



TRAVEL

Eine Landschaft der Superlative mit schneebedeckten Gipfeln, riesenhaften Bäumen, versteckten Tälern und geheimnisvollen Salzseen – von betörender Schönheit, doch erschreckend zerbrechlich. ELIZABETH ZACH entführt uns in Kaliforniens Sierra Nevada.

MEDIUM US AUDIO PLUS

In the High Sierras

When I was growing up in Sacramento, California's capital, the Sierra Nevada was all around me. On sunny summer days, you could see that there was still snow covering the tops of the mountains in the east.

The Sierra Nevada is home to three national parks, twenty wilderness areas, and two national monuments. These include Yosemite, Sequoia, and Kings Canyon National Parks, and Devils Postpile National Monument. Hundreds of hikers attempt all or parts of the John Muir Trail and Pacific Crest Trail across the mountain range every year.

Ski resorts in Tahoe and Mammoth have become famous, especially since the 1960 Winter Olympics were held in Squaw Valley. Lake Tahoe was – and still is – a summer vacation ritual for many families, with boating, barbecue parties, and concerts.

Damaging wildfires

And yet, many visitors to the American West may overlook the Sierra Nevada in favor of the Rocky Mountains, the Grand Canyon, or Yellowstone National Park. I admit that I, too, took the Sierras for granted when I was young. The mountains were always there, and always would be there, at least in my mind. I felt no great loss when I left Sacramento to move around the world. Even crossing other mountain ranges didn't make me wish I was back in the Sierra Nevada of my youth.

But several years ago, after nearly two decades of living abroad, I moved back to Sacramento. It was hard. Not only had the U.S. changed in my absence; I, too, had changed. Adjusting to life back in my hometown was not easy.

What I found, though, was that the Sierra Nevada made me feel better. Since my return, I've explored what seems to me to be nearly every inch of the Sierras, going back again and again for day hikes, snowshoeing, kayaking, and historical tours. When I'm away from the Sierras these days, I miss them.

And with California's long drought, and increasing wildfires, every visit here feels special. In October, the Windy Fire in Sequoia National Forest in the central Sierras destroyed about a third of the massive sequoia trees. No one would have thought this could happen. People used to think of the Sierra Nevada as a huge wall that fire couldn't cross. But today, the permanence I associate with the Sierra Nevada is more fragile, and more threatened, than ever before.

A landscape of superlatives

The 640-kilometer-long Sierra Nevada is around four million years old, geologists say. It's part of the American Cordillera, a nearly uninterrupted chain of mountain ranges that stretch across the western part of North and South America.

This is a landscape of extremes. The largest tree in the world – a giant sequoia known as General Sherman – is in Sequoia National Park in the southern Sierras. Lake Tahoe is the largest alpine lake on the continent. Mount Whitney is the tallest peak in the continental United States. And the Sierra Nevada is so huge that it wasn't fully explored until 1912, although miners and pioneers had crossed the range in the 1840s and 1850s, often putting their lives at risk.

Indeed, the early pioneers of this land came to my mind on a recent hike on Mount Judah in the northern part of the Sierra Nevada. The ten-kilometer trail starts at Donner Pass. It was a difficult rocky climb at first, past ancient trees that were starting to turn golden. I passed Lake Mary, a freshwater lake that's the largest of the Mammoth Lakes, before I reached the heavily forested slopes that lead to Donner Peak (2,444 meters). From the top, I looked down to a perfectly blue Donner Lake – a spectacular view.

The name Donner was given in memory of a pioneer group of men, women, and children who were migrating from Missouri to California in 1846, traveling in a wagon train. The group included a family with the surname Donner. Underestimating how hard winters in the Sierra Nevada could be, the pioneers found themselves trapped by a heavy snowfall in the mountains. By the time rescuers arrived, four months later, some of the pioneers had resorted to cannibalism to survive. Of the 87 people in the group, 48 survived.

