**California Gold and Nevada Silver**

**A trip around the Sierra Nevada**

One of my favorite trips is from the Los Angeles area, up Highway 14 to Highway 395, up to the Tahoe area, and then across the Sierra to the Central Valley at Highway 49, through Bakersfield and then back to Los Angeles. There are many sights to see and activities along the way. Many of these places have been visited by Huell Howser on one of his “[California’s Gold](https://www.kcet.org/shows/huell-howser)” TV series.

**Rosamond**: The [Exotic Feline Breeding Compound](http://www.cathouse-fcc.org/), otherwise known as the Cat House or the Kitty Factory is where to go to see rare varieties of cats. Nearby is the old [Tropico Gold Mine](http://mojavedesert.net/desert-fever/tropico-hill.html) and [Willow Springs Raceway](http://www.willowspringsraceway.com/). On desolate Rosamond Blvd, towards Edwards Air Force Base, is [Century Circle](afftcmuseum.org/exhibits/edwards-afb-west-gate/) which has retired fighter planes from the F-100 to the F-106.

**Mojave**: This is a major railroad junction where both the Southern Pacific (now Union Pacific) and the Santa Fe (now Burlington Northern) met to share track through the [Tehachapi Pass](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tehachapi_Pass). The airport here is a storage area for many old commercial airliners, and it has been designated as a [spaceport](http://www.mojaveairport.com/). It was home to the [Rutan Voyager](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rutan_Voyager), the first aircraft to fly around the world nonstop and unrefueled. It was the starting point for the standard gauge supply railroad to Owens Lake where it intersected the rails from the north to build the [Los Angeles Aqueduct](http://www.history.com/topics/los-angeles-aqueduct). The aqueduct runs entirely downhill.

**Red Rock**: [Red Rock Canyon State Park](https://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=631) is a pretty, unreserved place to go camping in the desert. There are several desert points of interest nearby. In the El Paso Mountains mining area, there is the [Burro Schmidt Tunnel](https://www.desertusa.com/desert-prospecting/burro-schmidt-tunnel.html). It started off as an economic way of moving ore through Copper Mountain to the railroad, and then became an obsession. Roads in this area are primitive.

**Randsburg**: This is a living (barely, population 69 in 2010) ghost town off in the desert near Highway 395. Nearby, there is also [Johannesburg](http://www.ghosttowns.com/states/ca/johannesburg.html), also named after the South African mining area. There are many relics of the mining development in the area.

**Ridgecrest**: What is this large town doing in the middle of the desert? It all started during World War II when [Theodore Von Karman](https://www.jpl.nasa.gov/jplhistory/learnmore/LM-VonKarman.php) from Caltech was looking for a vacant place to do rocket and munitions testing. The [China Lake Naval Air Weapons Station](https://www.cnic.navy.mil/ChinaLake/) remains there today. The [Maturango Museum](https://maturango.org/) there is surprisingly worth visiting. The Coso Rocks outside of town are intriguing. The [Walker Pass](http://digital-desert.com/walker-pass/) (5250 feet) west of town to Lake Isabella is the furthest south auto pass over the Sierra.

**Searles Lake**: This is now the terminus for the railroad from Mojave. I was surprised one year by a long train on a Sunday at a seemingly vacant railroad crossing. Tons of minerals are mined from the underground lake water brines each year. The scenic [Trona Pinnacles](https://www.desertusa.com/desert-california/trona-pinnacles.html) to the east were formed by the drying lake. The road to the north and then east leads to Death Valley.

**Lone Pine**: To the west is the road leading to the starting point for the trail to the top of [Mt. Whitney](https://www.nps.gov/seki/planyourvisit/whitney.htm), the highest point in the continental US. To the east is the road to the former [Owens Lake](owenslakeproject.com/) (dried up by drought and the aqueduct), and then to [Death Valley](https://www.nps.gov/DEVA/). This is the lowest point in the US and frequently the hottest place in the US. The scenic [Alabama Hills](https://www.bishopvisitor.com/the-alabama-hills-a-quick-guide/) north of town have been used in many movies. The World War II Japanese internment camp of [Manzanar](https://www.nps.gov/manz/index.htm) is further north. There is a tour with several exhibits about what life was like for the residents (prisoners). While 110,000 people of Japanese descent were imprisoned in the continental US, 157,000 people of Japanese descent were helping the war effort in the Hawaiian Islands (maybe 2000 interred).

**Bishop**: This is a center for hiking trips in the Sierra along the [John Muir trail](file:///C%3A%5CDocuments%20and%20Settings%5Cjeremy%5CApplication%20Data%5CMicrosoft%5CWord%5Cjohnmuirtrail.org%5C). A deep valley is formed here with the Sierra Nevada on the west, and the White Mountains on the east. Caltech runs the [Owens Valley Radio Observatory](https://www.ovro.caltech.edu/) just to the south of town. There is a large hill to the north leading to the Long Valley dam that creates [Crowley Lake](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crowley_Lake) for aqueduct water storage. Near Lake Crowley, the scenic Rock Creek Road leads up the valley to the [Mosquito Flat trailhead](https://www.alltrails.com/trail/us/california/mosquito-flat-to-morgan-lakes) at 10,300 feet. The [Laws Railroad Museum](https://www.lawsmuseum.org/) has relics of the narrow gauge railroad that connected the Owens Valley to Carson City. Just south of town is [Keough’s Hot Springs](http://www.keoughshotsprings.com/).

