

Tahoe Unmasked: An Escape to the Sierra Nevada

Robert Kaufman with Dave Weretka

suffice to say, travel with a capital “T” remains anywhere from low on the radar to non-existent. And getting on an airplane may only enhance the reluctance to wander far away with the cloud of COVID-19 still hovering. Yet, as the looming light at the end of the pandemic tunnel appears brighter, the option to start spreading your wings seems on the near horizon.

Any chronic wanderer quickly discovers the only cure for a prolonged high-grade cabin fever is busting loose on a trip. If that means a combination of golf and outdoor adventure, the perfect remedy could be an escape to the Lake Tahoe, Reno, Carson Valley region. But like any popular destination with a bevy of guidelines for traveling during a pandemic, just be sure to pack plenty of patience. Certainly, fresh mountain air and a big crystal blue lake will make it that much easier to maintain an even temper and restore some mental clarity.

The Sierra Nevada playground is split between California and Nevada. Its acclaimed centerpiece is North America’s largest alpine lake at 1,644-foot deep, 22 miles long, 12 miles wide, and with 72 miles

of shoreline surrounded by boundless mountain terrain providing a four-season menu of outdoor activities, from skiing to hiking to clear kayaking on Lake Tahoe to biking and world-class golf!

Elevated Links

The Lake Tahoe, Truckee, Graeagle, Carson Valley, Reno golf arena may not be home to any “bucket list” course in the sense that the Monterey Peninsula has Pebble Beach or Scotland with The Old Course at St. Andrews, but what it can claim are over 40 golf courses consisting of hundreds of fairways and greens in all shapes, sizes, and difficulty for golfers to navigate over a variety of mountain landscapes. Not to mention the ego-boosting high elevation helping the golf ball travel farther. Regardless of ability, the diversity, combined with easy flight access to Reno, should place this destination near the top of your golf travel “A-list”. The only dilemma: which courses to choose from?

Our Covid-19 tour teed off at Tahoe’s northern end in Kings Beach with an old-school golf experience at Old Brockway Golf Course (built in 1924), surrounded

by Jeffrey pine and plenty of lake views. Rated one of the top 9-hole courses in the country, the course is family-owned by Lane Lewis. Old Brockway also boasts direct linkage to the perpetually highly-ranked aforementioned 18-hole course along the famed 17-Mile Drive. In 1934-35, a rising entertainer named Bing Crosby hosted his “Crosby Clambake” here with friends for a small purse of money, but after outgrowing the venue, Crosby traded beaches and moved the event to Monterey Peninsula where it is known today as the AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am.

Around the corner from Old Brockway is Gar Woods Grill & Pier, where you can dine on the deck and watch the sunset over the lake. Make sure to take a walk out on the 130-foot pier and soak in the beauty. The Korean short rib street tacos are a must. You won’t regret it.

On the opposite end of the golf course spectrum, Clear Creek Tahoe is a 13-year-old private club and master-planned community. It is secluded within a pine-forested timber ranch, just 10 miles up Highway 50 from Glenbrook Bay. The admission ticket to Clear Creek Tahoe may not be bargain friendly, but

the behind-the-scenes amenities and activities, including a personal favorite 18-hole course designed by the renowned team of Ben Crenshaw and Bill Coore, make this setting one of the most coveted real estate assets throughout the Lake Tahoe panorama. Clear Creek Tahoe is especially appealing for anyone seeking a permanent getaway to take advantage of Nevada’s zero state income tax.

“It’s the club and everything that comes with it, including the Summit Camp where the entire family can spend time, kids and grandkids,” said member Buddy Goldstone. “It’s the spectacular setting, it’s the lake house on the beach at Lake Tahoe, and it’s the people that makes it a great place.”

