

## Chapter 15

# Lake Tahoe

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Deciding when to visit, where to go, and how long to stay
  - ▶ Finding the perfect places to dine and dream
  - ▶ Getting active on shore — and out on the water — in any season
  - ▶ Mixing it up with lady luck at the casinos
  - ▶ Stepping back in time with a side trip to the Gold Country
  - ▶ Making a fast getaway to Sacramento — California’s capital city
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**I**f you’re looking for the Golden State’s biggest and best playground, look no further — you’ve found it. When we Californians — who have more than our fair share of beautiful places to visit — want to get outside and ski, snowmobile, boat, hike, mountain bike, ride horseback, fish, kayak, or jet ski (the list goes on), we go to Tahoe.

Lake Tahoe isn’t just any old hole in the ground; it’s one of the more spectacular bodies of water in the world, and definitely one of the most beautiful that we’ve ever seen. Tahoe is the largest alpine lake in North America — 22 miles long and 12 miles wide, with a surface area of nearly 192 square miles, which means it can hold about a half-dozen Manhattans (the *borough*, darling, not the cocktail).

To refer to it as “sparkling” barely does this crystalline lake justice. Science even has an explanation for it: The water is 99.9 percent pure, about the same purity as distilled water. It’s so clear that a white dinner plate resting 75 feet below the surface would be visible to the naked eye. What’s more, Lake Tahoe is the eighth-deepest lake in the world; it holds so much water that, if you tipped it on its side, the contents would flood the entire state of California to a depth of 14 inches.

Evergreens and snowy peaks rising from the shoreline make the lake look that much deeper, broader, and majestic. But don’t just take our word for it; listen to Mark Twain, who described Lake Tahoe as “. . . the beautiful relic of fairy-land forgotten. . . .” While Tahoe certainly isn’t forgotten anymore, Twain’s flight of fancy continues to hold true.

## Timing Your Visit

When's the best time to visit? Simple: Come in winter if cross-country or alpine skiing is your game. This is also the time, at least during the week, when you'll have Tahoe to yourself. Otherwise, come in summer. Or try autumn, the secret season in Tahoe. The colors are beautiful, the air is crisp, activities abound, and hotel rates are low, low, low. Skip yucky spring altogether. The snowmelt turns the terrain into mud.

Even in summer, prepare yourself for cool weather. In July, average highs don't hit the 80s, and evenings can dip well below 50°F. And because the upper 12 feet of the lake warms only to about 68°F, don't expect to splash around in your floaties. Chances are, it'll be all you can do to dip your toes in.



Tahoe is a favorite weekend getaway among San Franciscans, so you'll always save money — and, even more important, avoid the crowds — by scheduling your stay for Monday through Thursday.

A three-night stay in Tahoe will give you plenty of time to fully explore the area and play. If you cut your stay back to two, you risk spending too much time in the car (getting there and leaving), and not enough time in Tahoe. Budget four nights if you want to experience both shores. For more on this topic, check out the following section.

## Choosing between Two Shores

The 30-mile drive between Lake Tahoe's north and south shores can become a two-hour bumper-to-bumper (or snowstorm-y) nightmare in the high seasons, so choose your shore carefully. Both boast first-rate skiing, good restaurants, lake views, and plenty of on-the-water fun — but that's pretty much where the similarities end.

**South Lake Tahoe** is more developed and generally cheaper; more hotels mean more competition, so you'll get better accommodations for your money. The big Nevada casinos are at hand (in town for all intents and purposes), so this is the shore for nightlife. Getting out on the water is easier from the south shore, too, because it boasts more marinas, more outfitters, plus some excellent shoreline state parks not far from town.

If Mark Twain could wax poetic about today's Tahoe, he'd write about the north shore. **North Lake Tahoe** is much, much prettier than its southern shore. It's more remote and country-like, with a variety of ski resorts and first-class accommodations — but you can still find slot machines close by if you feel the urge. **Squaw Valley**, six miles from the lakeshore, is one of the best outdoor recreation centers ever, poised to become a one-stop destination, with its alpine-style village. **Tahoe City** is not as commercially spoiled as South Lake Tahoe, but it's way too crowded for its own good in the high seasons. And if affordability is a concern, you won't get as much value for your dollar here.

While we prefer the north shore, skiers find either one convenient. Our best advice: Avoid the weekends and *never* drive to Tahoe on a Friday afternoon unless you want to sit in traffic on a two-lane highway with no escape. On weekdays, you'll also have an opportunity to enjoy the wonderful drive along Highway 89 at an easy pace so that you can investigate both shores for yourself.

## Getting There

Lake Tahoe straddles the California/Nevada border, a four-hour drive east (slightly northeast, actually) from San Francisco.

- ✔ **If you're coming from San Francisco:** Take I-80 east to Sacramento, then U.S. 50 to South Lake Tahoe on the south shore, or stay on I-80 east to Highway 89 south to reach Tahoe City on the north shore.
- ✔ **If you're coming from Yosemite:** Take Highway 120 east out of the park to I-395 north to U.S. 50 east; at the U.S. 50/Highway 28 split, follow U.S. 50 to South Lake Tahoe, or Highway 28 to Tahoe City on the north shore.



The 3½-hour drive from Yosemite is do-able only between late June and the first snowfall (usually early November), because the park's east gate closes in winter. Otherwise, the drive becomes a five- or six-hour trek north on winding Highway 49 to I-50, which can be slow going in bad weather.

- ✔ **If you're coming from points south:** Take I-5 through central California to Sacramento, and then pick up I-80 east to the north shore or U.S. 50 east to the south shore.

