



Mammoth Fun

Eastern Sierra ski area is
big and beautiful ❄ By Rob Dunton



KERRICK JAMIES

The 360-degree view from Mammoth Mountain's 11,053-foot summit stops me in my tracks—as it has for the past 40 years. My eyes are drawn west to the 17 jagged peaks of the Minarets, part of the Ritter Range in the Ansel Adams Wilderness. When the members of the California Geographical Survey named the peaks in 1868, they described them as “grand pinnacles of granite, very lofty,” according to the book *Place Names of the Sierra Nevada*.

I concur.

The sun is out, and I want to stand here a while and soak up the incomparable view, but I'm on a mission to grab fresh tracks on Climax, a steep-face run high above the timberline. A late-March storm has left a bounty of fresh snow, and I need to move quickly because the high-speed Panorama Gondola is unloading a steady stream of equally zealous skiers behind me.

I walk briskly to the edge of the cornice, strap on my snowboard, catch a quick glimpse of the White Mountains across the Owens Valley, and drop in. Within two turns, I have found a plot of untracked snow. My wide, flat board floats silently on the fresh powder. There are no jolts or bumps from preexisting tracks.

Decades of lessons, stacks of lift tickets and innumerable falls have paved the way for this blissful moment. I reach my hand toward the slope as I lean into the hill, and then turn down the face. My heart pounds from exertion, my breath tightens from the altitude, but I do not stop. The run empties into a wide gully, and I carve long slalom turns back to the Panorama Gondola midstation. In just a few minutes, I have descended 1,700 vertical feet. Panting, I unbuckle my board and hop in line for another run.

Left: Mammoth has excellent terrain for all skill levels. Below: The Mill Cafe at the base of the Stump Alley Express is a popular place to dine and relax.



PEATROSS/MMSA



Mammoth is my home turf, my “local” mountain—which may sound odd, since for 25 years it took me almost seven hours to drive here from San Diego. For 15 years before that, I drove—or before I got my license, was shuttled by Mom and Dad—from Los Angeles, a five-and-a-half-hour journey. Memories flood back from those road trips during my high school days in the ’70s, when I thought I was cooler than Clint Eastwood in my lemon-yellow ski suit with a knitted rainbow collar, and my Vuarnet sunglasses, shoulder-length hair and Sony Walkman playing my favorite Doobie Brothers tape. Looking back, I just

laugh, yet through all the changes in style and technology, from long, 220-centimeter skis and monoskis to parabolics and snowboards, the mountain has remained constant. It has always been worth the journey. And these days the journey is little more than an hour from Los Angeles, thanks to Horizon Air’s new direct service to Mammoth Yosemite Airport. The town of Mammoth Lakes is just 15 minutes from the airport via rental car, taxi or shuttle bus, and from there the Village Gondola can zip skiers to the slopes in less than 10 minutes.

I and other in-the-know winter visitors come to Mammoth Mountain—the loftiest peak at any California resort—to enjoy its 3,500 acres of world-class skiing and snowboarding, with 28 lifts, 150 trails and 3,100 feet of vertical.

With annual average snowfall of 400 inches, Mammoth’s season can run from November to July. I’ve skied the mountain on a July Fourth weekend, and from 2000 to 2007, I also had a tradition of hitting the slopes on Memorial Day weekend. My friends and I would ski until 1 p.m., then horseback ride above nearby June Lake or explore the gold-mine ghost town of Bodie, ending the day with a soak in a local hot spring at dusk.

Above: Mammoth Mountain Inn buildings (both left and right in photo) offer accommodations in a scenic setting. Below: A group of skiers rides Mammoth’s Cloud Nine Express.



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The Panorama Gondola.



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I cut short my reminiscences when the gondola reaches the summit, and this time I launch into Cornice Bowl, where I make my turns through the growing moguls.

Then I head for Main Park, one of the mountain's seven sculpted terrain parks, which together provide 90 acres of fun. High-energy music spills from speakers overhead as members of the predominantly young-male crowd don their snowboards and enter the maze of thrill-inducing features.

Olympic gold medalists such as Shaun White and Kelly Clark have practiced at Mammoth, as have numerous other Olympians, and the ski area is renowned for its superbly crafted terrain parks, which have more than 80 jibs (rails, bars and other nonsnow surfaces), 50 kickers, and three half-pipes that attract novice and professional snowboarders and skiers from around the globe.