Adjacent to Harveys Lake Tahoe Hotel in Stateline, Nev., is arguably the crown

jewel of Tahoe’s golf scene, Edgewood Tahoe Golf Course. Not only is it the lone course to physically border Lake Tahoe (the entire right side of the par-3, 17th fairway is beach), the ninth fairway allows for a tee shot to travel from the Golden State of California to the Silver State of Nevada. Even if you don’t play, this is the place to be every July for the annual American Century Championship to spectate plenty of golf drama produced by top stars from the NFL, MLB, NHL, and Hollywood. For winter sports fans, a section of the course along the lakefront is transformed into an ice rink to entertain several NHL hockey games.



Edgewood Tahoe GC



A unique way to view the lake is to actually get out on it. We’ve been coming here for years and this was the first time to actually experience it. A Clearly Kayak tour may be just what you need. Take a leisure tour around the shoreline in a transparent kayak and enjoy the clear (up to 70 feet deep) blue water. They also offer evening LED and ECO tours. Check them out at clearlykayak.com

Around the lake, make sure to stop off and take a tour of the Thunderbird Lodge. Built in 1939 and home to eccentric millionaire George Whittell Jr., it boasts a fascinating history. He loved to party and play cards with neighbors such as Ty Cobb and Howard Hughes. Known to have exotic pets such as Mingo the elephant and Bill the lion – the stories are endless and almost unbelievable. The Lodge also includes a 600-foot underground tunnel, blasted out of granite that leads to the boathouse. The boathouse contains a 55-foot mahogany and stainless steel

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Old Brockway GC



Edgewood Tahoe GC

already in place by the first week of June. The big unknown was what kind of demand there would be for golf during a pandemic and whether that demand was sustainable.

The weather throughout all of June was perfect for golf, with temperatures on most days in the low 80s and not much rainfall. Very quickly, it became obvious to operators that golf had come roaring back. Not just in Chicago and not just in Illinois. Courses across the country were reporting tee sheets filling up from dawn until dusk. And due to restrictions on cart usage as well as limited supplies of carts due to single-driver requirements, golfers got used to walking 18 holes.

"That was probably the most interesting aspect of last season," Markionni of the CDGA said. "Golfers might have started out walking due to cart restrictions but then, even when some of those were lifted and supply had increased, many golfers wanted to keep walking. Golf wasn't just fun for them, it was also a chance to exercise." He added that the golf operators he talked to didn't mind the loss of cart revenue. "Sure, some income was lost. But the general feeling was that golfers who wanted to walk would return again and again. That was an even better outcome."

How popular was golf in Chicagoland in 2020? A metric used by the CDGA is the number of rounds posted in the association's handicap system. In 2020, the number was 1,828,730 scores. That compares to 1,675,977 rounds posted for all of 2019—a 9% increase despite losing all of April and with limited play in May. A more dynamic comparison is found reflecting the number of rounds posted from May 1, 2019 to the end of the year (1,443,450) vs. the number of rounds posted from May 1, 2020 to the end of the year (1,749,293). That increase of 305,843 rounds shows a whopping percentage increase of 21.2% year-over-year. This despite the limited play of twosomes allowed every 15 minutes last May.

The numbers with DuPage County Golf were even more remarkable, reflecting green fee revenues of \$2.95 million—38% above those revenues from 2019. While the county saw a loss in food and beverage revenue due to clubhouse restrictions and golf outing banquets, the county was able to show a net gain of \$834,871 for the year, again despite losing all of April and a good portion of May.

"None of us could have predicted the way golf came roaring back in June," said Stevenson. "Not only were our Maple Meadows and The Preserve at Oak Meadows courses busy," he said. "Our 9-hole Green Meadows course attracted golfers who wanted to walk but just for nine holes."

Mickelson said that the most encouraging element to Mistwood Golf Club was where those pockets of growth came from. "We were seeing significant family engagement in the game, first time golfers, re-engaged golfers, and most importantly, massive expansions in junior golf. Our reach to juniors, particularly through programs like PGA Junior League, more than doubled in participation year-over-year."