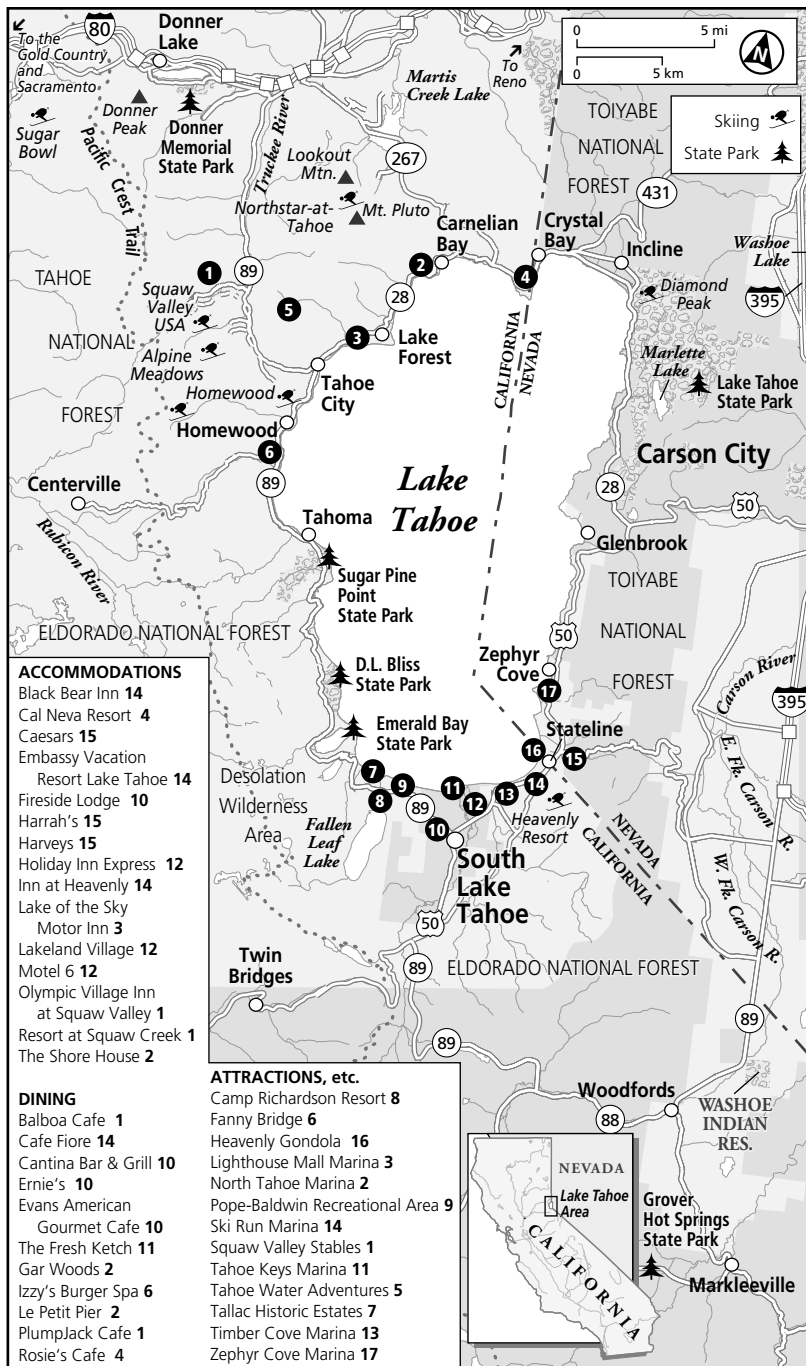


Whether you take I-80 to the north shore or U.S. 50 to the south shore, you can easily work in a side trip to the Gold Country on your way to Tahoe. All you need is a few hours to spare and the desire to see some small towns; for details, see the "Side-Triping to the Gold Country" section later in this chapter. The same goes for Sacramento, our state capitol, where you can spend a day steeping yourself in history or walking in the footsteps of Governor *Ahnhold*; see the "Prospecting for History in Sacramento" section later in this chapter.

- ✔ **If you're heading to Squaw Valley:** Follow Highway 89 (River Road) at the 89/28 split in Tahoe City. Go 5 miles and turn left at Squaw Valley Road.

**Reno/Tahoe International Airport** is at U.S. 395 just south of I-80 in Reno, Nevada (☎ 775-328-6400; [www.renoairport.com](http://www.renoairport.com)). All the national car-rental companies have airport locations. The drive takes 50 minutes to Tahoe City on the north shore; take U.S. 395 north to I-80 west to Highway 89 south. For South Lake Tahoe, take U.S. 395 south to U.S. 50 west, a 70-minute drive.

## Lake Tahoe



These airlines fly into Reno/Tahoe:

- ✓ **Alaska Airlines:** ☎ 800-426-0333; [www.alaskaair.com](http://www.alaskaair.com)
- ✓ **Aloha Airlines:** ☎ 800-367-5250; [www.alohaairlines.com](http://www.alohaairlines.com)
- ✓ **American Airlines:** ☎ 800-433-7300; [www.aa.com](http://www.aa.com)
- ✓ **America West:** ☎ 800-327-7810; [www.americawest.com](http://www.americawest.com)
- ✓ **Continental:** ☎ 800-525-0280; [www.continental.com](http://www.continental.com)
- ✓ **Delta Connection/Skywest:** ☎ 800-453-9417; [www.skywest.com](http://www.skywest.com)
- ✓ **Frontier Airlines:** ☎ 800-432-1359; [www.flyfrontier.com](http://www.flyfrontier.com)
- ✓ **Northwest:** ☎ 800-225-2525; [www.nwa.com](http://www.nwa.com)
- ✓ **Southwest:** ☎ 800-435-9792; [www.southwest.com](http://www.southwest.com)
- ✓ **United:** ☎ 800-241-6522; [www.ual.com](http://www.ual.com)

## *Getting Your Bearings*

On the south shore, two main highways meet at a prominent “Y” intersection in South Lake Tahoe: U.S. 50, which continues up the east (Nevada) shore of the lake to midpoint and then shoots off east; and Highway 89, which runs up the west (California) side of the lake to Tahoe City, and then turns northwest away from the lake. Highway 28 picks up where 89 leaves off, running along the north shore from Tahoe City to midpoint on the Nevada side, where it meets up with U.S. 50, completing the continuous 72-mile circle around the lake. (To get your visual bearings, look for the “Lake Tahoe” map on p. 192.)

Lake Tahoe’s biggest town is South Lake Tahoe, which runs along the south shore. Its main drag is U.S. 50, which is called Lake Tahoe Boulevard in town. After you cross the California/Nevada line, you’re immediately in Stateline, Nevada. It’s easy to tell; the casinos practically trip you after your toes pass over the border.

Follow Highway 89 about 31 miles north along the west shore, past camplike resorts and stunning lakefront homes, and you reach Tahoe City, the commercial hub of the north shore. Go 6 miles northwest on Highway 89 to breathtaking Squaw Valley, whose thriving Olympic Village was built for the 1960 Winter Games.

Along with a few other casino/hotels, another prominent community sits on the northeast shore, Nevada’s Incline Village. But we’ve concentrated on the California side because we’re partisans — this *is* a book about California, after all.

## Where to Stay

For additional choices throughout the region, contact **Lake Tahoe Central Reservations** (☎ 888-434-1262 or 530-583-3494; [www.mytahoevacation.com](http://www.mytahoevacation.com)). The service charges \$15 to \$20 to make your reservations, and you won't get the best room prices, but the staff is knowledgeable. You can also try **Tahoe Reservations.com** ([www.tahoereservations.com](http://www.tahoereservations.com)), a free, real-time service that specializes in South Tahoe. For ski packages, contact **Ski Tahoe** (☎ 888-982-1088; [www.skitahoe.com](http://www.skitahoe.com)).

Expect to see 10 to 12 percent in taxes added to your hotel bill.

### On the south shore

The big-name casinos at Stateline, Nevada, resemble unattractive office complexes, displaying none of the outrageousness of Las Vegas, but they offer gaming, entertainment, and amenities such as indoor pools and spa facilities. They're fairly similar in middle-of-the-road comforts and prices, which can range from \$69 to \$289 and up depending on the day and season. These places thrive on packages, so always ask.

- ✓ **Harrah's** (☎ 800-427-7247 or 775-588-6611; [www.harrahstahoe.com](http://www.harrahstahoe.com)) is attractive and low-key, comparatively speaking, and appeals to a slightly less raucous vacationer.
- ✓ **Harveys** (☎ 800-427-8397 or 775-588-2411; [www.harveys.com/our\\_casinos/hlt](http://www.harveys.com/our_casinos/hlt)) is the rock-and-roll casino and draws in a young, sophisticated crowd.
- ✓ **Caesars** (☎ 888-829-7630 or 775-588-3515; [www.caesarstahoe.com](http://www.caesarstahoe.com)) is the sole themed casino (think grown-up toga party) and attracts major talent to its showroom.

In addition to the more unique choices detailed in the following listings, South Lake Tahoe also has some excellent-value motels:

- ✓ **Holiday Inn Express**, 3961 Lake Tahoe Blvd. (☎ 800-544-5288 or 530-544-5900; [www.holidayinnexpresstahoe.com](http://www.holidayinnexpresstahoe.com)), has high-quality rooms and is tucked among the trees to ensure quiet. Rooms run \$69 to \$189, family-size suites \$149 to \$289, including continental breakfast.
- ✓ **Motel 6**, 2375 Lake Tahoe Blvd. (☎ 800-466-8356 or 530-542-1400; [www.motel6.com](http://www.motel6.com)), is the best motel value in town for penny-pinching travelers. Rooms run \$39 to \$69.

### **Black Bear Inn**

\$\$\$\$ South Lake Tahoe

Wow! This stunning lodgelike B&B looks like it rambled straight out of a Ralph Lauren advertisement, complete with gleaming knotty-pine woodwork, bearskins, and a two-story riverstone fireplace in the soaring living

room. Extraordinary craftsmanship, witty rustic-goes-chic décor, beautifully outfitted rooms (gorgeous bathrooms!), lots of lounging space, and charming hosts add up to the most gracious place to stay on the south shore, period. Geared toward adults and kids over 16.

See map p. 192. 1202 Ski Run Blvd., South Lake Tahoe. ☎ 877-232-7466 or 530-544-4451. www.tahoebblackbear.com. Parking: Free. Rack rates: \$240–\$280 double; \$295–\$500 cabin. Rates include full breakfast. AE, MC, V.