Days of gold

Although the name Nevada comes from the Spanish word for "snow-covered," summer and fall here are

- adjust to sth.**
 - sich an etw. gewöhnen
- drought** [draut]
 - Trockenheit
- favor: in ~ of**
 - zugunsten von
- fragile** ['frædʒɪl]
 - zerbrechlich, empfindlich
- freshwater**
 - Süßwasser
- geologist** [dʒi'ɑ:lɒdʒɪst]
 - Geologe, Geologin
- granted: take sth. for ~**
 - etw. als selbstverständlich erachten
- migrate**
 - ziehen, übersiedeln
- mountain range**
 - Bergkette
- peak**
 - Gipfel
- permanence** ['pɜ:mənəns]
 - Beständigkeit
- resort to sth.** [ri'zɔ:rt]
 - etw. als letzten Ausweg suchen
- sequoia tree** [si'kwɔ:ɪə tri:]
 - (Küsten)Mammutbaum
- ski resort** [ri'zɔ:rt]
 - Wintersportort
- slope**
 - Berghang
- snowshoeing**
 - Schneeschuhwandern
- trail**
 - Wanderweg
- wagon train**
 - Planwagenzug



Bodie State Historic Park, a gold-rush ghost town.



Giant sequoias, the world's largest trees, grow only on the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada.

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White Pocket, on the Paria Plateau in northern Arizona

mostly warm. The foothills on both the west and the east sides of the Sierras are beautiful throughout the year. Especially in the fall, when the “quaking aspens” shake their golden leaves and apple orchards come alive, both regions attract visitors.

The drier, east side of the range looks different from the west side. The mountain slopes of the Eastern Sierra are covered with white fir trees and pines; in the desert stretching out across Nevada, you see cottonwoods and quaking aspen. Highway 395 snakes along the Sierra Nevada’s base, starting at the Canadian border and going down into Death Valley.

I took my first road trip along the Eastern Sierra in 2012. I spent a day exploring Bodie State Historic Park, a gold-rush ghost town dating to 1859. Miners here found \$35 million worth of gold and silver in the 1870s. I wandered into the old general store and into houses that had once been grand, looking out at the hilly desert landscape.

I stayed the night at El Mono Motel, across the road from a saltwater lake called Lake Mono. It is 2.5 times saltier than the sea, so you can easily float, like in the Dead Sea – and I did, under a cloudless sky. At Caldera Kayaks, I rented a canoe, and a guide accompanied me across the shallow water. We saw brine shrimp and hundreds of sandpipers, wading and swimming.

Driving further south, into the Inyo National Forest, I took a shuttle bus from Mammoth ski resort to see the volcanic Devils Postpile National

Paddling across the deep blue waters of Lake Tahoe

brine shrimp

- Salinenkrebse

cottonwood

- Amerikanische Schwarzpappel

fir tree

- Tanne

foothills

- Vorgebirge, Ausläufer

general store

- Gemischtwarenhandlung

gold rush

- Goldrausch

orchard [ˈɔːrtʃərd]

- Obstplantage

pine

- Kiefer

quaking aspen

- Amerikanische Zitterpappel

sandpiper

- Strandläufer

shallow

- seicht

snake

- sich winden, schlängeln

Fotos: topseller/Shutterstock.com, lucky-photographer, uschools/iStock.com



The Merced River flows through a canyon in Yosemite National Park



Columns of basalt at the Devils Postpile National Monument

Monument. The landscape is almost surreal. A short trail leads to a **basalt curtain** of nearly vertical columns that formed when rivers of slow-moving, molten lava cooled into six-sided columns. I walked to the top of the monument and saw the perfect **honeycomb design** of the column tops, a fascinating natural wonder.

