

# TRAVEL

AND RECREATION



ROAD TRIP

## Mountain summer

Follow Kaiser Pass Road to  
the heart of the Central Sierra

BY ANN MARIE BROWN  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SEAN ARBABI

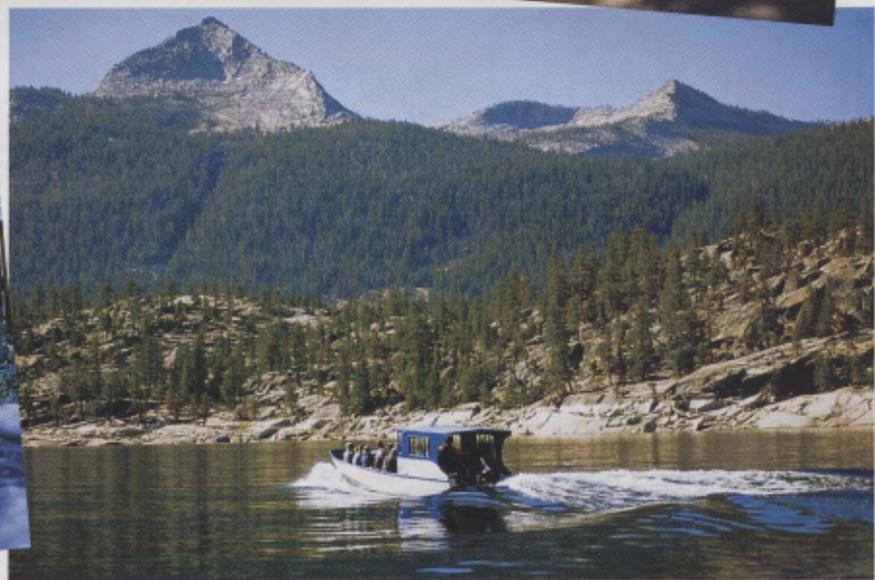
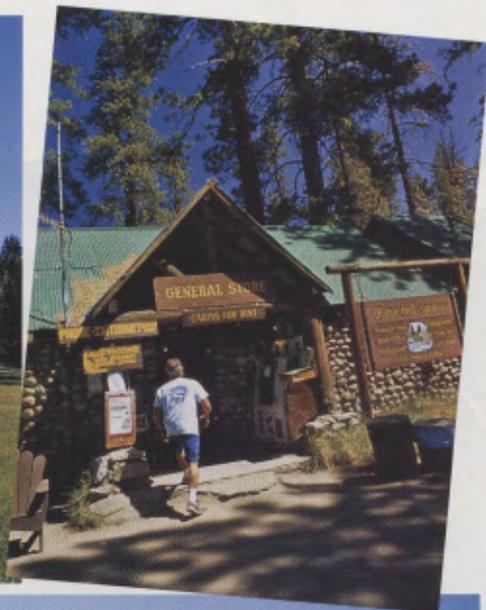
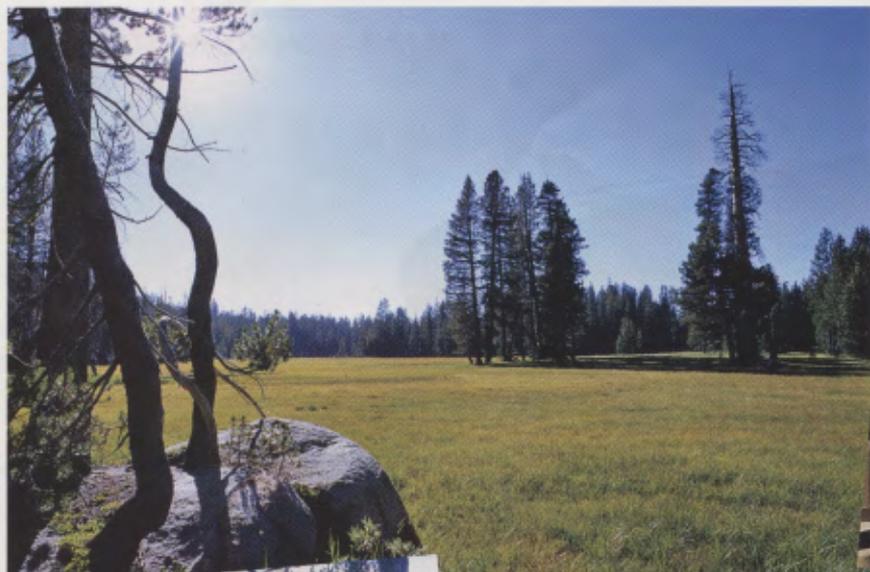
**"If you are looking** for the Hilton," Nick Grogan advises, "you won't find it here."