### **Embassy Vacation Resort Lake Tahoe**

**\$\$–\$\$\$\$ South Lake Tahoe**

Skip the bland Embassy Suites hotel at Stateline and book this lakefront condo resort, instead. The sun-filled suites are gorgeously decorated in subdued Southwest colors and high-quality everything. Each one comes with a cute balcony and a fully equipped kitchenette or kitchen. This hotel offers an excellent indoor/outdoor pool, pretty grounds, exercise room, video-game room, coin-op laundry, and far more style and value for your dollar than you'd expect. A winner!

See map p. 192. 901 Ski Run Blvd., South Lake Tahoe. ☎ 800-362-2779 or 530-541-6122. Fax: 530-541-2028. www.embassyvacationresorts.com. Parking: Free. Rack rates: \$140–\$250 studios, 1- and 2-bedroom suites (1-bedroom from \$160, 2-bedrooms from \$190). AE, DISC, MC, V.



### **Fireside Lodge**

**\$\$ South Lake Tahoe**

Recently renovated, these nine tidy little country-pine suites are cozy (read small), but equipped with kitchenettes, gas fireplaces, and TV/VCRs. Owned and operated by a local family (who also owns the Inn at Heavenly), the location is unbeatable — close to some great restaurants and the marvelous facilities of Camp Richardson, but far enough from the main drag to keep your mind on the mountains. Dogs and kids are most welcome. The staff even lends you bicycles, float tubes, and videos.

See map p. 192. 515 Emerald Bay Rd., South Lake Tahoe. ☎ 800-692-2246 or 530-544-5515. www.tahoefiresidelodge.com. Parking: Free. Rack rates: \$135–\$150 double. Rates include continental breakfast. AE, DISC, MC, V.

### **Inn at Heavenly**

**\$\$–\$\$\$ South Lake Tahoe**

These upscale motel rooms are low-ceilinged and teensy, but they're decorated in a dreamy-cute wooden-beam style, each with a gas fireplace, VCR, ceiling fan, and kitchenette with microwave, fridge, and coffeemaker. Swings and picnic sets dot the lovely grounds. Amenities include steam room and sauna, warm-hearted innkeepers, and a cozy common room with games and videos. It's pet-friendly, so bring Fido.

See map p. 192. 1261 Ski Run Blvd. (downhill from Heavenly ski resort), South Lake Tahoe. ☎ 800-692-2246 or 530-544-4244. Fax: 530-544-5213. www.inn-at-heavenly.com. Parking: Free. Rack rates: \$135–\$160 double; \$295–\$395 cabin (sleeps 8–12). Rates include expanded continental breakfast, snacks. AE, DISC, MC, V.

### On the north shore

Shooting craps actually gives us hives — unless we’re winning — but one more casino straddling the north-shore border merits mention. Once owned by Frank Sinatra (until the gaming authorities intervened), the **Cal Neva Resort** (2 Stateline Rd., Crystal Bay, Nevada; ☎ 800-CAL-NEVA or 775-832-4000; www.calnevaresort.com; \$89–\$289 double) is our personal choice for a Tahoe gambling den. While the others are definitely flashier, the Cal Neva offers some history and a little soul, and the spacious guest rooms have glorious lake views.

### Lake of the Sky Motor Inn \$–\$\$ Tahoe City

This '60s-era motel is a walk from restaurants, but far enough from the tourist fray to offer some measure of peace. Expect only the basics, but rooms (all nonsmoking) have been recently remodeled, beds are firm, housekeeping is neat, and beamed ceilings add a lodgelike touch. The lake-view rooms include fridges. The friendly owners keep the coffeepot on all day. The motel offers a pool and free local calls, too.

See map p. 192. 955 N. Lake Blvd. (Hwy. 28), Tahoe City. ☎ 530-583-3305. Fax: 530-583-7621. Parking: Free. Rack rates: \$59–\$149 double. Rates include continental breakfast. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V.

### Olympic Village Inn at Squaw Valley \$\$–\$\$\$\$ Squaw Valley

This Swiss chalet-style all-suite hotel is the best value in the gorgeous Olympic Valley. The suites sleep four, are attractively done in a country accent, and boast fully equipped mini-kitchens, VCRs, and stereos. The lovely grounds are a stone’s throw from Squaw Valley USA activities. Timeshare owners get first dibs, so call early; your best bet is to book a midweek stay.

See map p. 192. 1909 Chamonix Pl. (off Squaw Valley Rd.), Squaw Valley. ☎ 800-845-5243 or 530-581-6000. Fax: 530-583-4165. www.olympicvillageinn.com. Parking: Free! Rack rates: \$115–\$315 1-bedroom suite. AE, DISC, MC, V.



### Resort at Squaw Creek \$\$\$–\$\$\$\$ Squaw Valley

This 626-acre destination resort is built to take prime advantage of the valley and forest views. The rooms aren’t overly special, however. Come, instead, for the unparalleled facilities, which include a wonderful pool complex, spa, first-rate dining, golf, tennis, biking, cross-country ski center,

ice-skating in season, private chairlift at Squaw Valley USA, great kids' program, and more.

See map p. 192. 400 Squaw Creek Rd., Squaw Valley. ☎ 800-327-3353 or 530-583-6300. Fax: 530-581-6632. www.squawcreek.com. Parking: \$15 to valet, free self-parking. Rack rates: \$179–\$349 double, \$229–\$429 suite, from \$750 penthouse; off-season rates are lower. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V.

### **The Shore House**

\$\$\$–\$\$\$\$ Tahoe Vista

A great choice for lakefront amour, this wonderful B&B is 15 minutes from Tahoe City in gorgeous, upscale Tahoe Vista. The rustic-romantic rooms are built for two and have private entrances, knotty-pine walls, cuddly Scandia down comforters on custom-built log beds, gas fireplaces, and TVs and CD players. The B&B offers a new massage studio (with views), a sandy beach next door with kayaks to rent, lots of restaurants nearby, welcoming and attentive innkeepers, and plenty of lake-facing lounge spaces — including a lakeside hot tub.

See map p. 192. 7170 North Lake Blvd., Tahoe Vista (8 miles east of Tahoe City). ☎ 800-207-5160 or 530-546-7270. Fax: 530-546-7130. www.shorehouselaketahoe.com. Rack rates: \$190–\$290 double. Rates include a delicious full breakfast and evening wine and appetizers. DISC, MC, V.

## **Where to Dine**



Tahoe is at full capacity most weekends, so book Friday and Saturday dinners in advance to avoid disappointment.

### **On the south shore**

#### **Cafe Fiore**

\$\$\$ South Lake Tahoe ITALIAN

A low-profile but top-notch restaurant, Cafe Fiore's dining room is rustic yet lovely, with just seven white-linen-dressed tables, plus a handful more on the alfresco terrace in summer. The creative Italian fare is prepared with culinary expertise and care; the garlic bread alone is enough to bring us back, begging for more. A regular winner of the *Wine Spectator* Award of Excellence, this restaurant is ultra-romantic and simply divine.

See map p. 192. 1169 Ski Run Blvd. #5 (between U.S. 50 and Pioneer Trail), South Lake Tahoe. ☎ 530-541-2908. www.cafefiore.com. Reservations highly recommended. Main courses: \$15–\$29. AE, MC, V. Open: Daily from 5:30 p.m.

#### **Cantina Bar & Grill**

\$\$–\$\$\$ South Lake Tahoe CAL-MEXICAN

A local fave, this Southwestern cantina is attractive and lively, with first-rate margaritas and 30 different beers during the weekday happy hour and

beyond. The kitchen gets creative with specialties such as rock shrimp quesadillas and calamari rellenos, but you won't be disappointed by the tried-and-true: top-notch burritos, taco combos, and the like.

See map p. 192. 765 Emerald Bay Rd. (at Hwy. 89 and 10th St.), South Lake Tahoe. ☎ 530-544-1233. [www.cantinatahoe.com](http://www.cantinatahoe.com). Reservations not accepted. Main courses: \$8–\$16. AE, MC, V. Open: Daily 11:30 a.m.–10 p.m.



