

Nature and history blend in Truckee

By Beverly Mann
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Bay Area & Beyond

As I climbed over craggy rocks and broken shale and up winding ridges reaching 7,850 feet, I peered down from Mt. Judah to the crystal-blue Donner Lake below. I envisioned the struggling pioneers and ill-fated Donner Party, with caravans of wagons wending their way through this rugged terrain. I was exploring one of many scenic hiking trails combing the Truckee Donner mountain range.

Right at the doorstep of this nature's wonder sits the legendary lumber and train depot town of Truckee, 200 miles northeast of San Francisco. Steeped in a rich history of perseverance, the town has not lost its entrepreneurial spirit. Colorful characters and artists are still lured to

this alpine enclave and home to some of the best ski resorts in the country, such as the popular Northstar, directly connected to Truckee's first luxury hotel, the Ritz-Carlton Highlands.

My recent fall getaway was a perfect time to relax and experience the crisp mountain air surrounding miles of trails and to mingle with the friendly townspeople.

Exploring the past

I started my trek through Truckee with a self-guided tour at historic downtown along Commercial Row and Donner Pass Road. The Chamber of Commerce provided a handy map and brochures.

The chamber is adjacent to the newly opened Truckee Railroad Museum, situated in a cozy caboose next to the Southern Pacific railroad tracks.

The museum displays an array of models and artifacts depicting Truckee's transcontinental railway era.

Across the street stand rows of boutiques, cafes and restaurants (from homey to haute) housed in well-preserved 19th- and 20th-century edifices. Included is Carbona's, the oldest retail establishment with some of the best selections of women's hats and accessories. I couldn't resist buying a stylish sun visor, which served me well throughout my journey.

Walking westward, I entered Brickeltown, the original town before it officially became Truckee in 1868. Among the array of historic homes converted into store fronts, my favorite was Gioielli, a cheerful specialty bead shop with a Tuscan feel. Piles of colorful Venetian beads, handmade necklaces and Italian mesh ribbons created a dreamlike aura in this inviting shop. The accommodating owner assisted me with designing a necklace.

Hungry after my walk, I devoured a juicy bison burger and yummy sweet potato fries at the nearby Burger Me. The fresh, local ingredients, friendly staff and choice of alfresco seating facing the mountain vista were definite pluses.

Former residents

Later, I climbed up the hill at Spring



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Street to High for a visit to the Richardson House, a two-story haunted Victorian built in the 1880s. It is available for short-stay rentals and receptions.

The antique furnishings, rocking chairs, dark woodwork and original wainscoting create a warm ambience -- if you don't mind a rumored ghost. Some say they have seen one of the wives of original owner Warren Richardson occasionally drifting through the rooms. "Guests have sighted a ghostlike image with long dark hair sweep by their bed upon rising," said manager and longtime resident Chelsea Waltersheid.

Waltersheid, who gives historic tours of the town for individuals and small groups, wears many hats. In addition to volunteering for the Truckee Historical Society, she is curator of the Old Jail Museum. "You are not a local," she said, "if you don't hold three jobs."

The Old Jail Museum is one of the few surviving 19th-century jail houses left in the West. On Jibboom Street -- the former main street once lined with bars and brothels -- sits the hospital-turned six-cell jail, with 32-inch thick walls and a 200-pound steel door. Infamous criminals who once stayed here included Baby Face Nelson and Machine Gun Kelly.

Touch of tranquillity

Back downtown, the new 2,600-foot Carmel Gallery also caught my eye. It is adjacent to the landmark 1873 Truckee Hotel. Local artists and award-winning photographers, Elizabeth and Olof Carmel, create larger-than-life photographs (some 6-by-10 feet) revealing nature's spectacular landscapes. The vivid colors and special processing technique transform photos into illuminating paintings. One piece of artwork drew me into a brilliant yellow and magenta autumnal setting.

For more tranquillity, I wandered across the nearby railway tracks to a charming combo cafe and used book store, Truckee Book & Bean, touted as Truckee's underground bookstore. The turn-of-the-century stone and wood building with its hanging pink and fuchsia flowers reminded me of a Provencal country cottage. On Saturday evenings, old black-and-white films are shown to keep a touch of nostalgia.

My final day in Truckee, I literally curled up here with a book, while drinking a steamy cappuccino and eating a berry muffin. In a comfy corner, I ruminated over my weekend sojourn -- reveling in a world where nature's beauty, casual conversation and a good book take priority.

IF YOU GO

WHAT TO SEE: Donner Memorial State Park's Emigrant Trail Museum -- 12593 Donner Pass Road, 530-582-7894. Open 9 a.m.-4 p.m. daily. The museum is full of memorabilia of the pioneers. Richardson House -- 10154 High Street, 530-563-6874, www.therichardsonhouse.com. Gioielli -- 10280 Donner Pass Road, 530-582-4464, www.specialtybeads.com. Open 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. daily. Carmel Gallery -- 9940 Donner Pass Road, 530-582-0557. Open 11 a.m.-5 p.m. daily. Truckee Book & Bean -- 10009 West River Street, Suite B, 530-582-8302, www.truckeebookandbean.com. Open 8 a.m.-8 p.m. daily.

WHERE TO EAT: Pacific Crest Grill -- 10042 Donner Pass Road, 530-587-2626, www.pacificcrestgrill.com. Open 11:30 a.m.-3 p.m. weekdays for lunch, 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturdays-Sundays for brunch, 5:30-9:30 p.m. Sundays-Thursdays and 5:30-10 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays. Manzanita at Ritz-Carlton -- 13031 Ritz-Carlton Highlands Court, 530-562-3050, Open 7-10 a.m. for breakfast, 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. for lunch and 5-9 p.m. Sundays-Thursdays and 5-10 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays for dinner. Moody's Bistro & Lounge -- 10007 Bridge Street,

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530-587-8688, www.moodysbistro.com. Open for dinner 5:30-9:30 p.m. Sundays-Thursdays and 5:30-10 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays. Burger Me -- 10418 Donner Pass, Suite A, 530-587-8852. Open 11 a.m.-9 p.m. daily.

WHERE TO STAY: Truckee Hotel -- 10007 Bridge Street, Truckee, 1-800-659-6921, www.truckeehotel.com. For budget-minded travelers, rooms feature twin, queen or king beds. Rates for shared bathroom accommodations start at \$49 and private bathrooms start at \$99. Ritz-Carlton Highlands -- 13031 Ritz-Carlton Highlands Court, 530-562-3000, www.ritzcarlton.com. The luxury hotel includes a day spa, hiking and biking trails and ski lifts and cable cars leading to the Northstar Resort. Fall rates from \$229.

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