Mickelson went so far as to predict continued growth in 2021 when, presumably, ballparks will open to some capacity along with soccer fields and restaurants. "I think we are entering a golf renaissance," he said. "Golfers who were either new to golf, re-engaged, and juniors will continue to be strong consumers for the foreseeable future. Yes, other sports and distractions will come along as we open things back up, but the seed and roots that were planted in 2020 run deep and we will see this tree bear fruit for a while (hopefully!)"



Markionni of the CDGA was similarly optimistic about the new season. "For starters, we know that April and May are bound to be better than in 2020," he said. "We certainly expect that people will go back to some of their normal activities like coaching baseball and attending sporting events. But we'd like to think that the great experiences golfers had in 2020 will bring them back to the course this year, even as COVID-19 restrictions ease."

The CDGA plans to run a full slate of amateur tournaments in 2021, kicking off with Mid-Amateur Qualifying in April and extending through the 90th Illinois State Amateur Championship July 20-22 at Mistwood Golf Club.

In reflecting on the 2020 season, Bill Johnson felt that the pandemic's impact on golf had even larger implications than just increased play and revenues. "Five years from now it is my guess that most will think about the pandemic," he said. "My mind goes to the social injustices that came to the forefront in 2020. At a time when others were talking about cancel culture and exclusion, golf truly became a game of inclusion. We saw people of all races, ages and genders flock to their local courses. At a time of chaos, golf offered tranquility. Those who were new to golf or who returned after being away rediscovered what we always knew: that this game is safe, communal, challenging and fun."

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Genoa Lakes GC



Toiyabe GC



Thunderbird Lodge

speedboat known as "Thunderbird." The Lodge is now a part of the state park system; call ahead for tour times. Visit them at thunderbirdlodge.org

Moving on from the lake scene to the valley environ, the switchback road over the Kingsbury Grade, topping out at 7,344-feet, drops into Carson Valley (20 minutes from South Shore) where the Lakes Course at Genoa Lakes Golf Club and the semi-private Robert Muir Graves-designed Toiyabe Golf Club (five minutes north of Carson City) are accentuated by the dramatic backdrop of the eastern slopes of the Sierra Nevada. While both are excellent options, the Lakes Course may tip the scale with the 19th hole, a no-brainer straight shot to "Nevada's Oldest Thirst Parlor" in the nearby town of Genoa, established 1853.

Shifting Gears

Before attempting any strenuous outdoor activity in a higher elevation, make sure your heart and lungs are in good working order. In no time flat after traveling from sea level, they will be tested to the max. Especially when starting at 7,000 feet and huffing and puffing your way to 8,157 feet on a mountain bike along the notorious 14-mile (one way) Flume Trail. Don't make this your first stop off of the plane. Give your body a couple days to acclimate and thank us later.

The 10-minute shuttle ride from the bike shop at Tunnel Creek Café delivers bikers to the trailhead located at Spooner Lake day use area in the Lake Tahoe Nevada State Park. Greeted with more than 1,000- feet of climbing during the first four miles (and the body screaming

"turn back!" while watching motor-assisted e-bikes whiz by) the chugging continues on the rolling uphill terrain through Aspen Grove on the Carson Range to the top at Marlette Saddle. Fair warning: regardless how much oxygen is inhaled and exhaled, the ride is about to pay huge dividends.

At the dam on Marlette Lake is where the single-track 4.5-mile Flume Trail starts. It traverses along the mountainside high above Sand Harbor and offers spectacular vistas of Lake Tahoe. The track drops 40 feet per mile.

"Make sure if you want to look at the views, stop and look. Don't become part of the view by riding off the trail," says Max Jones, two-time national mountain bike champion and owner of Flume Trail Bikes.

Once reaching the end of Flume Trail, all that remains to stay injury free is a three-mile, 1,500-foot descent to the finish line and a look back at an experience that takes your breath away.

With all bones still intact and no visible scars, the door sadly shuts on a much-needed getaway, far from a pandemic-induced hibernation. This Lake Tahoe experience definitely has us fired up for an encore.

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