### Ernie's Coffee Shop

\$ South Lake Tahoe AMERICAN

More than just a mere coffee shop, we happen to love Ernie's for great java, sizable portions of hearty breakfast fare — the scrambled eggs being our favorite — and the excellent milkshakes at lunch. This spot is popular with the locals and savvy visitors for all the right reasons.

See map p. 192. 1146 Emerald Bay Rd. (on Hwy. 89, a mile north of U.S. 50), South Lake Tahoe. ☎ 530-541-2161. Reservations not accepted. Main courses: \$5–\$9. MC, V. Open: Daily 6 a.m.–2 p.m.

### Evan's American Gourmet Cafe

\$\$\$–\$\$\$\$ South Lake Tahoe CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN

Tucked away in a vintage ski cabin in the woods is Tahoe's best restaurant, on any shore. It's intimate and sophisticated, but completely unpretentious. Ingredients are fresh and top-quality. Preparations are somewhat complex, yet light enough that even the foie gras starter doesn't seem too heavy. Desserts are swell, too. This terrific restaurant could stand on its own in New York or San Francisco.

See map p. 192. 536 Emerald Bay Rd. (on Hwy. 89, a mile north of U.S. 50), South Lake Tahoe. ☎ 530-542-1990. [www.evanstahoe.com](http://www.evanstahoe.com). Reservations highly recommended. Main courses: \$20–\$26. AE, DISC, MC, V. Open: Daily from 5:30 p.m.



### The Fresh Ketch

\$\$–\$\$\$\$ South Lake Tahoe SEAFOOD

The well-worn, casual downstairs bar offers first-rate seafood and good views, while the pretty upstairs dining room maintains a more formal atmosphere. We like the bar for lunch; golden-wood backgammon tables even let you settle in for a game as you nosh on oysters on the half shell, delicately breaded calamari with a zippy dipping sauce, fish and chips, and ahi tacos. The New England clam chowder may be the best you'll find west of the Mississippi.

See map p. 192. At Tahoe Keys Marina, 2433 Venice Dr. (off U.S. 50 at the end of Tahoe Keys Blvd.), South Lake Tahoe. ☎ 530-541-5683. [www.thefreshketch.com](http://www.thefreshketch.com). Reservations recommended for dining room. Main courses: \$9–\$12 at downstairs bar, \$18–\$28 in upstairs dining room. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Open: Daily from 11:30 a.m. (dining room dinner only from 5:30 p.m.).

## *On the north shore*

### **Balboa Cafe**

**\$\$-\$\$\$ Squaw Valley CALIFORNIA**

The PlumpJack boys got a jump on the competition at the new Village at Squaw Valley, opening the brasserie-style Balboa Cafe before the paint was even dry in the first of the new condos. They serve the identical nearly famous hamburgers here as in the San Francisco haunt of the same name, along with a good steak frites and delicious roast chicken nicely accompanied with potato-mushroom gratin and our personal love, Brussels sprouts. The décor is western eclectic, the bar is fun, and it's the hippest spot in Squaw, a magnet for ski bums of all persuasions. Takeout is available from a little counter next door.

*See map p. 192. Directly across from the base lifts in the village, 1995 Squaw Valley Rd., Squaw Valley. ☎ 530-583-5850. www.plumpjack.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses: \$10-\$27. AE, MC, V. Open: Daily 11:30 a.m.-9 p.m. (bar open till 2 a.m.).*

### **Gar Woods**

**\$\$-\$\$\$\$ Carnelian Bay AMERICAN**

The large lakefront deck is a popular gathering spot in summer, but this friendly restaurant/bar draws the crowds every season. Along with the grand views, patrons suck up creative cocktails, enjoy live music Friday and Saturday nights, and party down with their pals. The menu, while not particularly creative, covers familiar surf/turf/pasta territory and includes such toothsome appetizers as beer-battered coconut prawns. Quite a scene.

*See map p. 192. 5000 North Lake Blvd. (Hwy. 28, between Tahoe City and Tahoe Vista), Carnelian Bay. ☎ 530-546-3366. www.garwoods.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses: \$10-\$14 at lunch, \$19-\$30 at dinner; bar menu \$10-\$14. AE, MC, V. Open: Daily 5:30-10 p.m. (bar open till 1:30 a.m.; Fri-Sun 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m. (lunch hours daily during summer); Sun brunch in summer (10 a.m.-2 p.m.).*

### **Le Petit Pier**

**\$\$\$-\$\$\$\$ Tahoe Vista FRENCH**

For a romantic splurge, this *Wine Spectator*-award-winning restaurant in gorgeous Tahoe Vista is well worth the 15-minute drive east from Tahoe City. Spectacular lake views enhance the pretty dining room and inspire relaxed conversation. The Sonoma foie gras is always a fine choice to begin with, followed by a lovely asparagus salad in season, and the lobster. This is haute cuisine made to put someone in a most magnanimous mood, indeed.

*See map p. 192. 7238 N. Lake Blvd. (Hwy. 28, about 8 miles west of Tahoe City), Tahoe Vista. ☎ 530-546-4464. Reservations recommended. www.lepetitpier.com. Main courses: \$19-\$31. AE, DISC, MC, V. Open: Wed-Mon 6-10 p.m.*

**PlumpJack Cafe****\$\$\$\$ Squaw Valley CONTEMPORARY MEDITERRANEAN**

The best restaurant in Squaw Valley is this first-rate resort version of the San Francisco favorite. The Mediterranean-accented modern cuisine revolves around seasonal ingredients, always a good sign (and if the duckling trio is on the menu, order it). The room is 100 percent high-design chic but utterly comfortable nonetheless. Service is impeccable in a not-too-formal way, and the wine list boasts well-chosen labels at reasonable markups. And for a fondue break between ski runs, this is the place.

See map p. 192. At *PlumpJack Squaw Valley Inn*, 1920 Squaw Valley Rd., Squaw Valley. ☎ 530-583-1576. [www.plumpjack.com](http://www.plumpjack.com). Reservations highly recommended for dinner. Main courses: \$25–\$32; bar menu \$11–\$15. AE, MC, V. Open: Daily 7:30–10:30 a.m. and 11:30 a.m.–10 p.m.

**Rosie's Café****\$–\$\$ Tahoe City AMERICAN**

Two floors of tables usually ensure a short wait, if at all, at this shingled, lodge-style family-owned restaurant. It's noisy and casual, perfect for families, and servings are plentiful. A big menu offers breakfasts designed to rev up skiers, as well as hamburgers, grilled chicken sandwiches, and chef-type salads for lunch, and two-course dinners starring meat (the pot roast is hard to resist) and fish. You won't mistake it for gourmet, but you'll like the value and ethos.

See map p. 192. 571 North Lake Blvd., Tahoe City. ☎ 530-583-8504. [www.rosiescafe.com](http://www.rosiescafe.com). Reservations accepted for dinner. Main courses: \$5–\$10 at lunch, \$10–\$20 at dinner. DISC, MC, V. Open: Daily 6:30 a.m.–10 p.m.

## Enjoying Lake Tahoe

You have to get out on the water to truly appreciate the grandeur of Lake Tahoe.

The 570-passenger *M.S. Dixie II* (☎ 775-589-4906 or 775-588-3833; [www.tahoedixie2.com](http://www.tahoedixie2.com)), an authentic paddle-wheeler, offers lake cruises year-round from Zephyr Cove Marina, on U.S. 50, 4 miles east of the Nevada state line. We like the two-hour Emerald Bay Sightseeing Cruise best; it gives you a general feel for the lake and takes you into the stunning bay where you can see Fanette Island and Vikingsholm up close without having to take the difficult walk (see the “Driving along the spectacular west shore” section later in this chapter). Fares are \$27 adults, \$9 for kids under 12; reservations are recommended.

If you'd like a more intimate ride, book with **Woodwind Sailing Cruises** (☎ 888-867-6394; [www.sailwoodwind.com](http://www.sailwoodwind.com)). Trips, which originate from Camp Richardson Resort or Zephyr Cove, start at \$28 for adults, \$24 for seniors, \$12 for kids 12 and under. The sunset champagne cruise is smooch-worthy.

