



Hikers enjoy the sunshine on a walk along Hot Creek.

PHOTOS BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER

DISCOVER YOSEMITE'S LESSER-KNOWN NEIGHBOR MAMMOTH LAKES

BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER
Special to the Post-Dispatch

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 rotor slicing the thin air above the jagged peaks of the Eastern Sierra Nevada Mountains.

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.

The town itself covers just four square miles but is surrounded by millions of acres of public land. Already known as one of the most popular ski areas in California, I was surprised to discover a 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 can be frustratingly clogged with traffic. Think of Mammoth Lakes as Yosemite Lite, an affordable, easily navigable alternative.

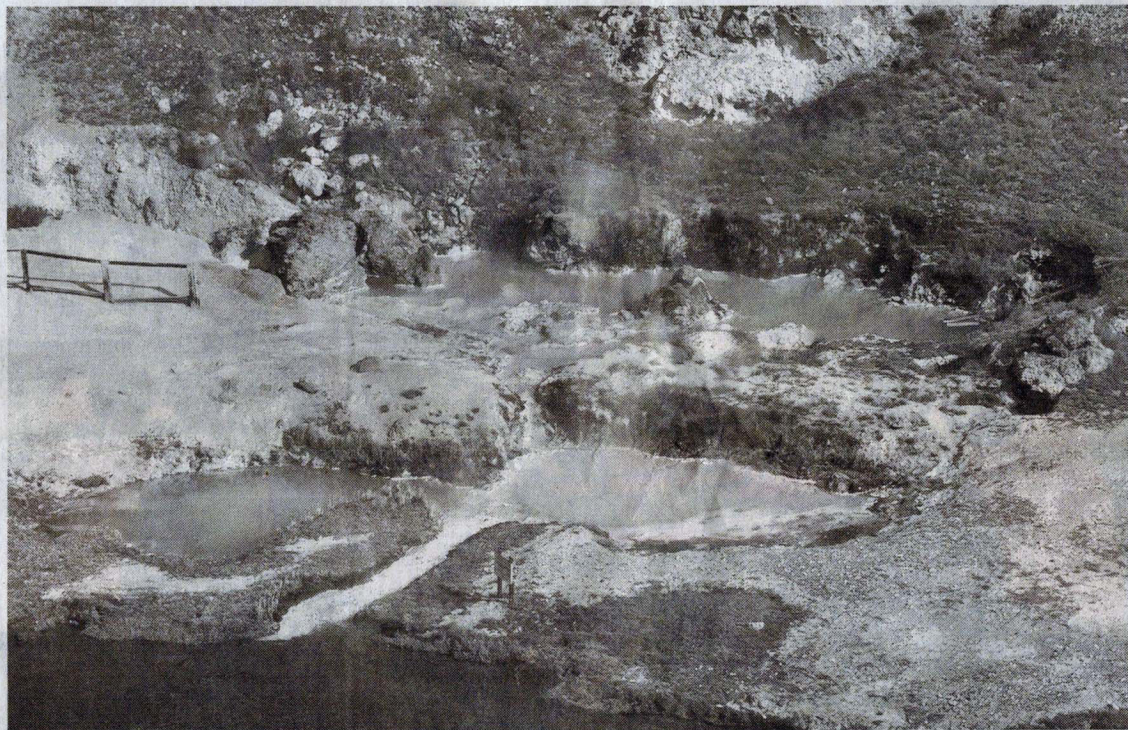
You can do both, actually. Once the Tioga Pass road to Yosemite's east gate opens for the summer, the national park can be visited in a day trip by shuttle bus or rental car.

BLAST FROM THE PAST

Volcanic eruptions may not be rare, but the super volcano that blew around Mammoth Lakes 750,000 years ago certainly was. It formed a 20-mile-long caldera and shot a surprising amount of volcanic material into the air, 500 times more than the Mount St. Helens eruption in Washington in 1980. Ash traveled as far as Kansas and Nebraska.

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 Devils Postpile National Monument accessible only after the road opens to the monument around mid-June. Take a shuttle from Mammoth Mountain's main lodge and walk a quarter-mile to see surprisingly uniform hexagonal 60-foot columns. Two miles farther on, Rainbow Falls tumbles 101 feet over a lava ledge. With luck a rainbow will materialize over the spray.

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



ABOVE: Hot springs are evidence of the volcanic activity that created Hot Creek Gorge. LEFT: Helicopter pilot Ed Roski gives Mammoth Lakes visitors a bird's-eye view of the natural wonders around the California resort.

you 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, take a 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 and fumaroles venting gas from magma churning a few miles 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. If you're 16 or older you'll need a California fishing license. Buy one at the marina 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.

You'll find more lake and mountain views, along with hiking, biking and boating in Mammoth Lakes Basin. Main Street in the town of Mammoth Lakes turns into Lake Mary Road snaking 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 now and then to enjoy the view,

IF YOU GO

Tourist information • Mammoth Lakes Tourism, 1-888-466-2666, visitmammoth.com

Getting there • Mammoth Lakes is about a five-hour drive from Los Angeles, San Francisco or Las Vegas and three hours from Reno. The drive from Reno follows a state-designated Scenic Byway, U.S. Route 395. Alaska Airlines has one flight a day between Los Angeles and the small Mammoth Lakes Yosemite airport, but it cancels when summer fog sets in.

Where to stay • Options include cabins, condos, chalets, bed-and-breakfasts, hotels and resorts, including: The Westin Monache Resort, 1-888-627-8154, westin.com/mammoth and Sierra Nevada Resort & Spa, 1-800-824-5132, thesierranevadaresort.com.

Skytime Helicopter Tours • 1-321-247-8687, skytime.com

Yosemite side trip • Tioga Pass Road, Calif. Route 120, opens in late May or June depending on snowfall. It leads to the east gate of Yosemite National Park, about 45 minutes from Mammoth Lakes. Yosemite Valley and its views of El Capitan and Yosemite Falls lie an additional 90 minutes away, depending on traffic. If you drive, top off your gas tank before departing because service stations are scarce. YART tour buses make the trip daily, 1-877-989-2787, yarts.com.

or hike or bike a five-mile paved path. You can rent bikes in the village, board a 16-bike shuttle for a ride to the top of the path then bike down to town.

Of course, you also can see Mammoth Lakes' surprising collection of natural wonders from the air on one of Roski's helicopter sightseeing tours. As we climb over Mammoth Mountain and dip down to Rainbow Falls, Roski tells me his interest in helicopters began many years ago in college when he became fed up with LA traffic and borrowed against his life insurance policy — of all things — to pay for flying lessons. Back then said he'd land the chopper in the parking lot of a fast-food restaurant and no one thought anything of it.

Now that would be a surprise, even in Mammoth Lakes.



Hot Creek Gorge was formed by a volcanic explosion that created a 20-mile-long caldera eons ago.



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