These days, I'm strictly an observer. A teen in a baggy earth-tone parka and pants (the antithesis of the form-fitting, electric-yellow outfit of my youth) launches off a jump, rotates in the air and lands—intentionally—on a long metal railing, which he glides down as if it were a waxed banister, before racing toward a two-story jump.

At one of the park's half-pipes, other fearless skiers and boarders fly off an 18-foot-tall lip. In the air, they hang, turn, spin and flip. When gravity finally retrieves them, they elegantly reconnect

with the pipe wall and rocket toward the parallel wall for another launch.

At 10 A.M., I meet up with my brother Jay, who chose to sleep in this morning instead of making fresh-powder runs. We plan to search Mammoth's back bowls for more untracked snow, tucked among the trees above Chair 14.

From the upper ridge, we drop into the vast open bowls and enjoy wide, sweeping turns and stellar vistas. Then we make a beeline for the trees, and head off-piste into the deep stuff.

My senses ratchet up as I navigate a path through the evergreens and my turns go silent in the soft snow. I hear my breath as I brush past pine needles releasing their scent of evergreen. Jay, on his classic 230-centimeter skis, carves his own line through the trees, graceful and assured from his decades on these slopes. Each run, we seek a different path, always in search of fresh tracks—a chance to be first again on a mountain we've skied a hundred times.

As noon approaches, we head to McCoy Station, midmountain, for its expansive selection of food. Outside, sun seekers relax in rows of lounge chairs that skirt the lodge, enjoying one of Mammoth's 300 sunny days a year. The open-air deck of Steeps Bar is also full. Patrons enjoy locally handcrafted beers or the bar's signature Bloody Mary. Famished, we choose from among the food court's fresh stews,



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massive slices of pizza, artisan sandwiches, grill-station dishes, expansive salad bar, and organic baked goods and desserts. We grab a seat at a slope-facing table and take in the vistas of the mountain as we refuel.

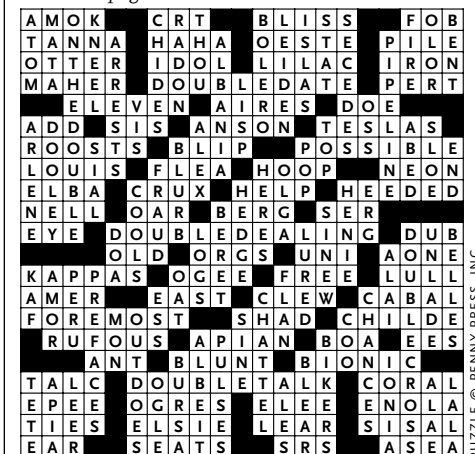
With most of the fresh snow now carved up, Jay and I decide to join one of the mountain's free naturalist tours after lunch. We meet the friendly mountain guide and other interested skiers and boarders at 1:30 at the bottom of Stump Alley, and spend the next 90 minutes traversing the mountain, learning about the area's unique mining history and volcanic background. The pumice stones visible in certain areas during the winter, and all over the mountain when the snow is gone, were blown here by a series of eruptions—dating as far back as 760,000 years ago and as recently as 50,000 years ago—that formed a caldera bordering Mammoth Mountain.

As we explore a number of the mountain's varied beginner and intermediate slopes, we also learn how to distinguish many of the local trees: mountain hemlock, Jeffrey pines, western white pines, and Douglas and red firs.

The tour is an example of the many activities available on the mountain and in the Mammoth Lakes region. Speed lovers can take guided and unguided snowmobile trips. Those who prefer canine power to horsepower can escape into the mountains on a dogsled. Trekkers can hike to the local hot springs for a soak near the fish hatchery, or enjoy 19 miles of sensational Nordic skiing and snowshoeing trails around Tamarack Lodge.

Prefer something more relaxed? You can take pleasure in a good meal, a massage and some retail therapy in the town of Mammoth Lakes, which is chock-full of locally owned restaurants, spas, galleries,

Puzzle on page 48.



PUZZLE © PENNY PRESS, INC.



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ski and mountaineering stores, and high-end shops selling brands such as Polo Ralph Lauren and Coach.

When our tour is finished, Jay and I head to Chair 22—which almost never has a line—for a few more turns on steep, challenging, wind-sheltered runs such as the Avalanche Chutes. Mammoth also has plenty of beginner terrain (25 percent) and intermediate terrain (40 percent), making it family-friendly and all-ski-levels-friendly. Beginners can choose flat and easy terrain off the Discover Chair or more challenging beginner terrain off Chair 7.