On the north shore, catch a ride aboard the *Tahoe Gal* (☎ 800-218-2464 or 530-583-0141; [www.tahoegal.com](http://www.tahoegal.com)), which offers tours from the Lighthouse Mall Marina, 850 N. Lake Blvd., in Tahoe City from May through September. Prices start at \$24 adults, \$12 kids. The Happy Hour Cruise is \$15 adults and \$10 kids.

### ***Boating for do-it-yourselfers***

Expect to pay in the neighborhood of \$109 to \$139 per hour for a powerboat and between \$100 and \$140 for a jet ski; the fourth hour is often free. Always reserve ahead.

Rental options on the south shore include:

- ✓ **Zephyr Cove Resort Marina**, on U.S. 50, 4 miles east of the Nevada state line (☎ 775-589-4908 or 775-588-3833; [www.tahoedixie2.com](http://www.tahoedixie2.com)), rents late-model 16- to 28-foot boats, plus runabouts, ski boats, pontoons, pedalboats, kayaks, and canoes.
- ✓ **Tahoe Keys Boat Rentals** (☎ 530-544-8888; fax 530-541-8405) rents powerboats from Tahoe Keys Marina, conveniently located in South Lake Tahoe off Lake Tahoe Boulevard (U.S. 50) at the end of Tahoe Keys Road.
- ✓ A great place to launch a kayak is **Timber Cove Marina**, on Lake Tahoe Boulevard at the end of Johnson Boulevard, which has the largest public beach on the south shore. Rentals are available from **Kayak Tahoe** (☎ 530-544-2011; [www.kayaktahoe.com](http://www.kayaktahoe.com)). Call ahead to arrange for a guided tour.
- ✓ **Camp Richardson Marina** at Camp Richardson Resort, 2 miles west of the U.S. 50/Highway 89 junction (☎ 530-542-6570; [www.camprichardson.com](http://www.camprichardson.com)), rents a full slate of boating equipment similar to that at Zephyr Cove.

For rentals on the north shore, check out the following:

- ✓ **North Tahoe Marina**, 7360 N. Lake Blvd. (Highway 28, 1 mile west of Highway 267), in Tahoe Vista (☎ 800-58-MARINA or 530-546-8248; [www.northtahoemarina.com](http://www.northtahoemarina.com)), rents 19- to 24-foot powerboats, plus skis and tow lines.
- ✓ **Tahoe Water Adventures** at the Lakehouse Mall, just off North Lake Boulevard at the end of Grove Street, in Tahoe City (☎ 530-583-3225), rents powerboats with wakeboards or skis, canoes, kayaks, jet skis, or environmentally friendly inflatable watercraft.

### ***Sportfishing***

The most respected charter company around is **Tahoe Sport Fishing** ([www.tahoosportfishing.com](http://www.tahoosportfishing.com)), which operates from two south-shore locations: **Ski Run Marina**, off U.S. 50 at the end of Ski Run Boulevard, a

mile west of the state line (☎ 800-696-7797 or 530-541-5448); and **Zephyr Cove**, on U.S. 50, 4 miles east of the state line (☎ 800-696-7797 or 775-586-9338). Four- to seven-hour trips run \$75 to \$105 per person, including all gear, tackle, and bait. If you're lucky enough to hook a salmon or a big Mackinaw lake trout, the fee includes cleaning and sacking.

### *Driving along the spectacular west shore*

The entire drive along Highway 89 offers spectacular scenery. It's worth dedicating the better part of a day to explore (be sure to make your exploration day a bright, clear weekday to avoid traffic). Here are your best stops, from south to north:

- ✓ The best public-access beaches are part of the **Pope-Baldwin Recreational Area**, which begins just west of the Y intersection with U.S. 50. Expect to pay \$3 to \$5 to park at most public beaches, such as pretty **Pope Beach** and the beach at **Camp Richardson**. Camp Richardson's **Beacon Bar & Grill** is the ideal place to enjoy a sunset Rum Runner (practically the official Tahoe cocktail) because the patio is right on the sand, just a stone's throw — literally — from the water.
- ✓ Next up is the **Tallac Historic Estates**, three landmarked 1920s homes open for tours in summer. More interesting is **Visitors Center Beach** (turn right at the USFS Lake Tahoe Visitors Center sign). Follow the **Rainbow Trail**, an easy ten-minute walk along a paved walkway dotted with interpretive placards, to the **Stream Profile Chamber**, which offers an eco-lesson in water clarity and the freshwater food chain through a submerged window onto **Taylor Creek**. The view is like looking into an aquarium, only it's the real thing — very cool. Walk ten minutes in the opposite direction from the visitor center, following the “Beach Access” sign, to a very nice stretch of beach.



If you're a hiker, stop in the visitor center to pick up a copy of the invaluable *Lake of the Sky Journal*, which details a number of great hikes throughout the area.

- ✓ From the **Visitors Center Beach**, the highway begins to climb northward. Soon you see the aptly named **Emerald Bay**, a 3-mile-long finger of sparkling green water jutting off the lake. This bay also has the lake's only island — tiny **Fanette Island** — where you find the ruins of an old stone teahouse.

Pull into the lot marked “Emerald Bay State Park/Vikingsholm” for the favorite lake photo op, bar none. The walk to the lakeshore is 1½ miles long, but at the end you find **Vikingsholm**, a Danish-style castle built by the same (kinda wacky) lady behind the teahouse on Fanette Island. Back in 1928, the lake so reminded her of a Scandinavian fjord that she decided to drive the theme home. The castle is a sight to see — but remember, you have to walk back up that steep 1½-mile hill. The mansion is open for tours in summer only (☎ 530-525-7277).

- ✔ A couple of miles farther up the road sits **D. L. Bliss State Park** (☎ 530-525-7277), a gorgeous spot with one of the lake's finest beaches (come early in summer to ensure a parking space). If you're a hiker, moderate-level **Rubicon Trail** is a worthy 5-mile hike along Emerald Bay.
- ✔ Another 7 miles on is **Sugar Pine Point State Park** (☎ 530-525-7982). This terrific park offers 1¾ miles of shoreline with sandy beaches, more than 2,000 forested acres laced with hiking trails, the historic Ehrman Mansion (open for guided tours in summer), and a nature center. Parking starts at \$5.
- ✔ After you reach Tahoe City, take note of **Fanny Bridge**, so named for the view of derrieres as folks bend over the rail to catch sight of the leaping trout below. It's on Highway 89 just south of the Y intersection with Highway 28, next to **Izzy's Burger Spa**, a great spot for juicy burgers and thick shakes.

### *Golfing and other warm-weather fun*

Hitting the links is a very big deal in North Tahoe. A half-dozen excellent courses lie within easy reach of Tahoe City, including the award-winning Robert Trent Jones, Jr.–designed links-style course at the **Resort at Squaw Creek** (see the “Where to Stay” section earlier in this chapter), honored by *Golf* magazine as one of the Top 10 resort courses in America. For tee times here or at another course, contact **North Lake Tahoe Central Reservations** (☎ 888-434-1262 or 530-583-3494; [www.tahoefun.org](http://www.tahoefun.org)). These friendly folks can also direct you south-shore vacationers to great courses, too.

### *Taking a heavenly ride*

Heavenly operates a **gondola** a half-block west of Stateline right on U.S. 50, between two new Marriott timeshare developments. The ride (\$22 for adults, \$20 for kids 13 to 18, \$14 for kids 5 to 12) takes you 2.4 miles up the mountain to an observation deck at 9,123 feet. The views are breathtaking, but there's not much to do up there except eat at the cafe or continue to the top and eat at the Adventure Peak Grill. You also find one established hiking trail, with others planned. You may get more for your money taking the cable car at Squaw Valley High Camp.

