

Hiking the High Sierra

Let Mammoth Lakes rejuvenate you and your dogs.

Kyra Kirkwood

Every time I see majestic Crystal Crag jutting high above Lake George like a stone sentry, it feels like coming home. Since I was 9, my family and I have vacationed annually in Mammoth Lakes, Calif., a picture-perfect collection of nature's finest. Turquoise lakes rimmed with enormous pines and towering mountains provide everything from hiking and fishing to bear sightings and horseback riding.

All this, under gas-flame-blue skies that feel 3 million, not just 300, miles from Los Angeles. For ages I envied all who vacationed here with their dogs — and there were many to be found hiking, relaxing, and swimming. Finally, after all those years, I got my chance to be one of the pack.

A cabin on the lake

Each year, we stay at Woods Lodge on Lake George for a week during the high season, June through October. We spend days fishing the rocky shore, traipsing around the lake, reading, and hiking to neighboring lakes that epitomize the beauty captured by Ansel Adams. No matter how many times we visit, Lake George never changes or spoils. The cluster of rustic, cozy lake cabins overlooks Crystal Crag, and the waiting list for reservations is legendary. Tent camping at neighboring campgrounds is an option, but we're a heat-and-hot-water kind of family, and at only \$8 extra per night per dog, who can blame us? (760) 934-2261; www.mammothweb.com/lodging/woodslodge

The first time my husband Patrick and I took our dogs — German Shepherd Dog mixes Annie and Owen — to Mammoth with the rest of the family was an exercise in patience, joy, and wonder.

After driving up I-395 through the Mojave Desert and eye-blink hamlets like Lone Pine, we arrived at the town of Mammoth Lakes, and Lake George six miles later. The air, which always feels cleaner in the mountains, energized the dogs upon contact. They bounded out of the car and immediately explored the chipmunk holes puncturing the ground. We brought along their crates, which helped the dogs feel at home and safe at night, and during our trip for pizza at Giovanni's in town. www.villageatmammoth.com

The week, as it always does, rushed by. We spent time hiking around the lake and catch-and-release fishing. Annie loved boat rides, while Owen tried to follow Patrick as he launched his fly-fishing float tube from shore. The sun dappled Lake George, peppering the crisp air with pockets of warmth as I waited on the bank, photographing golden aspen, muddy dogs, and my fly-fishing husband.

Lake hopping and hiking

Our adventures weren't limited to Lake George, though. Everyone enjoyed hiking to nearby lakes TJ, Barrett, and Crystal, nestled at the base of Crystal Crag, especially my city dogs. October is a quieter month in Mammoth, making the switchback-filled hikes even more serene. The silence actually had sound, and the sky appeared close enough to taste. Annie and Owen basked in the sunshine along the shores, relaxed and content, as Patrick and I munched on Power Bars to get our second wind.

Hiking around neighboring Horseshoe Lake also proved popular. Unlike other lakes in the area (Lake Mary, Lake Maime), Horseshoe does not have any cabins or campsites. But with an easy, level hiking trail, it's a must-see for local and visiting dogs, with plenty of shore-romping, stick-chasing, and water-frolicking to be had.

At the end of each day, we'd cook dinner, brush the dogs, and curl up by the fire with books, cards, or board games. The cabins have no TVs or phones, creating a perfect refuge. Owen loved snuggling with my sister on the couch, while Annie snored contentedly at our feet.

I've never seen my dogs as peaceful as I did in Mammoth. I suppose this enchanted corner of the High Sierra works its magic on canines as well as it does on humans. It breathes life into weary souls and rejuvenates them. Annie and Owen, tails wagging and tongues hanging out, looked like brand new puppies, and my own spirit lifted as I watched them live life to the hilt along the shores of my own childhood playground of Lake George.

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