Well, no. As retired wilderness manager of the Sierra National Forest's High Sierra Ranger District, Grogan knows his mountains. But, he adds, if you want to camp, hike, or fish, the part of the Sierra reached by Kaiser Pass Road "offers plenty of chances for that."

The Sierra Nevada is creased by famous mountain passes, from Walker in the south to Donner in the north. Of all of them, 9,184-foot Kaiser is not the best known but ranks among the most beautiful. Situated midway between Yosemite and Kings Canyon National Parks, 70 miles northeast of Fresno, Kaiser Pass grants a rare portal into the Central Sierra.

Because a holy trinity of wilderness areas forms the region's boundaries—the Kaiser Wilderness to the west, the John Muir Wilderness to the south and east, and the

Riders lope among the pines at Muir Trail Ranch, which has been hosting vacationers for more than 50 years.



**Sierra Nevada scenery** (clockwise from top left): meadow off Kaiser Pass Road; Mono Hot Springs store; the Florence Lake ferry; soaking at Muir Trail Ranch.

Ansel Adams Wilderness to the north—Kaiser Pass Road provides drive-up access to a landscape you would otherwise reach only by backpacking. The road extends 22 miles into the mountains, and experts like Grogan recommend allowing more than an hour to cover that distance. But you'd be better advised to plan on staying a day, or three. The mountain scenery is that incredible.

State 168 out of Fresno is your ticket to Kaiser Pass. For last-minute supplies and gasoline, stop in the small town of Prather,

16 miles before Shaver Lake. (Prather is also the site of the forest service's High Sierra Ranger Station.) The highway winds uphill past Shaver Lake to the eastern shore of Huntington Lake and the turnoff for Kaiser Pass. From this point you must go easy on the gas pedal—Kaiser Pass Road is a narrow, circuitous byway that locals call a mountain pig path. Grogan advises drivers to pull over when oncoming cars approach.

Eight miles in, the road reaches its summit. Turn right at the sign for White Bark Vista and you

will stand witness to a granite panorama dominated by the sawtooth ridge of the Minarets—a banquet of peaks and precipices.

**Follow the wilderness road**

The first sign of civilization, 7 miles beyond the pass, is the volunteer-run High Sierra Visitor Center, which is open sporadically in summer. Open or not, it's a good place to stretch your legs and enjoy the view.

A mile farther, the road forks, with the left fork leading to Lake Thomas A. Edison, or Edison Lake, as everyone calls it. Along

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the way is Mono Hot Springs Resort. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the resort was built in 1935, a few years after Southern California Edison completed this stretch of road as part of the Big Creek hydroelectric project. The current owners, the Winslow family, have been running the place for 43 years. The location is spectacular, with *very* rustic—even for this part of the world—cabins and mineral water bathing tubs. (Camping is another overnight option. There are seven campgrounds in the area—for reservations, visit [www.reserveusa.com](http://www.reserveusa.com) or call 877/444-6777—and two of them, Vermilion and Jackass Meadows, have piped water; bring bottled water to the others. Backpackers who stop by the High Sierra Ranger Station can pick up a free wilderness permit, though availability is limited—reserving a permit costs \$5—and then set up a tent anywhere that's at least 100 feet from a stream or lake.)

At Edison Lake, Vermilion Valley Resort has lodging, boat rentals, ferry service, and a small cafe decorated with mounted trophy trout. The lake is known for big fish, especially wild German brown trout, so mealtime conversation usually revolves around who is catching what with which tackle. VVR is a beloved rest stop for backpackers, who use the resort as a resupply point while trekking the Pacific Crest Trail or John Muir Trail.

### The Queen of the High Sierra

Back at the fork, if you take a right, in about 6 miles you'll come to Florence Lake, with a small but friendly store and boat rentals. This is the end of the road, where the pavement ends and the wilderness begins. To continue through the Sierra, you have to walk—or ride. Florence Lake is a base for High Sierra Pack Station, which leads half-day, all-day, and overnight horseback trips from here and from Edison Lake.

At Florence Lake, most hikers board the ferry, a 22-seater that once tended

buoys on San Francisco Bay. At the far side of the lake, trails lead into the John Muir Wilderness. Karla Hurley, whose family has been operating Florence Lake Store & Ferry since 1947, says, "People get on that boat and they leave everything behind. Even if it's only for a few days, entering the wilderness means making a commitment to a much simpler way of life."