### *River rafting*

**Truckee River Rafting** (☎ 888-584-7238 or 530-583-7238; [www.truckeeriverrafting.com](http://www.truckeeriverrafting.com)) offers one cool north-shore activity: a leisurely float along a 5-mile stretch down the Truckee River from Tahoe City to River Ranch Pond. You even hit a couple of baby rapids for a few thrills; kids just love it. The ride is \$32 for adults, \$27 for kids 6 to 12, including all equipment and pickup at the end. Reserve ahead and allow two to four hours for the adventure.



### *Playing at Squaw Valley's High Camp*

**Squaw Valley High Camp** (☎ 530-583-6955; [www.squaw.com](http://www.squaw.com)) is a wonderful place to play in summer, and a great way to experience the Olympic Village. After a scenic cable-car ride to 8,200 feet, you can ice-skate at the mountaintop Olympic Ice Pavilion, or swim and spa in the Swimming Lagoon. If you're a hiker, pick up a trail map at the base information desk and follow any one of a half-dozen mountain trails, ranging from easy to difficult. Mountain bikers can rent a front-suspension bike at the **Squaw Valley Sport Shop**, in the Olympic Village (☎ 530-583-3356), take it to the top, and explore the snowless slopes. Expect half-day rentals around \$30, and full-day rentals in the neighborhood of \$40, helmets included; call to book a bike and avoid disappointment. Cable car tickets are \$19 adults, \$15 teens 13 to 15, \$5 kids 3 to 12; swim/skate/ride packages are available.

### *Hitting the slopes in ski season*

Tahoe is more popular as a ski resort than anything else. It's home to the state's best skiing, and the country's largest concentration of downhill slopes. The ski season usually lasts from November through April but has been known to extend into the early summer. Most resorts welcome snowboarders, but always check first.

Lift tickets for adults cost between \$18 and \$57 for a full day, depending on the resort, with convenient Heavenly and Squaw Valley on the high end. Resorts often issue money-saving multiday tickets, and kids and seniors always qualify for discounts. Your lodge will probably have discounted tickets on hand as well.

Contact the local **visitor centers** (see the "Gathering More Information" section later in this chapter) or go to [www.tahoestbest.com/Skiing](http://www.tahoestbest.com/Skiing) for more about the area ski resorts. Also inquire about ski packages, which can usually save you a small fortune, especially if you ski midweek.

### *The top south shore slopes*



**Heavenly** (☎ 775-586-7000; [www.skiheavenly.com](http://www.skiheavenly.com)) is off U.S. 50 at the top of Ski Run Boulevard (turn left). It features the region's steepest vertical drop (3,500 feet) and one of its largest ski terrains (4,800 acres), not to mention one of the world's largest snowmaking systems. A third of the trails are set aside for envelope-pushers, but the rest are dedicated to beginners and intermediates. Excellent for families, with everything from kiddie ski schools to daycare.

**Kirkwood** (☎ 209-258-7254; [www.kirkwood.com](http://www.kirkwood.com)) is a 30- to 45-minute drive outside of South Lake Tahoe on Highway 88 (from U.S. 50, take Hwy. 89 south to 88 west). This resort ranks among *Ski* magazine's Top 10 in North America for snow, terrain, and challenge. A terrific choice for spring skiers thanks to high average snowfall. It's now a destination resort, so inquire if you want to stay.

### *The top north shore slopes*

Midsize **Alpine Meadows** (☎ 800-441-4423 or 530-583-4232; [www.ski-alpine.com](http://www.ski-alpine.com)), 8 miles west of Tahoe City, has the best spring skiing around. Many years, Alpine Meadows is still going strong into May, when everybody else (even Kirkwood) has closed for the season. A local favorite, it maintains a committed following.



**Diamond Peak** (☎ 775-832-1177; [www.diamondpeak.com](http://www.diamondpeak.com)) is 17 miles east of Tahoe City in Incline Village, Nevada. Diamond Peak has taken great care to target families, and it's the north shore's best resort for kids. It's also smaller and less expensive than most. Kids as young as 3 can learn to ski, and the resort maintains a terrific snow-play area.



If you want spectacular lake views while you ski, take to the slopes at **Homewood** (☎ 530-525-2992; [www.skihomewood.com](http://www.skihomewood.com)), right on the lake's west shore, 6½ miles south of Tahoe City. It's small, intimate, and a local favorite. Weekday lift tickets are a great value.

**Northstar-at-Tahoe** (☎ 800-466-6784 or 530-562-1010; [www.ski-northstar.com](http://www.ski-northstar.com)), 11 miles east of Tahoe City, is a terrific choice for families, with many good facilities and other activities. About 75 percent of the ski terrain is devoted to beginners and intermediates.

Ever dream of Olympic glory? **Squaw Valley USA** (☎ 530-583-6985; [www.squaw.com](http://www.squaw.com)), 9 miles from Tahoe City, was the site of the 1960 Olympic Winter Games. Spanning six Sierra peaks, gorgeous, excellently outfitted Squaw Valley is Tahoe's most state-of-the-art ski area with the most challenging array of runs. A must for serious skiers.

### *Cross-country skiing and snowmobiling*

The north shore offers the most — and best — cross-country options. **Tahoe Cross-Country Ski Area** (☎ 530-583-5475; [www.tahoexc.org](http://www.tahoexc.org)) has 65 kilometers of groomed trails, a full-service day lodge, state-of-the-art equipment, and a convenient location, 2 miles east of Tahoe City off Highway 28 at Dollar Hill (turn at Fabian Way).

**Northstar-at-Tahoe** (☎ 530-562-2475; [www.skinorthstar.com](http://www.skinorthstar.com)) has a terrific cross-country, telemark, and snowshoe center with 50 kilometers of groomed trails. The **Resort at Squaw Creek** (☎ 530-583-6300; [www.squawcreek.com](http://www.squawcreek.com)) is much smaller, with just 18 kilometers of trails, but the Squaw Valley setting is unparalleled — and the resort was the site of the 2004 U.S. Snowshoeing National Championships.

On the south shore, head to the 35 kilometers of trails at the **Cross-Country Ski Center** at Camp Richardson Resort, on Highway 89 which is 2½ miles north of the U.S. 50/89 “Y” intersection (☎ 530-542-6584; [www.camprich.com](http://www.camprich.com)).

The south shore's **Zephyr Cove Snowmobile Center**, on U.S. 50, 4 miles east of the state line (☎ 775-588-3833; [www.tahoedixie2.com](http://www.tahoedixie2.com)), is the

largest snowmobiling center in the United States. You can rent and set out on your own (kids as young as 5 can accompany you on a double machine), or take a guided tour (recommended if you're a newbie). Reservations recommended.

On the north shore, contact **Snowmobiling Unlimited** (☎ 530-583-5858 or 530-583-7192). Tahoe's oldest snowmobile touring company, this company leads two- and three-hour guided tours.

### *Trying your luck at the casinos*

One of the great advantages of a Tahoe vacation is the proximity to the casinos — just a skip across the border in either Stateline or Crystal Bay, Nevada. You can throw a snowball and hit any of them from the California side. These are the best of the bunch:

- ✓ **Cal Neva Resort** (☎ 800-225-6382 or 775-832-4000; [www.calnevaresort.com](http://www.calnevaresort.com)), once co-owned by Frank Sinatra, has its diehard fans, including us, who prefer the north-shore location and low-key atmosphere. The showroom, built to the specifications of Ol' Blue Eyes himself, isn't used much anymore and the medium-size gaming room has only blackjack, roulette, craps, and slot machines. However, photos of Marilyn Monroe, Sinatra, and his cronies line the walls, providing a cool piece of history and a hint of past glamour that may be irresistible.
- ✓ The jam-packed showroom at **Harrah's** (☎ 800-427-7247 or 775-588-6611; [www.harrahstahoe.com](http://www.harrahstahoe.com)) offers a wide array of entertainment, from crowd-pleasing Vegas-style revues starring leggy showgirls to big-name headliners, including many baby-boomer faves (Ringo Starr, Smokey Robinson, and so forth).
- ✓ **Harveys** (☎ 800-427-8397 or 775-588-2411; [www.harrahs.com/our\\_casinos/hlt](http://www.harrahs.com/our_casinos/hlt)) rocks, with video monitors and speakers blasting radio-friendly sounds throughout the largest and most stylish casino in Tahoe. It's a terrific racing and sports book. Harveys draws in a young, sophisticated crowd. The showroom focuses on cabaret-style shows and sexy revues, while the **Hard Rock Cafe** hosts live music on Friday and Saturday nights.
- ✓ **Caesars Tahoe** (☎ 888-829-7630 or 775-586-7771; [www.caesars-tahoe.com](http://www.caesars-tahoe.com)), the only real theme casino in Tahoe, is also the most glam. Caesars contains the best of the sports books, although Harveys gives it a run for its money. It offers the best showroom, too, with such heavyweight headliners as Wynonna, David Copperfield, and Tom Jones, as well as championship boxing. Attention party animals: Caesars houses **Club Nero**, Tahoe's biggest and best dance club.



