

## Taking a scenic drive down California's Spine



- U.S. 395 was called El Camino Sierra by prospectors during the California Gold Rush. It is now a State Scenic Highway running along the eastern flank of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

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Posted 3/13/2022 7:30 AM

Once just a dirt trail used by prospectors during the California Gold Rush, U.S. 395 has become the main thoroughfare along the east flank of the Sierra Nevada Mountains and a celebrated scenic drive. My husband and I spent five days road-tripping along California's backbone, taking

our time to experience a side of the Golden State different from the palm trees, beaches and big cities along its Pacific Coast.

We started our journey near Bridgeport about 85 miles from Lake Tahoe at the Nevada border and ended in Lone Pine about 150 miles south. For some, it would have been a day trip, but for us, it proved an adventure as we stopped to tour a ghost town, ascend a mountain summit, hike around a surreal salt lake and a desert movie set, learn about a sad chapter of American history at a former Japanese internment camp and drive a winding road up Mount Whitney, the highest elevation in the lower 48 states.



Bodie is a ghost town left in a state of "arrested decay." Wood buildings have been burnished bronze by the unforgiving climate of the Eastern Sierra's high desert. -  
**Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier**

### **Spooky State Park**

At Bodie, a 13-mile detour from U.S. 395, we strolled past dilapidated wood buildings of a ghost town preserved as Bodie State Historic Park. I peeked through dusty store windows at shelves of goods more than a century old. When silver mining peaked here in the 1870s, Bodie had 60 saloons and dance halls, its bordellos had no shortage of customers and gunfights broke out on the main street. A preacher at the time called it "a sea of sin, lashed by the tempests of lust and passion."

A vista point on U.S. 395 high above the town of Lee Vining gave us a panoramic view of mountains and lakes. We followed the highway down to the town and the popular Whoa Nellie Deli. Though it occupies a Mobil service station, it's more than a place to grab a quick bite when pumping gas. While we waited for our ribs and fish tacos on a busy Friday night, two wedding receptions filled the outdoor seating area.



**At Mono Lake, Dr. Seuss-like calcite formations, called tufa, form along the shoreline.** - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Mother nature's sculptures prompted a stop at nearby Mono Lake, nearly three times as salty as the ocean. When this lake water mixes with freshwater bubbling up from springs, calcite towers build up along the shoreline in surreal formations called tufa. I saw some 30 feet tall on a walk around a loop trail.

No tufa studded the perimeters of four lakes on the June Lake Loop, a scenic route off U.S. 395. We stretched our legs on a two-mile hike around Gull Lake, stopping to gawk at Carson Peak towering nearly 11,000 feet above forests of aspens and pines.

### **A mammoth mountain**

We spent two days in Mammoth Lakes, a major ski resort town offering summer visitors a bounty of geological wonders to discover in the surrounding area. A gondola whisked me to the summit of Mammoth Mountain, 11,053 feet, and the nature exhibits inside the Eleven53 Interpretive Center. Across the valley, I spotted the picket fence rock formation of Minaret Vista and watched late-spring skiers hurl themselves down the slopes. Some years the ski runs stay open as late as the Fourth of July.

Though snow capped the mountain peaks, not a flake survived the heat of Hot Creek Geological Site where signs warn "No Swimming." The scalding turquoise pools and billowing steam vents testify to the volcanic origins of this stretch of the Eastern Sierra.

At nearby Convict Lake, visitors swim, fish for trout and cruise around in pontoon boats when the weather is warm. I settled for a hike around the lake that takes its name from escaped prisoners who holed up here in 1871 before the law caught up with them. More scenery grabbed my attention at Mammoth Lakes Basin, home to five lakes. At Lake George, I admired the reflection of Crystal Crag poking up from the rim of a ridge lining the opposite shoreline.





Pontoon boats cruise Convict Lake named for an 1871 prison break that ended badly for both outlaws and lawmen. The lake is one of several around the community of Mammoth Lakes. - **Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier**

### **High and low points**

Leaving Mammoth behind us, the summits of the Sierra followed U.S. 395 on our right. As we passed through the towns of Bishop and Independence traffic remained light on the ribbon of pavement as it dipped and curved, transitioning between two lanes and four.

We hit the brakes when we caught sight of a guard tower at Manzanar National Historic Site where Japanese-Americans were imprisoned during World War II. It is what remains of one of 10 military-style internment camps President Ronald Reagan called "a mistake." We walked into the old barracks, including one housing a school, and observed quiet reflection at a cemetery where a white obelisk was inscribed with Japanese characters.



**President Ronald Reagan called World War II Japanese internment camps like Manzanar "a mistake" when signing a law authorizing modest reparations to camp survivors.** - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

A five-mile detour from U.S. 395 led through the Alabama Hills where more than 400 films and TV shows have been shot. The boulders of this 30,000-acre desert served as background in old Westerns starring the Lone Ranger, Hopalong Cassidy and Roy Rogers as well as later films "Star Trek Generations," "Django Unchained" and the horror flick "Tremors." We'd just seen some of the props from these movies, along with costumes, saddles and other Western gear at the Museum of Western Film History occupying an old cinema in Lone Pine.

Before hitting the road again, we couldn't pass up a climb to the must-see natural attraction, Mobius Arch. The effort expended hiking to this weathered 8-foot rock formation paid off when we saw how the arch perfectly framed the jagged granite peaks of the Sierra behind it.

Our detour took us seven more miles toward the mountains on Whitney Portal Road and the trail leading to the top of Mount Whitney, the highest in the contiguous U.S. states. A permit is required for the 22-mile round-trip climb to the summit, 14,505 feet with an elevation gain of more than 6,000 feet.

We took a pass. The Whitney Portal Store, a camp store and snack bar, was high enough for us at 8,360 feet. As we drove back down the mountain, we took in the view of U.S. 395 snaking through the valley below, tracing our journey along the Eastern Sierra.

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### **If you go**

Visit California: [visitcalifornia.com/](http://visitcalifornia.com/)

Visit Mammoth Lakes: [visitmammoth.com/](http://visitmammoth.com/)

Getting there: Fly into Reno-Tahoe International Airport and drive south on U.S. 395 or fly to one of the metro Los Angeles airports and pick up northbound U.S. 395.

When to go: Late spring to early fall. Some roads off U.S. 395 close in winter and some mountain passes may not open until mid-June.

• Information for this article was gathered during a research trip sponsored by Visit California and Mammoth Lakes Tourism.

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