

Vacations & travel

The real McCoy - Mammoth!

By Arnie Wilson

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From hot springs to world-class skiing and snowboarding, Mammoth oozes California cool.



As its name suggests, Mammoth Mountain is a large, wild, hulking whale of a dormant volcano (hot vents included) – which has the highest skiable terrain in California. There’s even a fault-line running through the area: the nearby town of Mammoth Lakes lies on the edge of the Long Valley caldera, and the area around the town is geologically active, complete with hot springs – the best known of which has the bizarre name of Wild Willy’s. Located about 15km from town, it’s free. And wild!

Mammoth Lakes and its nearby ski area are near Yosemite National Park on the edge of the desert in California’s Eastern Sierra. Although when compared with some major resorts in the Alps it may not quite be “Giant! Spacious! Huge! Immense! Enormous!” and “Colossal” as the resort once boasted (these days they have a mellower message: “ski hard, après, sleep, rinse and repeat!”) the ski area does indeed have more than 150 trails spread across four different areas and a six mile “footprint”. But that’s not the reason for its name.

Since there are no fossilised prehistoric tusks lurking beneath the slopes, no one really knows for sure where the ‘Mammoth’ moniker comes from. But it’s more than likely that it’s derived from the Mammoth Mining Company’s presence at Mineral Hill, which prompted a gold rush in Mono County.

By the end of 1878, 1500 people had settled in a mining camp called Mammoth City. But within two years, the company had shut down, and by 1888, the population had dwindled to fewer than 10 people.

And yet somehow, by the early 1900s, thanks to logging and tourism, the town of Mammoth was informally established near Mammoth Creek. It wasn't until a few die-hard skiers brought portable skiing rope-tows into the mountains – powered by Model A Ford trucks – that a different kind of rush began. Some arrived on motorbikes, skis strapped on the back of them. One such pioneer, now approaching his 100th birthday this August, was Dave McCoy, a one-time Californian State ski champion. In 1928, his mother took him to visit friends in Independence, a tiny village with spectacular views of the Sierra Nevada mountains. "I'd never seen anything like it" he would say later. "I loved the snow: I started dreaming about it. I said, 'This is where I am going to spend my life'."



In 1945, McCoy, by now a snow-surveyor with the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, and a member of the Eastern Sierra Ski Club, obtained the rights from the Forest Service to build a permanent rope tow on Mammoth Mountain. To finance this he even sold his beloved Harley-Davidson. Initially, he said, he wasn't thinking about business. "I did it because it was fun." And a decade later, he personally installed the first chairlift.

Although he sold the resort in 2005, he's still very much a 'local' – Dave's Run is named after him as is McCoy Station at the mid-mountain junction of the two stage Panorama gondola.

With its dramatic trademark backdrop of the jagged Minarets towering above the nearby forested valleys, some said the mountain, which tops out at 3370 metres, was too high, too remote and too

stormy to succeed as a ski resort. Needless to say, McCoy was determined to prove everyone wrong. "They said all those bad things" he said "but they all forgot to look around and see how much fun we were having."

Of course, like any other mountain, it can and does get storms. But then how else would it get its generous amounts of snow – sufficient for it to remain open, almost every year, until well into May, and sometimes even later.

A storm wafting in from the Pacific has been known to deposit a metre and a half of snow in the Sierras in one night. Mammoth's "second season" – from late spring onwards – is normally highlighted by magnificent corn-snow: a thin, easily skiable soft layer on top of frozen snow. And a cheaper lift ticket. The ski area lures thousands of weekend skiers from Los Angeles and Orange County, even though it means a five-hour drive. So the slopes can get crowded at weekends – in contrast to weekdays when queuing is rare.

The journey to Mammoth, whether by air or by road, is spectacular. Mammoth is about three hours driving from Reno, Nevada, but the most spectacular approach is the drive from Los Angeles through the beautiful Mojave Desert, passing Edwards Airforce base, and skirting Death Valley. For long stretches, with a splendid backdrop of arid desert and mountain scenery, it may feel as though you're alone. But don't be tempted to put your foot down: the road is renowned for drivers picking up speeding tickets! Flying is an option too. The ski area is five miles from Mammoth/Yosemite Airport, with a free shuttle service for passengers flying into town.

Mammoth, with 945 vertical metres of slopes and more than 1416 skiable hectares served by 28 lifts, is now the official training ground of the US Olympic snow teams. And although there are numerous testing chutes and steeps, including favourites like Avalanche Chutes, Wipe Out and Paranoids, Mammoth has extensive terrain for every grade of skier and boarder, with plenty of feel-good cruising runs like St. Anton, Broadway and Forest Trail.



