

Tuesday, July 16, 2019

## Discover Mammoth Lakes, Yosemite's lesser-known neighbor

*Katherine Rodeghier, Special Contributor*

Perhaps flying at 13,000 feet was not the best time for the helicopter pilot to tell me he's afraid of heights.

Or that he's claustrophobic.

But Ed Roski, pilot and owner of Skytime Helicopter Tours, assured me he felt fine. I found that surprising as we were encased in a four-passenger glass bubble with a rotor slicing the thin air above the jagged peaks of the Eastern Sierra Nevada Mountains.



Mammoth Lakes, Calif., is surrounded by 17 lakes, many of them stocked with trout. Convict Lake takes its name from a shootout back in 1871.

(Katherine Rodeghier/Special Contributor)

But Roski's ill-timed oversharing was one of many surprises during a long weekend in the California resort of Mammoth Lakes, southeast of Yosemite National Park.

Already known as one of the most popular ski areas in California, Mammoth Lakes is a surprising summer hot spot as well. Stunning mountain scenery surrounds 17 lakes for fishing and boating, bike paths pass through fragrant pine forests, hiking trails skirt hot springs and waterfalls, and gondolas take riders to the top of its namesake summit.

Yet Yosemite gets most of the attention -- and the crowds. During the peak summer season, accommodations can be pricey and hard to come by, and the roads through the park are frustratingly

clogged with traffic. Think of Mammoth Lakes as Yosemite Lite, an affordable, easily navigable alternative.

You can do both, actually. Once the Tioga Pass road to Yosemite's east gate opens for the summer, the national park can be visited in a day trip by shuttle bus or rental car.

### **Blast from the past**

The super volcano that blew around Mammoth Lakes 750,000 years ago formed a 20-mile-long caldera and shot 500 times more volcanic material in the air than the Mount St. Helens eruption in Washington in 1980. Another series of eruptions 100,000 years ago pushed Mammoth Mountain skyward and sent lava oozing through fissures in the Earth's crust far below. The lava formed columns of black basalt at [DevilsPostpile National Monument](#), creating surprisingly uniform hexagonal 60-foot columns. Two miles farther on, Rainbow Falls tumbles 101 feet over a lava ledge.



Hikers enjoy the sunshine on a walk along Hot Creek near Mammoth Lakes, Calif.

(Katherine Rodeghier/Special Contributor)

Mammoth Mountain's gondolas aren't just for skiers; they carry summer sightseers to the 11,053-foot summit, where an interpretive center has natural history exhibits. From this perch, you can see the sharp, jutting spires of Minaret Vista on the horizon and pick out lakes and lava cones in what's left of that 20-mile-long caldera below.

For a closer look, walk through Hot Creek Gorge. Only a fool would ignore the "No Swimming" signs around its bubbling hot springs or get too close to its unpredictable geysers venting gas from magma churning below the surface. Hot Creek keeps its cool, though, cutting through the gorge and offering anglers some of the best fishing around.

### **Hook or crook**

Most of the lakes around Mammoth are stocked with brown and rainbow trout. Buy a California fishing license at Convict Lake, named for a gang of desperadoes who broke out of a Nevada jail in 1871 and met their end in a shootout with lawmen here. The lake is a picture of serenity with rental canoes and pontoon boats gliding across its placid surface mirroring the ivory and rust faces of surrounding mountains. A three-mile hike around the shore reveals ever-changing views.



Biking on dirt or paved paths is a popular activity among summer visitors in Mammoth Lakes, Calif.

(Katherine Rodeghier/Special Contributor)

You'll find more lake and mountain views, along with hiking, biking and boating, in Mammoth Lakes Basin. From the town of Mammoth Lakes, Lake Mary Road snakes upward to Twin Lakes and its waterfall, Lake Mary, Lake Mamie and Horseshoe Lake. A detour to Lake George is rewarded with a stunning view of Crystal Crag poking its rugged peak above a rim of mountains. Make the trip by car, stopping to enjoy the view, or hike or bike a five-mile paved path. For an easy downhill ride, you can rent bikes in the village, take a 16-bike shuttle to the top of the path and then bike down to town.



Visitors to Mammoth Lakes, Calif., learn that hot springs are evidence of the volcanic activity that created Hot Creek Gorge.

(Katherine Rodeghier/Special Contributor)

### Details

**Tourist information:** Mammoth Lakes Tourism, 888-466-2666, [visitmammoth.com](http://visitmammoth.com)

**Where to stay:** Options include cabins, condos, chalets, B&Bs, hotels and resorts, including:

\* The Westin Monache Resort, 888-627-8154, [westin.com](http://westin.com)

\* Sierra Nevada Resort & Spa, 1-800-824-5132, [thesierranevadaresort.com](http://thesierranevadaresort.com)

**Skytime Helicopter Tours:** 321-247-8687, [skytime.com](http://skytime.com)

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<https://www.dallasnews.com/life/travel/2019/07/16/discover-mammoth-lakes-yosemites-lesser-known-neighbor>