**Mammoth Lakes**: We have been on many driving and bus trips for a weekend of downhill skiing at [Mammoth Mountain](https://www.mammothmountain.com/). There is also cross-country skiing and snowmobiling nearby. Throwing snowballs at unsuspecting people is also on the list. The gondola ride gives a great view from the top of the mountain. The June Lakes loop nearby offers scenic lakes and [June Mountain](https://www.junemountain.com/) ski area.

**Mono Lake**: Another casualty of drought and the aqueduct. As it shrinks, [tufa towers](http://www.monolake.org) appear where there were hot vents underwater. Many birds stop here on the islands in the lake and eat the brine shrimp. The next road across the Sierra ends at [Lee Vining](https://www.leevining.com/) on the shore of the lake. It has a steep upgrade to Tioga Pass (9943 feet) and then to Tuolumne Meadows in Yosemite National Park. This road did not open to auto traffic in 2017 until June 29 due to heavy snow accumulation.

**Bodie State Historic Park**: The town of [Bodie](https://www.bodie.com/) is a real ghost town, population is zero. It remains almost as it was when the last person left 50 years ago. There is a weather station here at an altitude of 8375 feet and during the summer, it regularly is the coldest place in the continental US with a minimum temperature of around 20 degrees F (-7 degrees C). It is surrounded by high desert and at one time in 1880 had a population of 6000. The remains of the town show that the people lived pretty well considering the isolation of the area. There are really bad roads into the town from various directions; the one directly to the west from US 395 is the best, but still dirt and rough.

**Carson City**: The capital of Nevada. A nice town but off the main transcontinental railroad line that goes through Reno. South on Hwy 395 at the Nevada border is [Topaz Lake](https://www.monocounty.org/places-to-go/lakes-rivers-creeks/topaz-lake/) with its sleazy casino.

**Lake Tahoe**: This is the largest mountain lake in the US. It is really pretty with nice beaches and pine trees all around the lake. [Emerald Bay](https://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=506) is surrounded by steep rock walls. There are several winter ski resorts in the area. At [South Lake Tahoe](https://tahoesouth.com/), there is a very long gondola for [Heavenly Valley Resort](http://www.skiheavenly.com/) with 120 cabins that proceeds directly up the hill and to the middle of the ski resort. Only the Truckee River flows out of the lake; it goes past [Squaw Valley](squawalpine.com/), proceeds down to [Reno, Nevada](http://www.reno.gov/about-reno), and then ends at [Pyramid Lake](http://www.pyramidlake.us/). On the Nevada side of [Lake Tahoe](https://tahoe.com/), there are several casinos.

**Virginia City**: This town was too [big and famous](http://www.visitvirginiacitynv.com/) to disappear. It was in one of the largest silver/gold mining areas in the country and remained active until 1943 when the US government closed all the gold/silver mines as not essential to the war effort. The town has many bars that really have metal bars across the front of the serving area. The town even had its [own railroad](https://www.virginiatruckee.com/) from Reno; the branch to the east side of Carson City is still active for tourist traffic. The old mines used much timber from the Lake Tahoe area to shore up the sides and roofs of the tunnels. A lot of money was spent in developing mines that went into the ore vein, but never produced anything.

**Ebbetts Pass**: This is a high mountain pass (8730 feet) with a very narrow paved road. It is scenic but cars are required to slow down for oncoming traffic due to no passing room. The [Highway 4](scenic4.org/) road is not open during the winter as it is never plowed. It also did not open in 2017 until June 29. The road is good (open in the winter) from the west as far as the [Bear Valley ski resort](https://www.bearvalley.com). Further to the west is [Calaveras Big Trees State Park](https://www.gocalaveras.com/travel-directory/calaveras-big-trees-state-park/) which has two groves of giant sequoia trees.

**California State Route 49:** The Golden Chain Highway. This highway goes along many of the towns of the gold rush era. From the north: Vinton, Downieville, Nevada City, Grass Valley; Auburn; Coloma (Sutter’s Mill); Placerville; Drytown; Amador City; Sutter Creek; Jackson; and then…

**Angels Camp**: The cute town of Murphys is up Highway 4. Outside of town is [Mercer Caverns](http://www.mercercaverns.com/) which is a deep show cave with nice formations. An artificial water sluice is outside the entrance for gemstone and fossil mining. The bag of sand is salted with products. They also have a good selection of geodes that can be split. There are also three other show caves along the Route 49: Black Chasm Cavern (Volcano), California Cavern (Mountain Ranch), and Moaning Cavern (Vallecito).

**Columbia**: The state of California purchased the town and runs it as an [active historic park](http://www.visitcolumbiacalifornia.com/). There are many period stores from the 1850’s with proprietors in period costumes. The library shows the history of the California Gold Rush. There are exhibits of old fire engines, mining artifacts, and stagecoach rides. Authentic meals of the era are served.

**Jamestown:** This is the home of [Railtown 1897 State Historic Park](http://www.railtown1897.org/). The park contains the original equipment and facilities from the railroad era in the foothills. Rides are available on a steam train. The roundhouse is still in use and contains several old steam locomotives in various stages of repair.