

12.25 mahj squad feature

Denver's Mahj Squad fuels mahjong's modern revival

Shaw Morris learned mahjong first. Then she taught her friend, Kelly Warren. Then they taught their friends. What began as game nights in someone's living room became something closer to a calling and the Mahj Squad, which offers lessons, events, and mahjong merchandise such as custom tiles, trays, and mats, was formed.

They are part of mahjong's unlikely American revival; a resurgence that has little to do with nostalgia and everything to do with what happens when people gather around a table, shuffle tiles and lose track of time. Morris and Warren have turned that simple truth into a thriving business.

Today, the Denver-based Mahj Squad hosts approximately 60 to 75 events a month around Colorado, Warren said, ranging from birthday parties at private homes to corporate networking events and beyond. The Mahj Squad is a full-service experience.

"We show up and we really bring everything needed to play. If you are hosting, all you need to do is invite your friends over. Everyone gets to keep our Mahjong 101 guidebook and we bring the sets. We can even bring tables and chairs if needed," Morris said.

The lesson lasts about two hours with two games played and the events attract a mix of beginners and skilled players alike.

"A lot of times, these people have zero experience, and they're coming to us to teach them the game. And you really do have to be taught the game. It's not something you could really just read the instructions and figure it out because there's a lot of, you know, rules and strategy," Warren said.

As teachers, Morris and Warren approach the game in a modern way: they simplify learning and make it more accessible and engaging, with an upgrade that adds personalized tiles and accessories, an upgrade from the original game.

Once people know how to play, the Mahj Squad invites them to join its social club, a league where players can compete, meet new people and, most importantly, socialize.

"You're not just sitting around, you know, hosting a party where you're having a glass of wine. You're actually doing something. And I think people leave thinking, 'Oh my gosh, that was so fun,'" Warren said.

The networking opportunities of mahjong events can't be overstated. The Mahj Squad collaborates with different businesses, such as realtors, travel agents and mortgage

brokers on team-building and social events, complete with food and drinks. They recently hosted an event with an oil company that was, in essence, a holiday party complete with a gift exchange and a catered lunch.

“We love partnering with local businesses, and it's a win-win because we bring customers into the store, and they'll shop or order food or drinks, and it's really fun for everyone,” Morris said.

Future plans include a mahjong retreat at the Broadmoor in Colorado Springs and expansion nationwide. Currently, the company has 10 additional people to run events in Milwaukee, Michigan and Greenwich, CT and is in talks to open mahjong chapters in other cities.

The Mahjong Squad is active on Instagram and in addition to booking information, its website features gifts for players of all levels and ages, a reflection of the game's broad appeal.

"Mahjong is a multi-generational game, so it's really fun. We teach grandparents with their grandkids and it really is for everybody," Morris said.