



Sierra Nevada

With fierce granite mountains standing watch over high-altitude lakes, the eastern spine of California throws up an exquisite topographical barrier from north to south. When the Sierra Nevada and White Mountain ranges finally drop back down to earth at the basin of Nevada and Death Valley, almost a dozen peaks have topped out over 14,000ft.

An outdoor adventurer's wonderland, the region's a year-round pageant of snow sports, white-water rafting, hiking, biking, backpacking and rock climbing. Skiers and snow boarders explore the hushed pine-tree slopes and suicidal chutes hovering over the glittering blue expanse of Lake Tahoe, or stop to catch their breath as they ascend the southern giant of Mammoth Mountain.

In the majestic national parks of Yosemite and Sequoia and Kings Canyon, visitors will be humbled by the enduring groves of solemn giant sequoias, the ancient rock formations and valleys, and the omnipresent opportunity to see bears and other wildlife.

At the close of the day, you can sooth your soul in a piece of hot-springs heaven, or by the fire of a woodsy 19th-century lodge. Though not a particularly cosmopolitan section of the state, here you'll find plenty of excellent food and entertainment options, especially in South Lake Tahoe, Mammoth Lakes and nearby Reno.

History unfolds here at varying rates of speed: the timelessness of the physical landscape; the presence of its first people, Native American tribes who still call it home; the decomposing ghost towns left behind by California's early white settlers and miners. And now you. Tread lightly.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Wettest eyeeful** Marvel at the springtime waterfall gush at Yosemite National Park (p376).
- **Top stroll to feel small** Gaze heavenward through the celestial sequoia canopies of Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks (p391).
- **Most exhilarating downtown transport** Run the rapids at Reno's Truckee River Whitewater Park (p373) by kayak.
- **Most dazzling blue views** Survey the shimmering expanse of blue Lake Tahoe from atop its many ski resorts (opposite).
- **Best Wild West backdrop** Amble around the evocative ghost town of Bodie (p402).



LAKE TAHOE

Shimmering softly in myriad shades of blue and green, Lake Tahoe, which straddles the California–Nevada state line, is one of the most beautiful lakes in the USA and also its second deepest with an average depth of 1000ft. The largest alpine lake in North America, and at 6225ft, it is one of the highest lakes in the country; driving around the lakeshore's 72 miles would give you quite a workout behind the wheel, but also reward you with spellbinding scenery. Generally speaking, the north shore is quiet and upscale, the west shore rugged and old-timey, the east shore undeveloped, and the south shore busy and a tad tacky with aging motels and gaudy casinos.

The sun shines on Tahoe three out of four days in the year, making it ideal for outdoor pursuits of all stripes. Swimming, boating, kayaking, windsurfing and other water-based activities are all popular, as are hiking and camping among the horned peaks around the lake. Winter brings bundles of snow, perfect for hitting the slopes at more than a dozen ski resorts.

Unfortunately, the news isn't all good: the lake is gradually losing its famous clarity. Development, erosion, runoff and air pollution reduce visibility by about 1.5ft every year. Steps are underway to stop this decline, but the challenge is enormous and the future remains murky.

TAHOE SKI AREAS

Lake Tahoe has phenomenal skiing, with thousands of acres of the white stuff beckoning at more than a dozen resorts. These complexes range from the giant, jet-set slopes of Squaw Valley and Heavenly to no less enticing insider playgrounds like Sugar Bowl

and Homewood. Tahoe's simply got a hill for everybody, kids to kamikazes. Ski season generally runs November to April, although it can start as early as October with the last storm whipping through in June.

All resorts have ski schools, equipment rental and other facilities as well; check their websites for snow conditions and weather reports. Many also operate shuttle buses.

Information

Between late fall and early spring, bring snow chains in case a storm rolls in.

California Department of Transportation (Caltrans; ☎ 800-427-7623; www.dot.ca.gov) California road conditions.

Nevada Department of Transportation (NDOT; ☎ 877-687-6237, 511 within Nevada; www.nevadadot.com/traveler/roads) Nevada road conditions.

Sliding on the Cheap (www.slidingonthecheap.com) Personal website listing discounts and bargains on Tahoe lift tickets.

Ski Lake Tahoe (www.skilaketahoe.com) Portal for the seven big resorts, with deals covering all.

Activities

DOWNHILL SKIING & SNOWBOARDING Truckee & Donner Summit

Sugar Bowl (☎ 530-426-9000; www.sugarbowl.com; Soda Springs/Norden exit off I-80; adult/teen \$60/50; ☎ 9am-4pm) Cofounded by Walt Disney in 1939, this is one of the oldest ski resorts in the Sierra and a miniature Squaw Valley in terms of variety of terrain, including plenty of exhilarating gullies and chutes. Views are stellar on sunny days, but conditions go downhill pretty quickly, so to speak, during stormy weather. Stats: 12 lifts, 1500 vertical feet, 84 runs. Three miles east of I-80.

Northstar-at-Tahoe (☎ 530-562-1010, 800-466-6784; www.northstarattahoe.com; Hwy 267; adult/child/teen \$74/28/64; ☎ 8:30am-4pm) An easy 6 miles south of I-80, this hugely popular resort has great intermediate terrain, although advanced and expert skiers can look for challenges on the back of the mountain. Continuing additions to the slick Village Plaza are making it look a lot more like amenity-rich Squaw. Its relatively sheltered location makes it the second-best choice after Homewood (p353) when it's snowing. Weekends get superbusy. Stats: 17 lifts, 2280 vertical feet, 83 runs.

Boreal (☎ 530-426-3666; www.borealski.com; Boreal/Castle off I-80; adult/child day \$44/12, night \$25/12; ☎ 9am-9pm) Boreal is fun for newbies and

FAST FACTS

Population of Reno 205,300

Average temperature low/high in Reno
Jan 20/45°F, Jul 48/88°F

Reno to Truckee 35 miles, 30 minutes

Truckee to San Francisco 185 miles, three to four hours

Truckee to South Lake Tahoe/Stataline, NV 40 miles, 1¼ hours

Reno to Las Vegas 450 miles, eight hours