As the lifts begin to close around 4 p.m., we make our way back to the Main Lodge, unbuckle our equipment, walk past the life-size bronze woolly mammoth and

Details

For more information on the Mammoth Mountain Ski Area, including current snow conditions, lodgings, restaurants and activities, go to www.mammothmountain.com.

For more information on Mammoth Lakes and the surrounding region, go to www.visitmammoth.com.

Ground transfers from Mammoth Yosemite Airport, just 15 minutes from Mammoth Lakes, are complimentary for guests staying in Mammoth Mountain's Lodging Properties (Mammoth Mountain Inn, The Village Lodge, Juniper Springs Resort and Tamarack Lodge) and a few other local hotels. Cabs run about \$30 to town/\$45 to the Main Lodge. Car rental is also available at the airport.

Free buses run throughout Mammoth Lakes and to base chairlifts year-round, delivering you to great mountain-biking trails in summer as well as to the great ski runs in winter. Golfing, hiking, fishing and horseback riding are other popular nonwinter activities, and the eastern entrance to Yosemite National Park is only about 20 miles to the north, over Tioga Pass (open only in summer). The Yosemite Area Rapid Transit System even provides a seasonal shuttle from Mammoth to the park.

If you want to travel to the local hot springs, Bodie, June Lake, June Mountain or Mono Lake, you will want to rent a car. Four-wheel drive and/or chains are highly recommended (and often required) in winter. —R.D.


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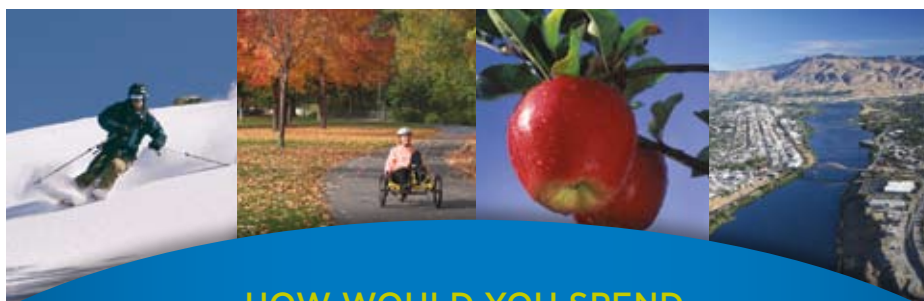


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enter the Yodler Bar & Restaurant, a cozy après-ski pub that local legend says was imported piece by piece from Switzerland. The place is packed. We luck out as a couple deserts two coveted seats by the stone fireplace, and I order a Baileys and hot chocolate while Jay tries a pint of Mammoth Brewing Company's Double Nut Brown. We split a plate of fish tacos to hold us until dinner.

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I remember chatting with Skadi's chef and owner, Ian Algerøen, on a chairlift a few years back, and always wanted to give his place a try. We call in a 9 p.m. reservation, then cross the parking lot to the Mammoth Mountain Inn to clean up for a trip into town.

Refreshed, we drive four miles down the mountain to Mammoth Lakes to explore the vibrant new Village, with its compact pedestrian area, market, bars and restaurants, then visit a number of Mammoth's established outfitters in search of spring gear deals.

As 9 o'clock approaches, we drive about a mile to Skadi and enter its intimate space. Sixteen candlelit tables sit beneath a vaulted ceiling. Broad windows offer a

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stunning view of Mammoth's snowcapped dome, glimmering beneath the full moon while the headlights of snowcat groomers move up and down the slopes. On the walls hang a variety of skis from the 1940s to the 1960s—all a fitting tribute to Skadi, the Viking goddess of winter and skiing.

I start with the grilled-venison sausage on a corn pancake, topped with a Maine-wild-blueberry-and-vodka compote. Jay tries the Salad Monaco, a stacked salad of roasted peppers, avocados, tomatoes, cucumber, basil and couscous drizzled with essence of balsamic. Both present an elegant balance of flavor and texture.

For my second course, I try the recommended maple-leaf-roasted duck with lingonberries, while Jay indulges in marinated medallions of venison, raised on the restaurant-owned Walking Beam Ranch in Santa Paula, California.

