

OUTDOORS

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SEE A MULTIMEDIA SLIDESHOW OF KINGVALE TERRAIN PARK
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Pat Lee of Tahoe City spins 360 degrees in the air after hitting a bullet-shaped obstacle at Kingvale Terrain Project. Its unique features and friendly, casual atmosphere make the terrain park a unique and nascent cultural point in the Sierra Nevada.

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“Kingvale is my dream come true.”

Brian Neri, Incline Village
Kingvale Terrain Project rider



With one rope tow, a trailer for a lodge and a barbecue as a dining hall, Kingvale Terrain Project has a buzz that's spreading past the peaks of the Lake Tahoe Basin. In fact, this tubing hill that converts into an urban terrain park is getting national recognition — and it's in our backyard.

King of the hill

Kingvale Terrain Project: Big risk, big reward

Every Friday night, the most innovative terrain park in the United States gets a makeover. The propane tank Tahoe pro snowboarder Pat Lee sailed over that afternoon is taken down. So are the rails, boxes and the other junk — and it is junk — but junk with a purpose, junk with style. All of it is dug up and put away.

Once that process is over, the snowcats come out and create five perfectly manicured tubing lanes. When that happens, the makeover is complete.

Then, on Saturday and Sunday mornings, children and parents from Sacramento, Chico and the Bay Area arrive in their SUVs. They park in the same parking lot where some of Lake Tahoe's best freestyle snowboarders parked Monday through Friday. They urinate in the same portable restrooms Lake Tahoe's best freestyle snowboarders urinated in, three teal-colored bathrooms situated on an ice-

covered parking lot.

With their SUVs parked, they walk through a stand of pine trees and head toward a gray building with red trim to buy tubing tickets. This gray building is not far from another gray building that has a barbecue on its deck, where Shawn Durst grilled hamburgers two days before.

“No one's brought out a keg yet,” joked Durst, a Truckee pro snowboarder and former South Lake Tahoe resident.

Mike Durst — Shawn's younger brother — has a pair of black sunglasses to block out the

sun and wears his pants below his butt. He tends the rope tow and places children in an inner tube, then watches them get taken up the hill.

He does this all weekend until Sunday night, when the snowcats are brought out again and the tubing lanes are destroyed. By Monday morning, the most innovative terrain park in the United States has returned.

“Seriously, we do it every week,” said Mike Durst. “Day (Franzen) and Jay (Rydd), they run the show. The rest of us are the ones who make the show happen. Somebody has to be there to pull up the curtains. We shovel, rake, groom, run the lifts all day. It's not really glamorous stuff, but somebody has to do it.”

Imagine the CEO of Intrawest or Vail Resorts sitting butts in inner tubes, shoveling snow and driving snowcats. Seriously, imagine it, because that's what Franzen and Rydd, who assume most of the managerial duties, and the



Riders watch and study while holding onto a tow rope as others go down the terrain park. The small resort has no lines and enough space to give riders free access to all the park features without waiting.

minority owners do.

It's noble, sure, but Kingvale Terrain Project might be the biggest risk in the history of mountain resorts. Cut into a modest hill that rises 400 feet above Interstate 80, it's just a terrain park, and it's within an hour of a dozen world-class resorts that have both terrain parks and natural terrain.

“We're basically basing our future on a plastic toy,” Mike Durst said. “Any way you look at it, it's risky, but what else are you going to do? You have to try something for yourself sometimes. You can't get anywhere in life if you don't lay it all on the line at some point.”

The industry trend also has been the closing of resorts, not the opening of new ones. According to the National Ski Areas Association, there were 485 ski resorts operating during the 2006-07 season, down 33 percent from an all-time high of 727 during the 1984-85 season.

When that figure is updated after this season, it should increase to 486, but it's unclear if the NSSA considers a resort/tubing operation a full-operation resort.

“We didn't buy this to be tubing operators,” said Franzen, Kingvale's majority owner and a former terrain-park builder at several resorts around the world, including Heavenly. “We bought it because we could slowly transition it into a park, but tubing is what pays the bills right now. The reality is, nobody has pioneered in a long time. It's been a long time since somebody said, ‘Let's put in a tow into a hill and build from there.’ We are super underdogs in this. We don't have the most money, but we have a good park.”

No, they have a great park. Insane park. Creative park, but that's not the real story.

The South Shore roots of Kingvale

Shawn Durst grew up in Pennsylvania, snowboarding with friends in backyards and sliding rails around town. He traveled around for a few years, put in several good seasons of couch surfing and ended up, somehow, at Mountain High resort outside Los Angeles.

That was where he met Franzen. The two hit it off immediately, so when Franzen was offered a job to run Heavenly's terrain parks, Durst followed him to South Lake Tahoe.

Like any pro snowboarder living the dream, Durst's memory of his early years at

Heavenly remains foggy, but he hasn't forgotten the spirited conversations he had with Franzen and Rydd. Those were the conversations that bred Kingvale.

The exact words of the conversation remain unclear, but the verdict wasn't: Let's buy our own resort and make it into the best terrain park in the world.

“It was a little bit of dreaming, but we knew we could do it,” said Durst, a sponsored rider for Grenade and Red Bull. “Day and Jay have been running parks for years. I've ridden parks all over the world and know what people want. They want what those guys build. We just wanted to get away from the big mountain and all the stuff that comes with it ... all the bosses saying you can't build stuff the way you want to.”

