

THE CITY YOU'RE MISSING

Reno-Tahoe

The spirit of the American West lives on in Nevada, where adventure and creative reinvention go together.

BY MILES HOWARD





LITTLE CITY, BIG HEART
Clockwise from left:
Ride around Tahoe,
climb downtown,
snack at Simple Ice Cream
Sandwiches, draw at
the Nevada Museum of
Art, and learn to love
Reno's Playa Art Park.





I'm standing by a window on the seventh floor of Whitney Peak Hotel, downtown Reno's first independent non-gaming hotel, admiring the shimmering green dome of the Silver Legacy Resort Casino and the burnt sienna glow of the Carson Range, when a tanned, muscular arm suddenly swings out from my left. There's a woman ascending the side of the building.

Reaching for my phone, not sure whether I should take a picture or dial 911, I watch as a young woman in a neon-green tank top Spider-Mans her way up the building. She's wearing a harness and grabbing onto rock-like holds affixed to the hotel's exterior. It dawns on me slowly—the 16-story “east face” of the Whitney Peak is a climbing wall. People don't just come here to dine, drink, and luxuriate. They also scale the scenery.

This unlikely marriage of boutique city lodging and vertigo-inducing recreation is the perfect aperitif for the three days I'm about to spend in Reno and Lake Tahoe. I traveled here from Boston expecting to split my time between smoky blackjack tables and ritzy mountainside boat clubs. But, as I'll soon learn, Reno and Tahoe comprise something else entirely. There is so much more to this dual destination in northern Nevada than “the city and the mountains.”

It's a thriving pocket of the American West, where the mythical frontier spirit of adventure and enterprise is not just alive, but evolving. Reno-Tahoe, a region once defined by the western migration of the 19th century, is booming again. Only this time, the lure isn't timber or gold. It's the cosmopolitan-meets-country existence that Reno-Tahoe offers to all—a lifestyle well worth living.

A tale of two places

The story of Reno-Tahoe is written in silver. The year was 1859 and the Carson Range was crawling with bearded men who came here to prospect for precious metals in the rivers and mountains. A silver lode near Mount Davidson had sparked an influx of aspiring mining tycoons. But to reach the prize, the prospectors had to cross the Truckee River, a powerful waterway that meanders across the border of Nevada and California. An enterprising fellow built a log bridge over the Truckee and charged a toll for the privilege of getting across alive.

The prospectors scraped out most of the silver from Mount Davidson, but in discovering the silver haul and scouring the surrounding wilderness, the men unwittingly stumbled across something else. Something much, much bigger. West of Davidson lay a massive cerulean lake flanked by mountains. The lake was quickly transformed into a transportation hub for miners and for loggers who harvested the king-size trees that grew around the shores. Steamboats stacked with timbers chugged across the water.

And so the region's future was decided. Decade after decade, travelers kept coming to these neighboring commercial hotspots, inspired by the idea of Manifest Destiny and the dream of hacking paradise out of the wilderness.

But slowly, the promise of the West evolved. Swanky resorts, where you could spot Frank Sinatra and the Rat Pack sipping Manhattans, appeared at Lake Tahoe. Reno took a more taboo turn and embraced a 1931 residency law that made it easy for couples to move to Nevada and get divorced. Then the city went all-in on legalized gambling, which the mob dominated until organized crime was driven out by new industry regulations and law enforcement in the latter half of the 20th century. For many outsiders, the story of Reno-Tahoe ends at the casinos and the marinas. The true story, which continues to this day, is one of contrasts.

My first night in town, when I step off the plane and enter the terminal of Reno-Tahoe International Airport, I expect to be greeted by slot machines. (The airport is five miles from downtown Reno.) But the first thing I encounter is a bronze statue of a smiling skier. *I'll have whatever he's having*, I think. The floor is decorated with a blue marble "river," populated by reflective fish, which I follow past the baggage carousels to the hotel shuttle pickup area. I feel a wave of excitement. As my shuttle zooms toward the animated neon skyline of late-night Reno, I think that I could be arriving at the doorstep of a new frontier.

All roads lead west

Rising from my plush bed at Whitney Peak the next morning, I pull open the curtains to reveal a stunning view of the city's casinos. The Eldorado, Silver Legacy, and Circus Circus tower above me like citadels from a *Lord of the Rings* movie. This looks more like the Reno I expected. But there's more to these three casinos than meets the eye. Together, they constitute The Row, a \$100 million renovation project undertaken by Eldorado Resorts to redefine the idea of what a casino can be. (Whitney Peak, which opened in 2014, was a precursor to this.) Why settle for a bullpen of slot machines and cocktail bars when you can also catch a show, sample locally brewed craft beers, shop for designer clothing, or even enjoy a hot stone massage at a luxury spa?

I head out and walk through the glowing Reno Arch, which features an irresistible tagline: "The Biggest Little



Fuel Up

↑ **Liberty Food & Wine Exchange** / This artisan eatery in Reno's Riverwalk District uses locally sourced ingredients to handcraft shareable plates featuring pastas and cured meats. After having a glass of vino at the wine bar, take a leisurely stroll along the Truckee River.

Lone Eagle Grille / A fine dining experience on Tahoe's north shore is enhanced by lakeside views and a firelit ambiance that calls to mind one of northern Nevada's historic lodges. Try the juicy roast chicken with garnet yam puree, roasted zucchini, and thyme jus.

Louis' Basque Corner / Immigrants from the Basque Country of northern Spain have long flocked to the Reno-Tahoe area. Basque culture and food are well-represented at this Reno icon, which has offered family-style dining (try the lamb) for more than 50 years.

