



Come on in, the water's
fuuuureezing!
Photo: Matt Banskak

THE SEDUCTION OF SKIM

The Fountain of Youth stalls
aging, not shrinkage

BY DAVE ZOOK

THE WHO: It's the dead center of another asphalt-roasting summer, and even after California's leviathan winter, the Sierra Nevada snowpack has been relegated to dirty patches of white stuff where the sun don't shine. You want to ski, but scrambling up ankle-biting talus for a few hundred feet of sun-cupped glory no longer lights the fire within.

What to do? One option, made possible in Tahoe by a rarified alignment of the elements, has been the tradition of slogging camping and ski gear to the Fountain of Youth, a naturally forming pond skim with icy fresh waters way up in the California wilderness.

A crew of North Tahoe folks and I did just that in

August. No one had been there, no one knew exactly where it was, and only one had ever skimmed a pond.

But we were following in good footsteps. The founder of Splitboard.com, Chris Gallardo, "discovered" the skim in 2008, when he and a friend were looking for late-season turns. "When I first laid eyes on it, only one thought came to my mind...I gotta ride across it!" said Gallardo, who has returned every year since. "As long as I can make the trip each year physically, it will help keep me young and will live up to its name."

THE WHAT: Reaching the pond—which sits at just over 9,000 feet and is roughly 40 feet wide and 70 feet across—is a verified pain in the ass. It is custom-tailored for foolhardy, hike-happy skiers who want to let their friends know, either via social media or at the bar, they will keep skiing longer and harder than anyone else.

Hungry skeeters, granite scrambling, and hefty vertical are part of the roughly seven-mile route in. Most spend the first night camping at the high alpine lake, skim the following day, and hike out afterward. "For real, I think we just walked for miles to make it to a puddle," said one of our skiers, Jenny Ley. And that was *before* a hail-infused thunderstorm slapped the group around for a half hour.

Once at the pond, the idea was to hike up the steep in-run another 100 feet or so, point it, and... float?

THE WHY: Just seeing the various shades of frigid topaz blue water is enough; the nearly fluorescent hues look like they'd be right at home in

the tropics. A snow reef forms the underbelly to the shallow pond, resembling knobby white coral heads, or puffy clouds.

It's also a tremendous excuse to spend a day at a makeshift Tahoe beach not occupied by hundreds of tourists. And the sensation of shooting over a pond at high speeds isn't so bad either.

"For those few seconds of weightlessness when speed, water, friction, balance, and individual style mesh together, it's a beautiful thing and absolutely worth it," says Gallardo.

THE WTF: "I want to go *yard*," said Graham Johns, after he and Anthony Santos warmed up on the narrower stretches. "I think it can be done long-ways if you point it from that highest snowfield and slingshot into it."

In theory, you glide over the water like a tender ballerina. In practice, it's more like a polar bear on ice skates. After hiking the in-run, Johns came in hot, skis chattering like decayed molars, and greased the full distance—70 feet—as if it were an inch. Charlie Watt tried to follow, but showed us the real meaning of a water hazard. He took a digger at the entry and ended up borderline hypothermic.

His blue skin paled in comparison to the day's Hollywood moment. As the afternoon sun beamed brightly, Santos came in on Johns' tails. At great speed, they whisked onto the pond and shot the gap between two babes floating in the pond on a river tube and an inflatable pink flamingo. Spraying a double rooster tail of water and exiting with speed to burn, the only wrinkles to be found were from the smiles on their faces.