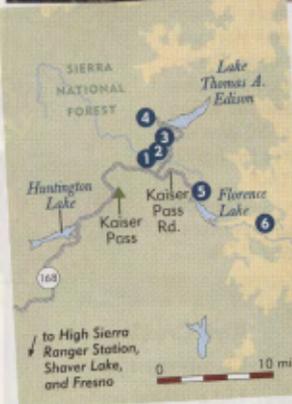
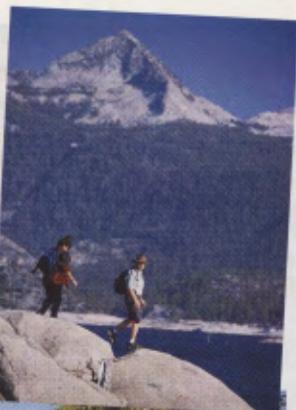
Karla's mother, 90-year-old Adeline Smith, takes that commitment to heart. With the help of Karla, son-in-law Tom, and granddaughter Hilary, Smith manages the Muir Trail Ranch, a rare patch of private land within the federal wilderness area. Since 1953, Smith has been welcoming guests to the ranch's cozy cabins along the South Fork San Joaquin River, a 5-mile hike or horseback ride from the ferry drop-off. Developed hot springs, a dining hall, and a stable of 30 horses complete the guest ranch package, but there is no bling here.

"Sometimes people show up expecting a fancy dude ranch, and on the first day they wear their clean white britches and tall boots with spurs. But by the second day, they put on jeans and a straw hat and are much happier," says Smith.

About a mile from the ranch is the 211-mile John Muir Trail, which attracts backpackers from all over the world. Over the years, the Smith and Hurley families have supplied hundreds of hikers with food and medical assistance, earning Adeline Smith the affectionate title of "Queen of the High Sierra."

In her 50-plus-year reign at the ranch, Smith has seen many changes, including the addition of a generator to produce electricity and the construction of the existing log cabins.

Still, things haven't changed too much—which is just the way Muir Trail Ranch's guests like it. Many, like Margie Youngblood of Texas, return year after year. "I've only missed one summer since 1987," she says. "The ranch is like a retreat. Going back just does my soul good."



## Kaiser Pass

Stock up on major supplies and gasoline before leaving Prather or Shaver Lake on State 168. Get maps, wilderness permits, and visitor information at the High Sierra Ranger Station (8-4:30 daily; 29688 Auberry Rd., off State 168, Prather; [www.fs.fed.us/r5/sierra](http://www.fs.fed.us/r5/sierra) or 559/855-5355).

**1 High Sierra Visitor Center.** Call ahead. 559/877-7173.

**2 Mono Hot Springs Resort.** Very rustic cabins (18 total) and natural bathing tubs. From \$55. [www.monohotsprings.com](http://www.monohotsprings.com) or 559/325-1710.

**3 Vermilion Valley Resort.** 5 tent cabins and 4 motel rooms from \$50. [www.edisonlake.com](http://www.edisonlake.com) or 559/259-4000.

**4 High Sierra Pack Station.** Guided half-day (\$60) and all-day (\$120) rides and multiday pack trips (call for rates). [www.sierrapackstation.com](http://www.sierrapackstation.com) or 559/285-7225.

**5 Florence Lake Store & Ferry.** Ferry \$9, \$17 round-trip. [www.florence-lake.com](http://www.florence-lake.com)

**6 Muir Trail Ranch.** Typically, the entire ranch is rented by the week for groups of 15 to 20, but space

is sometimes available for smaller groups and for individuals (check the ranch's website for dates). \$595 per person per week. [www.muirtrailranch.com](http://www.muirtrailranch.com) or 209/966-3195.

## Hiking

The area around Kaiser Pass Road is made for summer hiking. Here are three of our favorite trails.

**Devil's Bathtub.** After a steep tromp through Twin Meadows, a rocky, alpine lake awaits swimmers.

**DISTANCE:** 8.8 miles round-trip.  
**DIFFICULTY:** Strenuous.

**START HERE:** Near Vermillion Campground at Edison Lake.

**Mono Meadow; Doris and Tule Lakes.** Stop at Doris Lake, 1 mile out, or press on to Tule Lake and Mono Meadow.

**DISTANCE:** 5 miles round-trip.  
**DIFFICULTY:** Easy.

**START HERE:** Mono Hot Springs Resort, near entrance to Mono Hot Springs Campground.

**Twin Lakes.** Spectacular views from Potter Pass and a visit to two granite-bound lakes.

**DISTANCE:** 6.4 miles round-trip.  
**DIFFICULTY:** Moderate.

**START HERE:** 4.8 miles east on Kaiser Pass Rd. from State 168.

Park on the south side of the road; the trail begins on the north side. ●

An easy drive from Fresno, Kaiser Pass Road leads to Mono Hot Springs (top left), hiking near Florence Lake (top right), and dramatic roadside views (above).



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