seeing, you had to feel your way down, trust your instincts in a bath of white. You know your way down, I told myself, just go with it. At the bottom, I stared in disbelief as my friend arrived in a cloud of her own making. We laughed incredulously, wiped snow from our faces, then went back up for more. *

