

Lake Tahoe and Yosemite National Park By Suzanne Wright

As I stared out at the impossibly blue water (more about why, shortly) of Lake Tahoe I racked my brain as to why I live in Atlanta. Then it came to me: Hartsfield International Airport's ability to whisk me away to gorgeous vistas like this is one great reason.

I visited Lake Tahoe and Yosemite in September. For a full week, I frolicked under sunny, deep blue skies scented with pine. Impossibly perfect cloudless days were humidity-free, in the mid-70s; the dark, starry nights dipped into the 30s. My friend Margo served as tour guide; a realtor who's lived in Lake Tahoe for 45 years, she reveled in showing me beautiful spots such as Cascade Lake and Emerald Bay. She also loaned me a Mercedes SUV for my own explorations. Everyone should have at least one Margo in his or her life.

Ten million years ago, the Earth's crust bulged and lifted, completing the Sierra Nevada mountain range. At Lake Tahoe, the crust slide up and then down between faults, creating a basin surrounded by multiple peaks. Two million years ago, the lake began to form when Mount Pluto on the northern end erupted and formed a volcanic dam. Over hundreds of thousands of years, rivers, streams, rain and snow filled the basin—with 39 trillion gallons.

The lake is 22 miles long, 12 miles wide, surrounded completely by the mountains; its surface elevation is the highest of a lake its size in the U.S. At its deepest point it is 1,636 feet, the third deepest lake in North America, the tenth deepest in the world. Although it never freezes, the water is cold, ranging from just 41F to 68F. Why is the water so blue? The thin, clear mountain air allows the pure crystalline water (you can sometimes see down 70 feet in spots) to reflect the sky above. Its 72 miles of shoreline straddling Nevada and California represents some of the most coveted, expensive real estate in the U.S. Steve Winn, Las Vegas' hotelier extraordinaire, recently sold his place for \$25 million.

Thankfully, your pockets don't have to be as deep for a good time. Margo treated me to a gourmet lunch at Adele's in Reno, after picking me up at the airport. We feasted on velvety sautéed chicken livers, ahi tuna salad and a powdered sugar-dusted tuna Monte Cristo sandwich, washing it down with white wine, while businessmen (they were all men) did deals. We were properly fueled for the hour and 15-minute drive to her Tahoe Keys home. Tahoe Keys is an enclave that resembles the upscale neighborhoods of South Florida's Atlantic coast, replete with Intercoastal-like waterways where residents moor their boats.

If you don't have a pal to crash with, check out the vintage hotels along wooded Highway 89. Historic Camp Richardson has both hotel and tent accommodations that are wallet-friendly. Next door, the fascinating Tallac Historic Site features estates with names like Valhalla that date from the late 1800s. Down the road, be sure and drop into Cantina for a

juicy carnitas, homemade guacamole and a margarita. Pumpkin pancakes are the carbs of choice at quirky Bountiful Café, open for breakfast and lunch.

After noshing here, you'll have enough money left for a sunset cruise on the Woodwind, a catamaran that serves champagne (okay, it's Cook's) and snacks (okay, it's Chex Mix). Still, the night I went, the full moon was nearly up as we returned to shore after plowing the calm waters. The gondola ride at Heavenly gives you a bird's-eye view of the city, lake and alpine scenery (the Tahoe Basin is a popular ski resort), as you are hoisted more than 3,000 feet above the lake to 9,123 feet. There are hiking routes at the top or you can just enjoy the stunning scenery.

Margo informs me that the North Shore of the lake is exclusive and pricier; the South Shore (where she lives) more affordable and developed and home to more year-round residents. On the West Shore is Sunnyside, a lakefront restaurant. Its shrimp "martini"—so named for the glass holding pink crustaceans swimming in gazpacho studded with chunks of avocado—is all the better enjoyed with a view of passing sailboats.

We headed to Yosemite (about a four-hour drive) via the Tioga Pass. The drive is magnificent, and passes by Mono Lake with its visible salt deposits. The aspens are shimmering gold. Just before you enter the eastern edge of the park, stop at the Tioga Gas & Gift Mart; this is no ordinary Mobil station. It serves cocktails, has a gourmet food counter featuring lobster tacquitos and ahi fish tacos, and offers trapeze instruction for \$100 an hour or \$10 for one trip flying through the air with the greatest of ease.

We stayed at the Ahwanee, a stately, yet rustic inn operated by the Park Service since 1927. It's a splurge to stay here—rooms are \$350 and up, but you get an edge on meal reservations and you can almost count on a view of the granite from your window. Be warned: book a year ahead or gamble and ask for same-day cancellations. The massive dining room serves expensive dinners that have an Asian edge, such as onion seed crusted beef filet with wilted Chinese broccoli and black bean sauce. But I liked the \$35 Sunday brunch best. Light, moist, buttery scones, smoked salmon, full pasta and entrée bars, fruit, made-to-order omelets, dessert bar and a piano player accompanied by a waiter with a Louis Armstrong-like voice—you needn't eat again till dinner. We joked that we took in about 20,000 calories—the equivalent of what a hibernating bear needs each day to survive.

Next day, we tried to work off some of our excess. We saw a bride and groom being photographed at 9 a.m. in front of El Capitan's majesty on our first day. Although the falls weren't running (summer is dry) and Mirror Lake was a meadow, the grandeur of Half Dome and El Capitan in the changing light is transfixing. The best way to see the park is by bike, foot or free shuttle bus. Margo says it takes a lifetime to really explore the park that so inspired Ansel Adams. Or at least three rolls of film over two days.

Back in Tahoe, we took a day trip to Truckee, an old, funky cowboy-turned yuppie-tourist town (population: 15,000). There we shopped for the first time in a week. Margo

splurged on a shearling coat; I went for kitschy toys at Truckee Variety Store (magic tricks, candy, games) and after browsing for more than an hour, we both bought bath and body products at the lovely Pharmacy. We toasted our final day with two glasses of merlot, opened just for us, at Pianeta, a cozy brick and wood bistro where the locals call ahead for take-out risotto and ravioli.

Ensconced back at Margo's on my final night, packed and ready for my morning flight, I sipped wine in her backyard hot tub, counting stars and my good fortune.