"What are you up for tomorrow?" I ask Jay as he carves into his aromatic venison. "Shall we ski Mammoth again, or try dogsledding? There's cross-country skiing at Tamarack, or we could head just down the road to June Mountain [which is also owned by the Mammoth Mountain Ski Area]. It's always quiet over there, so they probably still have a lot of untracked powder in their trees."

"What I think we need to do is book a week next year, not a weekend," responds Jay with a broad grin. "As for tomorrow—there's so much of Mammoth Mountain we didn't touch today, I vote for skiing here again. We can do the others next year, when we come for a week."

I smile as the planning for next year's trip automatically begins in my head, to my local mountain: Mammoth. ■

Rob Dunton is a freelance adventure-travel writer residing in Southern California. He thanks his mother and father for getting him on skis at an early age, though something warmer than blue jeans lined with garbage bags would have made his first experience a slightly more pleasant one.

Horizon Air (800-547-9308, www.horizonair.com) flies daily to Mammoth Lakes, gateway to Mammoth Mountain and other area attractions. The airline is offering expanded service this season, with a second daily nonstop from Los Angeles, new daily nonstop service from San Jose and Reno, and direct (same-plane, one-stop) service from Seattle and Portland, all December 17–April 11. For a getaway package to Mammoth, call 877-359-4674 or visit www.horizonairgetaways.com.

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MONTANA

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OREGON

Mt. Bachelor Lifts: 10. Skiable terrain: 3,683 acres—15% beginner; 25% intermediate; 60% advanced/expert. Vertical rise: 3,365 feet. Trails: 71. 800-829-2442; www.mtbachelor.com.

Mt. Hood Meadows Ski Resort Lifts: 11. Skiable terrain: 2,150 acres—15% beginner; 50% intermediate; 35% advanced/expert. Vertical rise: 2,777 feet. Trails: 75+. 800-754-4663; www.skihood.com.

Mt. Hood Skibowl Lifts: 9. Skiable terrain: 960 acres—20% beginner; 40% intermediate; 40% advanced/expert. Vertical rise: 1,500 feet. Trails: 65. 503-222-2695; www.skibowl.com.

Timberline Lodge Lifts: 7. Skiable terrain: 1,650 acres—25% beginner; 50% intermediate; 25% advanced/expert. Vertical rise: 3,690 feet. Trails: 41. 503-272-3311; www.timberlinelodge.com.

WASHINGTON

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Mt. Spokane Ski & Snowboard Park Lifts: 5. Skiable terrain: 1,425 acres—23% beginner; 45% intermediate; 32% advanced/expert. Vertical rise: 2,000 feet. Trails: 45. 509-238-2220; www.mtspokane.com.

North Cascade Heli-Skiing 800-494-HELL; www.heli-ski.com.

Stevens Pass Winter Resort Lifts: 10. Skiable terrain: 1,125 acres—11% beginner; 54% intermediate; 35% advanced/expert. Vertical rise: 1,800 feet. Trails: 37. 206-812-4510; www.stevenspass.com.

The Summit at Snoqualmie Lifts: 19. Skiable terrain: 1,916 acres—14% beginner; 45% intermediate; 41% advanced/expert. Vertical rise: 2,280 feet. Trails: 96. 425-434-7669; www.summitatsnoqualmie.com.

Southwest

ARIZONA/CALIFORNIA/NEVADA

Arizona Snowbowl Lifts: 4. Skiable terrain: 777 acres—21% beginner; 41% intermediate; 38% advanced/expert. Vertical rise: 2,300 feet. Trails: 32. 928-779-1951; www.arizonasnowbowl.com.

Heavenly Mountain Resort Lifts: 19. Skiable terrain: 4,800 acres—20% beginner; 45% intermediate; 35% advanced/expert. Vertical rise: 3,500 feet. Trails: 95. 775-586-7000; www.skiheavenly.com.

Mammoth Mountain Lifts: 28. Skiable terrain: 3,500 acres—25% beginner; 40% intermediate; 35% advanced/expert. Vertical rise: 3,100 feet. Trails: 150. 800-626-6684; www.mammothmountain.com.

Northstar-at-Tahoe Lifts: 12. Skiable terrain: 3,000 acres—13% beginner; 60% intermediate; 27% advanced/expert. Vertical rise: 2,280 feet. Trails: 91. 800-466-6784; www.northstaratahove.com.