If you hope to catch a big-name headliner, check the schedule before you leave home and make reservations to avoid disappointment.



The casinos make sure families feel welcome. Harrah's, Harveys, and Caesars all offer sizable video arcades where classics like Pac Man and Donkey Kong buzz and beep alongside the latest virtual-reality games. In addition, the casino showrooms often offer all-ages entertainment, such as magic shows, at earlier family hours.

## Side-Tripping to the Gold Country

California's gold-rush country is rich in color and history. Dotted with 19th-century-mining-towns-turned-cutesy-B&B havens, the region is a big weekend destination for Northern Californians. The area has plenty to see and do, but nothing so major that you should devote the half-week you'd need to drive the region's main thoroughfare, Highway 49, from end to end. Leave that for a future visit, after you've covered so many of California's highlights that you have the time to dedicate to it.

However, a portion of the Gold Country is so easy to reach on the drive to or from Lake Tahoe that we highly recommend you dedicate half a day to seeing its main (and most fascinating) attraction, the **Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park**, where the gold rush began. You can also stop in a gold-rush town or two. Keep in mind, though, that the Gold Country can be brutally hot in summer, so dress accordingly.

### Getting there

We suggest you focus on the **Gold Chain Highway**; this section of Highway 49 runs roughly north-south between I-80 (the road to North Tahoe) and U.S. 50 (the road to South Tahoe). I-80 connects with Highway 49 at **Auburn**, 35 miles east of Sacramento and 78 miles (a gorgeous 1½-hour drive) west of Tahoe City. U.S. 50 connects with this section of Highway 49 on the south end, in **Placerville** (originally dubbed Hangtown for its single-minded justice system), 43 miles east of Sacramento and 55 miles west of South Lake Tahoe.

The roughly 23-mile drive between Auburn and Placerville along the Gold Chain Highway takes about an hour thanks to one narrow lane in each direction and more than a few hairpin turns. **Coloma**, the hairsbreadth of a town where you'll find the Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park, is roughly midway between the two.

- **If you're heading to South Tahoe:** Pick up I-80 (which you may already be on if you're coming from the Bay Area) in Sacramento, turn south on Highway 49 to do your exploring, and then head east to South Tahoe after you meet up with U.S. 50. If you're leaving from South Tahoe, reverse the process by taking U.S. 50 west, Highway 49 north for exploring, then I-80 west when you're done.
- **If you're heading to North Tahoe:** Take U.S. 50 east from Sacramento, then take Highway 49 north, then I-80 east to Tahoe City. From North Tahoe? You got it — I-80 west, Highway 49 south, U.S. 50 west to your destination.

## *Marshall's gold and Sutter's mill*

The **Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park** is nestled in the golden Sierra foothills on Highway 49 between Auburn and Placerville at Coloma (☎ 530-622-3470; [www.parks.ca.gov](http://www.parks.ca.gov)). Actually, about 70 percent of Coloma is the park. This is where James Marshall, a carpenter, discovered two itsy-bitsy gold nuggets on January 24, 1848, at John Sutter's mill on the dusty banks of the American River. This discovery managed to launch gold-rush mania and redirect California history in the process.



A working re-creation of Sutter's mill, a few intact gold-rush-era buildings, and enlightening exhibits capture the pioneering spirit and excitement of that day and the '49ers get-rich-quick craze that followed. This place is very cool, and kids will enjoy it more than you may expect. To take maximum advantage of this historic site, start at the **Gold Discovery Museum Visitors Center**, just off Highway 49 at Bridge Street. Come early and ask the rangers about guided discovery tours and sawmill demonstrations (usually Thursday through Sunday at 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. in summer). You may even get a chance to pan for gold yourself! The buildings are open daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. (4:30 in winter), and the fee is \$4 to \$6 per car. Bring a picnic lunch or snack.

By the way: James Marshall, poor soul, never saw a dime of the gold in them thar hills.

## *Old Town Auburn*

In Auburn, the area just off I-80 at Nevada Street (bounded by Court Street, Lincoln Way, Washington Street, and Maple and Commercial streets) is **Old Town Auburn**. This is an ideal example of an Old West gold town transformed into a boutique downtown. Nevertheless, it still maintains a strong historic feel with original buildings boasting false storefronts along steep, cobbled streets. Head to the **Bootleggers Old Town Tavern & Grill**, 210 Washington St. (☎ 530-889-2229), for a lunch stop with an appealing local vibe.

To get some background history on the area, stop at the **Placer County Courthouse**, the notable neoclassical building with a mismatched hat — a Renaissance gold dome — at the top of the hill at 101 Maple St. (at Court Street and Lincoln Way). Inside is the petite **Placer County Museum** (☎ 530-889-6500), which tells the story of Auburn's rise as a motherlode gold-rush town, and is a great place to pick up information on other attractions in the area.

## *Where to stay in the Gold Country*

If you want to spend more time in Gold Country, the following places are good bets for lodging:

- ✓ Located within the bounds of the Marshall Gold Discovery Park, the **Coloma Country Inn Bed & Breakfast** (☎ 530-622-6919; [www.colomacountryinn.com](http://www.colomacountryinn.com)) captures the spirit of the locale in a lovely and well-appointed 1852 farmhouse.
- ✓ In Auburn, your best bet is the **Holiday Inn of Auburn**, on Highway 49 within walking distance of Old Town (☎ 800-814-8787 or 530-887-8787; [www.holiday-inn.com](http://www.holiday-inn.com)).



Certain accommodations near **Yosemite National Park** make ideal bases for exploring the region, especially the **Groveland Hotel** and hotels in Oakhurst, such as the posh **Château du Sureau**. See Chapter 16 for details.

## *Prospecting for History in Sacramento*

California's state capitol is, admittedly, not the most exciting destination in this book. The nearest "real" city, San Francisco, has always held an iron grip on sophistication and glamour and that won't change no matter who's sitting in the governor's office. Snobbery aside, however, the town is absolutely worth a one-day or overnight detour, especially if you have kids on board. Our governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, has become a tourist draw (not that he's available to sign autographs), and Old Sacramento, with a terrific train museum and riverside location, is quaint and walkable. Just a 90-minute drive from South Lake Tahoe (two hours from North Lake Tahoe), Sacto is a practical stop on the way to or from Tahoe for an overnight or a side-trip if you're skipping the Gold Country, but still want to sample state history.

### *Getting there*

Vast housing tracts and freeways surround the city, but finding your way to Old Sacramento and the downtown area is easy. From Interstate 5, take the J Street exit and follow the signs. Highway 80 from the Bay Area intersects I-5 just south of downtown. If you are driving from Tahoe, head west on Highway 50 to Highway 80 and north on I-5.



What do the locals do on their way to visit the relatives in Sacramento? We stop at the factory outlets in Vacaville off Highway 80. No fab designer dubs unfortunately, but you can pick up Levi's, all kinds of athletic shoes, baby OshKosh, and imperfect Jelly Bellies (as if there were such a thing!).