Down and up

Today, I'm returning to the Sierras, going as far as the foothills that lie between Sacramento and Reno. I'm here to explore Cronan Ranch Regional Trails Park, an old ranch that's popular for hiking, cycling, riding, and **hang-gliding**. A few kilometers from Coloma, the birthplace of the 1848 California Gold Rush, these streams and hillsides are where miners came to make their fortunes in the 1850s.

Most of the trails run from north to south. I choose an eight-kilometer loop, with the accurate-sounding name Down and Up Trail. Passing a wide **meadow**, I decide to eat my lunch under a lonely **blue oak tree**. I watch as three people with hang-gliders test the wind's direction before running and **taking off** high into the air.

Later, the trail leads me down into a corridor of oak and pine. I can hear the **trickling** water of the South Fork of the American River. Reaching a dry, grassy **ridge**, I see the waterway, looking thin because of the drought. An **abandoned** farmhouse makes me think back to a time when there were no trails here, and pathfinders had to navigate the **virgin** landscape.

Untamed wilderness

I have the same feeling when I disappear into the **vast** Sierra Valley, in the **northernmost** edges of the mountain range. Often called the Lost Sierra, it feels cut off from the more developed areas

around Lake Tahoe, less than 60 kilometers to the south. The Sierra Valley may well be my favorite corner of this region. I love it for its silence and wild beauty, its dry ranchland and thick forests, its untouched lakes and **jagged** mountain peaks.

And then there's Nakoma Resort, where I recently admired the main building, designed in 1923 by Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright didn't plan for his so-called clubhouse to be built in the Lost Sierra. It was originally intended for a lake in Wisconsin, but personal problems in the 1930s forced him to abandon the designs, which were then discovered and bought in the 1990s by a Californian couple named Daniel and Peggy Garner.

The design of this golf resort is impressive, but it also feels welcoming. The designs for the roof and the **cedar** and **copper** towers were inspired by Native American wigwams. Inside, there are open **beams** and a huge dining room, with a **fireplace** like a campfire and **stained-glass windows**.

I stayed at Nakoma Resort because it's near the Sierra Buttes Trail. This difficult trail led me 600 meters up to the top. The narrow, rocky passages felt as though they would never end, but I did get to see masses of wildflowers. And from the lookout tower at the top, holding onto the **railing** as a **fierce** wind **picked up**, I could look down at the deep-blue Upper and Lower Tamarack Lakes, and the Young America Lake, all shining in the sun.

Another day, in early fall, I visited Plumas-Eureka State Park, where I found a trail to Madora Lake. I walked past fresh, golden **ferns** and along a trickling stream before reaching the **lakeshore** lined with **reeds**. **Canada geese** flew above, their tight V-formation reflected in the still water. They would be back here at some point – as I would, too, returning again and again to see the beautiful Sierra Nevada.

abandon [ə'bændən]

↳ verlassen, aufgeben

basalt curtain [bə'sɔ:lɪt]

↳ Kliff aus Basaltsäulen

beam

↳ Holzbalken

blue oak tree

↳ Blaueiche

Canada goose (pl. geese)

↳ Kanadagans

cedar ['si:dər]

↳ Zeder, Zedernholz

copper

↳ Kupfer

fern

↳ Farn

fierce ['fi:rs]

↳ heftig, stark

fireplace

↳ offener Kamin

hang-gliding

↳ Drachenfliegen

honeycomb design

[ˈhʌnɪkəʊm]

↳ Bienenwabenmuster

jagged ['dʒæɡɪd]

↳ zerklüftet

lakeshore

↳ Seeufer

meadow ['mi:dəʊ]

↳ Wiese

northernmost

↳ nördlichste(r, s)

pick up

↳ hier: heftiger werden

railing

↳ Geländer

reed

↳ Schilf

ridge

↳ Bergrücken

stained-glass window

↳ Buntglasfenster

take off

↳ abheben

trickle

↳ plätschern

vast

↳ riesig, weit

virgin ['vɜ:dʒɪn]

↳ unberührt;

hier: unerschlossen