Squaw Valley USA Lifts: 33. Skiable terrain: 4,000 acres—25% beginner; 45% intermediate; 30% advanced/expert. Vertical rise: 2,850 feet. Trails: 170+. 866-366-7261; www.squaw.com.

Yosemite's Badger Pass Ski Area Lifts: 4. Skiable terrain: 88 acres—35% beginner; 50% intermediate; 15% advanced/expert. Vertical rise: 800 feet. Trails: 10. 209-372-8430; www.badgerpass.com.

Western Canada

ALBERTA

The Lake Louise Ski Area Lifts: 9. Skiable terrain: 4,200 acres—25% beginner; 45% intermediate; 30% advanced/expert. Vertical rise: 3,250 feet. Trails: 139. 877-956-8473; www.skilouise.com.

Marmot Basin Lifts: 8. Skiable terrain: 1,675 acres—30% beginner; 30% intermediate; 40% advanced/expert. Vertical rise: 3,000 feet. Trails: 86. 866-952-3816; www.skimarmot.com.

Resorts of the Canadian Rockies (Fernie, Kimberley, Nakiska). Varying lifts, terrain and skill levels. 800-258-7669; www.skircr.com.

Ski Norquay Lifts: 5. Skiable terrain: 190 acres—20% beginner; 36% intermediate; 44% advanced/expert. Vertical rise: 1,650 feet. Trails: 28. 403-762-4421; www.banff-norquay.com.

Sunshine Village Ski and Snowboard Resort Lifts: 12. Skiable terrain: 3,358 acres—20% beginner; 55% intermediate; 25% advanced/expert. Vertical rise: 3,514 feet. Trails: 107. 877-542-2633; www.skibanff.com.

BRITISH COLUMBIA

Apex Mountain Resort Lifts: 4. Skiable terrain: 1,112 acres—16% beginner; 48% intermediate; 36% advanced/expert. Vertical rise: 2,000 feet. Trails: 67. 877-777-2739; www.apexresort.com.

Big White Ski Resort Lifts: 16. Skiable terrain: 2,765 acres—18% beginner; 54% intermediate; 28% advanced/expert. Vertical rise: 2,550 feet. Trails: 118. 800-663-2772; www.bigwhite.com.

Kootenay Rockies Resorts/Operators (Baldface Lodge, Big Red Cats, Canadian Mountain Holidays, Chatter Creek Snowcat, Eagle Pass Heliskiing, Fairmont Hot Springs Resort, Fernie Alpine Resort, Fernie Wilderness Adventures, Great Canadian Heli-Skiing, Highland Powder Skiing, Island Lake Lodge Catskiing, Kicking Horse Mountain Resort, Kimberley Alpine Resort, Mica Heliskiing, Monashee Powder Snowcats, Mustang Powder Lodge, Panorama Mountain Village, Powder Cowboy Catskiing, Purcell Helicopter Skiing, Red Mountain Resort, Retallack Resort and Alpine Adventures, Revelstoke Catskiing, Revelstoke Mountain Resort, RK Heliski, Selkirk Tangiers Heli-Skiing, Selkirk Wilderness Skiing, Snowwater Heli & Cat Skiing, Stellar Heli Skiing, Valhalla Powdercats, White Grizzly Adventures, Whitewater Winter Resort). Varying lifts, terrain and skill levels. 800-661-6603; www.powderhighway.com.

Red Mountain Resort Lifts: 4. Skiable terrain: 1,685 acres—15% beginner; 40% intermediate; 45% advanced/expert. Vertical rise: 2,919 feet. Trails: 88. 800-663-0105; www.redresort.com.

Silver Star Mountain Resort Lifts: 8. Skiable terrain: 3,065 acres—20% beginner; 50% intermediate; 30% advanced/expert. Vertical rise: 2,500 feet. Trails: 112. 800-663-4431; www.skisilverstar.com.

Sun Peaks Resort Lifts: 11. Skiable terrain: 3,678 acres—10% beginner; 58% intermediate; 32% advanced/expert. Vertical rise: 2,891 feet. Trails: 122. 800-807-3257; www.sunpeaksresort.com.

Whistler Blackcomb Lifts: 38. Skiable terrain: 8,171 acres—18% beginner; 55% intermediate; 27% advanced/expert. Vertical rise: 5,280 feet. Trails: 200+. 800-766-0449; www.whistlerblackcomb.com.