### *Where to stay and dine*

Should you decide to spend the night, you'll have a reasonable selection of chain hotels and motels to choose from. The Hyatt Regency on L Street is where the governor stays when he's in town (he still lives in Los Angeles), but our suggestion, just for the fun of it, is to book a room on the **Delta King**, 1000 Front St. (☎ 916-444-5464; [www.deltaking.com](http://www.deltaking.com)). A 1927 riverboat docked in Old Sacramento, the staterooms are tiny but cute, and the boat is outfitted with a restaurant and a 115-seat theater presenting shows nightly. Room rates are \$119 to \$134 (\$550 for the Captain's Suite).

Restaurants dot Old Sacramento and the locals are happy with all the new places to dine around the capitol building. Rumor has it that the guy likes the **Esquire Grill**, 1213 K St. (☎ **916-448-8900**), but even if that's unsubstantiated, the classic American chop house is as good as it gets around here.



When you need a break from exploring the city's attractions, check out the cafeteria in the basement of the State Capitol. You won't find a better value in town for Tex-Mex specials; we tried the food and found it more than satisfying. You can also pick up a sandwich for \$4.95 that comes with chips and a soda. The décor down there is dreadful and dark, but you can order lunch to go and eat it outside in the beautiful park.

### *Exploring California's capital city*

Sacramento's highlights center around a downtown core that includes the State Capitol and Old Sacramento. Also worth a visit is Sutter's Fort State Historical Park.



Street parking is metered and will require a handful of quarters if you choose to go that route. Otherwise, there are parking garages around Old Sacramento. Trolleys make 40-minute round-trip drives around the Capitol Mall and Old Sacramento; the fare is 50¢ and this is a cheap, stress-free way to get your bearings.

### *Old Sacramento*

When elementary school kids in San Francisco make the annual train trip to the state capitol, this is where they disembark. Old Sacramento, along the Sacramento River, was the center of commerce around the time of the gold rush, when Sam Brannan opened a general store here. Flooding and fires decimated most of the buildings in the 1850s; in the 1860s, a plan to raise the area above flood level was instituted, but eventually businesses moved east closer to the state capitol buildings. Forty years ago, the city decided to reinvest in the area, renovating the buildings that could be salvaged and reconstructing others. Pick up a map at the visitor center on 2nd Street, which includes a walking tour of these 20 blocks. Yes, this is a tourist-driven area with way too many sweet shops, useless trinkets, and annoyingly stupid T-shirts; on the other hand, it's no more offensive than Pier 39 in San Francisco or Cannery Row in Monterey. Plus, it's kind of pretty down there by the river.

The great attraction if you have the slightest interest in the railroad is the **California State Railroad Museum**. A gigantic building filled with 19th-century trains, you can watch a film that traces the history of railroading, and clamber aboard to view the elegant dining and sleeping accommodations. The exhibit on the Chinese laborers who essentially built the transcontinental railroad is especially touching. Between April and September, steam train rides are offered on the weekends.

2nd and I sts. ☎ **916-445-6645**. [www.californiastaterailroadmuseum.org](http://www.californiastaterailroadmuseum.org). Admission: \$4 adults, free for kids 16 and under. Open: Daily 10 a.m.–5 p.m.

### ***The State Capitol Building***

The last of California's eight capitol buildings (the first five being located in other cities) was occupied near the end of 1869, but actually completed in 1874. The classical Roman-Corinthian structure is stately and grand, especially compared to the modern buildings now housing the majority of the government's offices. The capitol sits at one end of a Victorian-styled park with 40 acres of trees, war memorials, and a fragrant rose garden.

You can take guided tours on the hour or wander around the historic offices and exhibit rooms. The Assembly and Senate galleries on the third floor are open for viewing as well. Strangely enough, you can even walk into the governor's outer office and check out the big, framed photograph of Arnold and Maria, prominently featuring the largest, toothiest grins in California.

*10th Street, between L and N streets. ☎ 916-324-0333. [www.assembly.ca.gov/museum](http://www.assembly.ca.gov/museum). Free admission. Open: Daily 8:30 a.m.–5 p.m.; hourly tours start at 9 a.m.*

### ***Sutter's Fort State Historic Park***

An entrepreneur with a history of failed businesses, the Swiss immigrant Captain Johann Augustus Sutter temporarily left his wife and five children behind in Basel, Switzerland, in 1834 to escape his creditors and seek his fortune in America. After travels across the states, and sailing as far as Honolulu, Sutter made his way up the Sacramento and American rivers, landing finally just a mile from the eventual site of his fort. California history — notably Northern California's — is shaped in large part by the discovery of gold at Sutter's Coloma mill. But Sutter, an educated, intelligent, and uncommonly decent man, first built a fort in 1840 that was the center of trade and farming in the area he named "New Helvetia." Much of the fort today has been reconstructed and belongs to the California State Park system. Along with a self-guided audio tour that covers this remarkable man's life, you see examples of the compound's workshops and living quarters. Living history events and pioneer demonstration days are often scheduled on Saturdays throughout the year. It's a must for kids, but we thought the place was pretty cool ourselves.

*Between K and L streets and 26th and 28th streets. ☎ 916-445-4422. [www.parks.ca.gov](http://www.parks.ca.gov). Admission: \$2 for adults 17 and over; free for kids (special events admission is \$4 for adults). Open: Daily 10 a.m.–5 p.m.*

## ***Gathering More Information***

The regions covered in this chapter offer far more to do beyond what's mentioned here. Contact one of the local visitor organizations for more information, especially if you're interested in an activity not discussed.

### ***Lake Tahoe***

The **Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority** (☎ **800-AT-TAHOE** or 530-544-5050; [www.bluelaketahoe.com](http://www.bluelaketahoe.com)) has the information you need on South Lake

Tahoe and environs. After you arrive, stop by the **South Lake Tahoe Chamber of Commerce**, at 3066 S. Lake Tahoe Blvd., east of Altahoe Boulevard (☎ 530-541-5255; [www.tahoeinfo.com](http://www.tahoeinfo.com)), open Monday through Saturday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

For information on the north shore, contact the **North Lake Tahoe Resort Association** (☎ 888-434-1262 or 530-583-3494; [www.tahoeinfo.org](http://www.tahoeinfo.org)). After you arrive, stop by their terrific visitor center at 380 North Lake Blvd. (on the south side of Highway 28; the sign says “CHAMBER OF COMMERCE”) in Tahoe City, open Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., Saturday and Sunday from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. (hours vary seasonally).

If you'd like information on the Nevada side of the north shore, contact the **Incline Village/Crystal Bay Visitors Bureau** (☎ 800-468-2463 or 775-832-1606; [www.gotahoe.com](http://www.gotahoe.com)).



For Tahoe **road conditions**, call ☎ 800-427-7623; for **weather**, call ☎ 800-752-1177 or 530-546-5253.

### *The Gold Country*

For more information on the Auburn area, including local B&B recommendations, contact the **Placer County Visitors Council** (☎ 530-887-2111; [www.visitplacer.com](http://www.visitplacer.com)).

If you plan to spend more time in the region, consider heading south to cute-as-a-button Sutter Creek (whose **Chatterbox Cafe** the *New York Times* noted “may be the finest luncheonette in North America”), and nearby Jackson. The **Amador County Chamber of Commerce** (☎ 209-223-0350; [www.amadorcountychamber.com](http://www.amadorcountychamber.com)) has more information.

To the far north end of Highway 49 are Nevada City and Grass Valley, which many consider to be the finest tourist towns in the Gold Country. Contact the **Grass Valley/Nevada County Chamber of Commerce** (☎ 800-655-4667 or 530-273-4667; [www.grassvalleychamber.com](http://www.grassvalleychamber.com)) or the **Nevada City Chamber of Commerce** (☎ 800-655-6569 or 530-265-2692; [www.ncgold.com](http://www.ncgold.com)).

### *Sacramento*

For maps, travel packages, hotel reservations, and brochures, call or stop by the **Old Sacramento Visitors Center**, 1004 2nd St. at J Street (☎ 916-442-7644; [www.oldsacramento.com](http://www.oldsacramento.com)). It's open daily from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Downtown, look for the **Sacramento Visitors Center** at 1303 J St., Suite 150 (☎ 916-264-4740). This office is open weekdays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.