After the 2004-05 season, Durst, Franzen and Rydd bailed from the South Shore, but it was a calculated move. They already had begun scouting out prospective resorts, some that currently were up for sale and others that were sites of defunct resorts, including Iron Mountain near Kirkwood.

During the process, they saw a “For Sale” ad in Ski Area Management magazine that piqued their interest. It was for a tubing operation off Interstate 80, 11 miles west of Truckee. They visited the property and saw gold where others saw coal.

The asking price was \$450,000 — not much for a ski resort, but a pretty big chunk of change for several snowboarders in their 20s. Franzen didn't offer that much — actually considerably less — and the exact amount he won't reveal no matter how many different ways a reporter asks the question.



Backed by a bluebird sky, Brian Austin of Camelian Bay grabs his board and glides through the air after hitting a jump at Kingvale Terrain Project.

“It had been up for sale for a year or two,” Franzen said. “We waited for the right opportunity, and we pounced on it. It's not really worth much, and it's still not worth much, but it's ours, and that's what counts.”

Compared with the rest of the group, Franzen was in the best financial position to take a leading role in the transaction. He had a decent-paying gig running Heavenly's terrain parks, but he also had started www.railbuilders.com, a Reno-based manufacturing company that produces some of the most innovative terrain-park features in the world.

With Rydd and Durst on board, they eventually attracted other partners. The first few years, they all shackled up together in a house in Glenshire near Truckee.

Keeping their day-to-day costs low (mac and cheese never tasted so good), the group's business plan slowly took shape.

Kingvale's first winter of operation was the 2005-06 season, when it only offered tubing. Last season, some of the creative genius that Franzen and Rydd are equipped with finally was put on display.

They constructed custom terrain parks for snowboard companies, which would bring out their team of riders for a photo shoot. They intended to open things up to the public, but there were some insurance issues that had to be worked out.

“Man, we're just learning as we go,” Shawn Durst said.

But on Jan. 14 of this year, Kingvale Terrain Project opened to the public for the first time. Lift tickets were priced at \$22, and season passes were \$128.99 for the first 200 customers who purchased them.

About a dozen customers showed up that first day, including several riders who were driving I-80 to ride at Boreal on Donner Summit. When they passed Kingvale, the brake lights came on.

“People were really skeptical. At first, even I was a little skeptical,” said Bob Walker, owner of a gear and apparel shop called The Rider's Union, which shares a building with Kingvale Terrain Project at the parking lot's entrance. “I was like ... ‘You're going to do what? A mountain that is not a tubing hill?’ But these guys are committed and work their asses off. If you look past these guys, you'll be sorry.”

Looking ahead to the future

For the rest of this season, Kingvale will continue its tubing operation on weekends, with the terrain park open Monday through Friday. At first glance, it doesn't look like much — one rope tow servicing 450 feet of vertical, and several lines with odd-looking features. There also is a hiking park with a few jumps and more odd features.

But upon closer look, those odd features bring the best out of its customers. There was a shuttle bus from Homewood in the hiking park, a propane tank in the main park and all sorts of metal structures dug into the snow all over, but there is a method to Kingvale's madness.

The park changes every week. It's updated with the latest and greatest from Franzen's shop in Reno, not to mention from the creativity of the resort's partners.



A large oil drum has become a toy for snowboarders and skiers, as Incline Village's Brian Neri demonstrates by jumping off the snow and sliding across it.

“You feel more intimate here,” said snowboarder Rick Skinner. “With all these pros hanging around like Shawn Durst, how many chances do regular people get to interact with someone like him? Well, every day you get to interact with him here.”

“I met a couple kids who were on their way to Boreal and saw this from the road and stopped. One said to the other, ‘Dude, we're going to get so good here.’ And it's true. It's not like other places. If you blow it on your first trick, you can go right back to the rope tow and try again. At a resort, you have to go back down the lift and wait in line. Here, it's like instant rebate.”



Lunchtime at Kingvale brings riders outside to a small area with a barbecue and picnic tables. The relaxed atmosphere is similar to something one might find when a group of old friends gets together on a Sunday afternoon for a casual backyard cookout.

Not only do the riders enjoy it, but Kingvale's competitors also are taking an interest. Franzen said he's caught officials from Boreal, a few miles up I-80 on Donner Summit, spying on what they are building.

“Boreal's biggest problem is up until recently, they viewed us as a joke,” Franzen said. “They didn't think we were able to do anything. Just this 400 feet has them worried. The reality is, the parks at the resorts are all cookie-cutter. We don't want to have every feature in a row, having people go straight up and straight down all day long.”

When people look at Kingvale this year, they are looking at just the first phase. The terrain park/tubing operation sits in the old Plavada ski area, which shut down in the 1960s, so there already are lift lines cut into the forest. Franzen said that next season, the resort will add 600 feet of additional terrain with another rope tow.

This month, the level above Walker's store The Rider's Union will feature the grand opening of King's Court restaurant, Franzen's latest phase of this ever-expanding resort. And this whole rumor that Kingvale is for snowboarders only? Not true.

“Skiers' money is as good as snowboarders' money,” Shawn Durst said. “We just want people to have fun.”

On a Wednesday last month, people certainly were having fun. Durst was grilling hamburgers. The sun was shining. Twenty snowboarders were jibbing it up.

Yeah, life is good for the creators of Kingvale.

“Things are floating a little better,” Durst said. “We're not all living together anymore. We're still in a pile of crap, but at least we can breathe.”