

Alpine Adventure

Cross-country skiing in Mammoth's winter wonderland.

Nineteenth-century naturalist and poet John Muir called the Sierra Nevada mountain range "a country of wonderful contrasts—frost and fire working together in the making of beauty." Over the past few years, my husband, Rob, and I have been fortunate to discover exactly what he meant. We have visited Mammoth Lakes in the Sierras during three seasons. We have hiked through a spellbound grove of shimmering aspens in the fall. The one season we missed was winter—until this year. In January, we set out with our Siberian Husky in tow to catch Mammoth in all its wintry glory.

It took us about six hours from Dana Point. The first part of the drive along Route 395 winds through the desert. You know you are getting closer to Mammoth when you reach the string of quaint little towns like Independence, Lone Pine and Big Pine. Bishop, the last of the group, is a booming metropolis compared to these and the last town you go through before you hit Mammoth, about thirty miles away.

It was almost ten at night when we rolled into town. I have to confess

that living in Southern California my whole life, snow is nothing short of a miracle to me. The first view of the spectacular white mountains against the dark velvet sky took my breath away. If something can be lovely and eerie at the same time, this is it. And stars... I can never get over the millions of stars scattered across this amazing backdrop.

We were staying at the Snow Creek Condos at the end of Old Mammoth Road, on the edge of town. We quickly unpacked and fell into bed exhausted. We awoke in time to catch the sight of a pale peach sunrise against the slope of the hills. It had snowed about an inch overnight, and everything was beautifully dusted in white.

Rob is always up for a new adventure, and he suggested we try cross-country skiing. I am hardly an adept downhill skier. But I do love the outdoors and a new experience. After looking at the Web site showing happy skiers posing outside the Tamarack Lodge, I agreed to give it a try. Although Mammoth has miles of cross country trails in and around the Village, Tamarack offers a ski school,

managed by ex-Olympic Skier Nancy Fidler, and over 30 kilometers of groomed tracks and ski skating lanes. Located at Twin Lakes, it's about a ten-minute drive from the Village. Tamarack operates from the first sufficient snowfall through the end of April.

Finding our way to the ski trailer, we were greeted by the friendly staff behind the counter. For \$59 you get your equipment, a lesson and a trail pass for the whole day.

After pleading to being beginners, we were introduced to our instructor, Brooke, and issued equipment. Cross country ski boots are much lighter and feel more like a hiking boot, as opposed to downhill boots, dubbed "cement shoes" by a friend of mine. The skis are also lighter and shorter.

Brooke showed us how to latch our boots onto our skis. Unlike downhill skis, cross-country skis latch only at the toe, leaving your heel free. The skis fit neatly into the groomed tracks. We started out without poles. Cross-country skiing feels like dancing—step, step, glide. After we found our balance and rhythm, we were issued our poles. These are used to propel you

forward. After a quick review of techniques for stopping – an essential – we were off. The lesson took a little more than an hour. No bad for a new sport.

Brooke guided us in a circle around the lake, over a rustic footbridge, past meadows covered in pure, unbroken white and through forests of towering pines. The quiet was broken only by the crunch of skis on the snow and wind rustling the branches of the trees.

Unlike downhill skiing, there are no crowds to fight, no lines to wait in. Cross-country skiers are a mellow and friendly lot, out to enjoy the fresh air and beautiful scenery.

We saw senior, middle-aged and young skiers all enjoying the lovely trails. Rob and I were delighted by the sight of a couple pulling a small sled called a pulk, with a toddler aboard, behind them.

During our stay, we also decided to try another alternative to downhill skiing—snowshoeing. There are a number of areas in Mammoth just perfect for snowshoeing. And there is virtually no learning curve to this sport. Just strap on your snowshoes, grab your poles and you are good

BY ANN SHULTZ

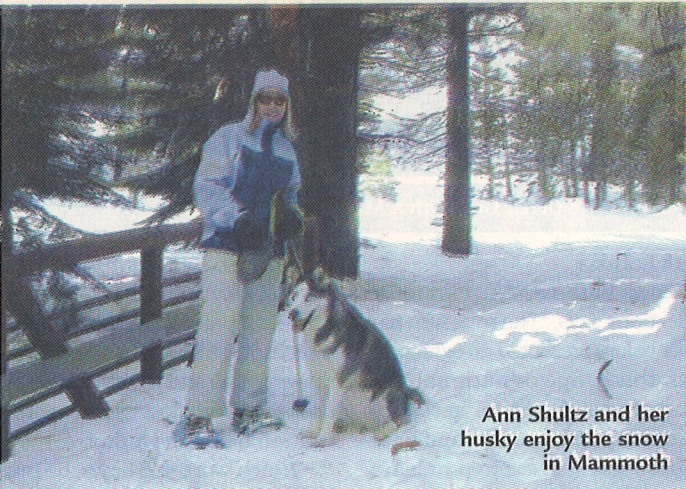
roadtrip

go. It costs about \$12 to rent shoes and poles for the day. We included our Husky, Belle, in this adventure. She is built for this weather and had a ball. We found that her feet were webbed and played out like two pairs of the best ocean flippers. These give her traction and balance in the snow. We had a great time exploring the nature preserve and trails around Snow Creek. Shoeing through the drifts of fine powder was a terrific workout, similar to jogging in the sand.

Snow Creek also has a full service gym to compliment your outdoor workouts. Daily or weekly membership rates are available to visitors. The gym has two weight rooms, an indoor pool, several racquetball courts and

reputation for having the best burgers in town.

With all the activity, it's easy to work up a Mammoth appetite. No worries. The town is home to a wide range of restaurants ranging from cozy pizza parlors to fine dinner houses. Roberto's, a favorite with the locals, offers delicious Mexican food. Catch skiing and trail tips at the restaurant's Margarita Bar. The Mogul offers tempting seafood, steaks and chicken all barbecued by your waiter. We like the Chart House not only for its scrumptious menu but also for the fire pit in the middle of the restaurant and the wide windows frosted with ice and snow. And no morning is complete without a latte or mocha at the local hangout, the Looney



Ann Shultz and her husky enjoy the snow in Mammoth

pool tables. It also offers a snack bar. If you find that you are a little sore after hitting the slopes and the trails, you can book a session with one of the gym's masseuses.

Mammoth also is a great place to just hang out and relax. Wespent one day meandering in and out of the shops in the Village. The town has its own outlet mall, which includes Ralph Lauren, Coach and mass stores. In addition, there are a number of sporting goods stores, bookstores, a Schat's Bakery and Rocky Mountain Chocolate store. We took a break for lunch at Berger's, which lived up to its

Bean. Don't miss their cinnamon drop scones.

A word about the weather—Mammoth is sunny, 300 days out of the year. We caught rays every day, even on the days it snowed. What a treat to see the sun sparkling on the snow, like someone had sprinkled fistfuls of diamond chips across the ground.

Mammoth Lakes offers fantastic food, beautiful scenery and lots of fun activities. "The Mountain" in winter is truly magnificent and not to be missed! **OCM**

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