Since snowboarding originated from Californian surfing, it's appropriate that Mammoth was one of the first American resorts to encourage ocean surfers to come out of the water and move onto the land – from the surfing beaches near Los Angeles to the snow-surfing slopes of the Sierras. There are seven parks and three pipes, including an Olympic-sized superpipe. The Unbound Terrain Parks comprise more than 28 hectares dedicated to 40 rails and boxes. There's a Wall Ride, 50 jumps and a world-class system of pipes. There are also two Family Fun Zones at Discovery and Canyon, along with South Park's Jibs Galore. Unbound Playgrounds – small parks geared towards beginners – can be found at each base lodge.

For many years, the town of Mammoth Lakes, perched at 2,400 metres, was the principal lodging base, but about nine years ago, the Village at Mammoth, a major new pedestrian resort development sprang up at Juniper Ridge, complete with a gondola link direct to the mountain. The 15-passenger lift transports guests from the Village to Canyon Lodge in five minutes, eliminating the need for cars at the ski area.

Mammoth Mountain's four main hotels are the Village Lodge, Juniper Springs Lodge, Mammoth Mountain Inn and Tamarack Lodge. Between them, the Village and the Old Mammoth Road boast more than 50 bars and restaurants, plus shops and various lodging properties. Among the most popular is the Campo Mammoth restaurant in the Village (for Italian food). Nearby, the brand new 53 Kitchen & Cocktails offers a fun twist on comfort food. The Stove in Mammoth Lakes has "the best French toast anywhere!". Mammoth Rock 'n' Bowl (a bowling alley with restaurant), which opened in town just last winter, has already proved a big hit with families. Also in town, the Mammoth Brewing Company is a popular après haunt, as is Lakanuki (fun place for drinks, serves local beer).

For a very different après experience, you could check out the Tufa Towers at the impressive Mono Lake about 30 minutes away. These bizarre limestone formations – most prolific at the South Tufa grove just off Highway 120 East, at the south end of Mono Lake – have nothing to do with tofu, although apparently a few first-time visitors, unfamiliar with the geologic term 'tufa' have been known to ask directions to the 'tofu'. The towers are formed when underwater springs rich in calcium mix with lake water that's rich in carbonates. As the calcium comes into contact with the carbonates, it forms calcium carbonate, which gradually forms a tufa tower under water. They're so visible above the waterline today because the lake level fell dramatically after water diversions began in 1941.

Be it Tufa or tofu; Wild Willy's; and a brooding, dormant volcano which now and then releases just a tiny hint of sulphur fumes – add magnificent skiing and Californian sunshine – and you have a ski vacation you won't forget in a hurry! •

Photography by Mammoth



TRAVEL FACTS

Getting There

Qantas, Delta, United and Virgin Australia fly into LAX. Mammoth is a five-hour drive from Los Angeles or Las Vegas and a 60-minute flight from LAX. Alaskan Airlines and United both operate flights. United flies from SFO to Mammoth during winter.

qantas.com.au; delta.com; united.com; virginaustralia.com; alaskaair.com

Transfers from the airport to town can be arranged through the Mammoth All Weather Shuttle, who also offer sightseeing tours. mawshuttle.com

Where to Stay

Westin Monache Resort has beautiful apartments along with a great location. westinmammoth.com

Where to Eat

Mammoth Village

The Campo Mammoth restaurant and 53 Kitchen & Cocktails (suite 153) are both in the heart of The Village at Mammoth.

- Campo: +1-760/934-0669; campomammoth.com
- 53 Kitchen & Cocktails: +1-760/934-0707; 53mammoth.com

Town of Mammoth Lakes

- The Stove restaurant: 644 Old Mammoth Road; +1-760/934-2821; thestoverestaurantmammoth.com
- Mammoth Rock 'n' Bowl: 3029 Chateau Road; +1-760/934-4200; mammothrocknbowl.com

When to Drink

- Mammoth Brewing Company: +1-760/934-7141; mammothbrewingco.com
- Lakanuki: +1-760/934-7447; lakanuki.net

Further Information

- Mammoth Mountain: mammothmountain.com
- Mammoth Lakes: visitmammoth.com
- Black Tie Rentals deliver all your ski hire gear to your accommodation: blacktieskis.com
- Mogul Ski World: 1800-335-724; mogulski.com.au
- Discover America: discoveramerica.com