

no chains required //

Mammoth's *amazing winter playground* opens up to the Bay Area.



by **SERENA RENNER**



Mammoth Mountain may be just on the other side of Yosemite, but it's long been inaccessible to Bay Area skiers, unless they were up for a seven-hour, blizzard-threatened road trek. Fortunately, new Horizon Air flights from San Jose are helping NorCal types bypass the usual barriers. Forty minutes after takeoff—before you can finish your free glass of McMinnville Pinot Gris—you're in the snow-capped serenity at the foot of chunky 11,053-foot Mammoth.

IF HE BUILDS IT, THEY WILL COME

Mammoth ski resort founder Dave McCoy was inspired by the enormous mountain as he rode his Harley up Highway 395 from Los Angeles in the 1930s. While surveying snow pack for the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, McCoy learned that Mammoth consistently had more snow than its surrounding peaks. He began leading skiers up the mountain on rope tows that he powered with the wheel of a surplus army tank. At times, hundreds waited in those first lift lines, and since McCoy hated to ask for money, his wife, Roma, walked around with a fishing creel to get donations for gas.

"All of a sudden, Dave realized skiing was a business," McCoy's longtime friend and Mammoth CEO, Rusty Gregory, remembers. "It's always been a very unpretentious, inclusive place."



Tamarack Lodge



Village at Mammoth

Still, the ski area has come a long way from its humble beginnings. With 28 lifts, three surface lifts, and three high-speed gondolas, Mammoth is the third most popular ski resort in the country. The main lodge, which started as a 252-square-foot room with little more than a Coleman stove for cooking hot dogs, now fills 120,000 square feet. Nearby, Mammoth Mountain Inn and the Yodler pub, both more than 50 years old, give a taste of the old days. (A cozy spot at the Yodler's outdoor fire pit is a good place to get acquainted with the mountain while you meet the regulars and sample Mammoth Brewing Company ales.)

For those in search of more glamour, the Village at Mammoth boasts a Swiss Alps-style atmosphere that's growing in fine dining, upscale accommodations, and bustling nightlife: Club-hoppers can stay out late at the überhip new Hyde Lounge (modeled after its West Hollywood sister); couples share sushi and Kurobuta pork at the Westin's classy

TOP TO BOTTOM: COURTESY OF MAMMOTH LAKES TOURISM; COURTESY OF MAMMOTH MOUNTAIN SKI AREA



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Whitebark Restaurant; and thirtysome-things sip island-style cocktails and scarf teriyaki burgers at Lakanuki.

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA-STYLE RIDING

Underneath the glitz, Mammoth is a true skier's mountain. More snow fell here last December than at any other ski resort in the world. The mountain has something for everyone: impeccably groomed beginner terrain at the bottom; varied intermediate runs in the middle; and single- and double-black diamond chutes and drops above tree line, with intimidating names such as Hangman's Hollow and Huevos Grande. And Mammoth's laid-back culture, influenced by Southern California surfing and skateboarding, gives the mountain a unique vibe.

You might hear surf music and reggae riffs while waiting in line for chair nine,



The mountain always seems to be on the pulse of what's new and adventurous.”

but when the wind starts whipping and larger-than-life craggy peaks come into view from all angles, your senses remind you that you're not at the beach. For a long hilly run through the trees, start down Solitude, then hang a right onto Quicksilver, and enjoy snow that still feels fresh after a month of sunshine.

The center and lower parts of the mountain are dominated by parks and freestyle terrain, regularly rated top 10 by *Transworld Snowboarding*. Boarders bust air off half-pipes, grind down muraled rails in the new Art Park, and eat gigantic burritos from an on-mountain food truck. Mammoth also keeps experimenting with new sports, such as ski cross (think motocross on skis). Homegrown racer John Teller became the first American to snatch the Ski Cross World Cup last January, and in early winter, he can be found riding

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the Panorama gondola to the mountain's summit first thing in the morning to ski Climax and Cornice Bowl.

"[The mountain] always seems to be on the pulse of what's new and adventurous around the world," Teller says.

GATEWAY TO THE SIERRA

Beyond deep powder and vertical feet, Mammoth is a great place to get lost in the woods. The town of Mammoth Lakes is only four square miles, and it's surrounded by the endless Sierra wilderness that inspired Ansel Adams and John Muir. A great way to explore the area is by cross-country skis out of Tamarack Lodge. Nineteen miles of trails, groomed daily, take you through frosty stands of pine to glassed-over lakes, quite possibly without your seeing another skier the whole way.

"You spread out and get that feeling of being out there on your own with this amazing backdrop of lakes and dramatic views," says former Olympian Nancy Fiddler, who ran the Tamarack cross-country ski school for 11 years.

After returning your skis to the center's friendly yurt, enjoy hot cider or a glass of



Opus One wine in Tamarack's cozy lodge, where you'll feel time stand still, while people read and play board games by the fireplace, as they have since the 1920s. Tamarack offers rooms in the lodge as well as 35 private cabins and an intimate lake-front restaurant, where Mammoth's best food—including fresh seafood from around the world and locally grown produce—is served in a homey dining room.

Getting off the plane at home, it's hard to believe that this wild wonderland, with California's tallest ski mountain, is less than an hour away. ■

ADDRESS BOOK

Hyde Lounge 1601 Minaret Rd., (760) 934-0669, mammothmountain.com. / **Lakanuki** 6201 Minaret Rd., Ste. 200, (760) 934-7447, lakanuki.com. / **Mammoth Mountain Inn** 1 Minaret Rd., (800) 636-6684, mammothmountain.com. / **Tamarack Lodge and Resort** 163 Twin Lakes Rd., (760) 934-2442, tamaracklodge.com. / **Whitebark Restaurant, Bar and Lounge** 50 Hillside Dr., (760) 934-0460, westinmammoth.com. / **Yodler Restaurant and Bar**, 1 Minaret Rd., (760) 934-0636, mammothmountain.com; all addresses in Mammoth Lakes.

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