City in the World." To my left, I see the towers of Harrah's Reno. Bill Harrah opened his first bingo parlor here in 1937, later opening casinos and hotels in Reno and Lake Tahoe. The company that bore his name would go on to become one of the most influential and recognizable in the gaming industry, with locations across the country, but this is where it all began, and where it continues. The east tower recently introduced an adults-only arcade to appeal to millennial customers. And the resort at Harrah's Lake Tahoe—which includes a casino, hotel, and venues for live entertainment—will soon finish an extensive remodel.

Ahead, the Truckee River rumbles through downtown, bordered by gorgeous pedestrian walkways studded with fountains and observation terraces. I'm about to cross the river bridge when something distracts me. It's a stone plaza with giant sculptures, including a whale made of black steel and colorful stained glass.

This gargantuan beauty is the "Space Whale," which debuted at Burning Man in 2016. The legendary annual arts gathering goes down in the desert about three hours north of Reno, and one could say that the creative freedom of Burning Man is in Reno's blood. Once you leave the glitz of the casinos, you step into a city where a new 21st-century "silver rush" is happening. For the past decade, Reno has been redefining itself as a technology hub. Rising startups, including Flirtey (a leading drone delivery company) and PassivDom (which makes 3D-printed houses), have set up shop here. The housing shortages and rising rent in Silicon Valley sent engineers and developers northeast, where they found affordable spaces and beautiful scenery in Reno.

The incoming entrepreneurs got more than just real estate. They discovered a city full of skilled college students and graduates ready to put their degrees to work. The University of Nevada, Reno has long been recognized as a top-tier research institution with acclaimed engineering, education, and business programs. As is often the case in Reno, high quality doesn't come at a high cost: The university estimates that its students pay 80 percent less



in tuition than they would at most Tier 1 research institutions. UNR has one of the largest study abroad programs in the nation, and researchers there make waves at an international level. But the university is also critical in driving an increasingly diversified area economy. Its esteemed School of Medicine, for example, plays a major role in a robust health care industry and in making northern Nevada a hub for medical research.

When Silicon Valley came knocking, UNR had already begun doubling down on its reputation as an incubator of top talent, building new advanced labs and residence halls to accommodate an increasing number of students. The university has invested heavily in new facilities, and enrollment swelled to nearly 22,000 students by the fall of 2017. Some UNR grads have found their way into Reno's existing startup circuit, while others have launched companies of their own.

Once word traveled that Reno was amassing its own tech scene, the big fish came, too. The word on the tip of everyone's tongue these days is Tesla. The automotive and energy company opened its first "Gigafactory" here in 2016. It's the largest lithium-ion battery factory in the world, and it's still growing.

Finally crossing over the river bridge, I step into Midtown. This leafy residential neighborhood is proving to be one of the most popular enclaves for Reno's



Truckee River Walk

PHOTOGRAPHY BY VISTIRENOTAHOE.COM (WOMEN), PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDY FOX (SPACE WHALE)



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Game On

← **Silver Legacy Resort Casino** / The spa at this downtown Reno destination offers top-notch pampering, and gamers can play slots, table games, and keno.

Harrah's Lake Tahoe / Outdoor recreation and adventure abound at Lake Tahoe, and you'll find ample opportunities for relaxation and entertainment at this resort.

Atlantis Casino Resort Spa / High rollers may want to treat themselves to a suite with its own in-room spa, but every guest will enjoy a luxurious stay.

expanding workforce. The high-rises segue into ranch homes, warehouses, and streets lined with vibrant trees. The lawns are decorated with succulents and stones. In three blocks, I pass gigantic murals depicting historical figures and aliens, a sushi burrito joint, a stringed instrument shop, an indie bookstore in a manor house, and a board game brewpub where the millennial patrons are building a Lego city on the tables. It's Saturday, so for all I know, they're unwinding after a week of tweaking algorithms and rationing VC cash.

After tasting a series of beers and spirits at 10 Torr, a craft distillery and brewery that uses a unique vacuum distillation technology to give its spirits a remarkably pure flavor, I walk several blocks to the Nevada Museum of Art. There I see Trevor Paglen's "Orbital Reflector," an early prototype of an inflatable silvery sculpture that will travel into the cosmos on a SpaceX rocket not long after my visit. Upstairs, I encounter a gallery of photographs by Anne Brigman. Admiring the hazy sepia aesthetic of Brigman's landscape shots, I step into the mind of someone deeply in love with the mountains. Brigman spent decades scouting the Sierra Nevadas for shooting locations, part of a long tradition of artists taking inspiration from Reno-Tahoe's striking and diverse environment.

Today, whether we're talking about engineers or artists, the Western pilgrimage continues. And some roads west lead to places higher and wilder than Reno itself.

The real treasure of Tahoe

I wake up late the next morning, pack my bags, and check out of Whitney Peak. It's time to go from Reno to the more elevated shores north of Lake Tahoe. Today's weather couldn't be sunnier. The drive will be epic. But first, some espresso—which I procure from a painter's studio-turned-coffee shop called Crafted Palette—and an early lunch at Liberty Food & Wine Exchange, where I tuck into some creamy spinach campanelle with winter squash, chorizo, and black truffles.

An hour later, hopped up on caffeine and carbs, I'm in a rental car flying along the highway toward the Carson Range. I take the scenic route, following state Highway 431 as it ascends through the foothills. Then things escalate. I work the wheel of my Nissan Sentra liberally to negotiate the hairpin turns that the road takes up the forested mountain slopes.

As I pass the entrance for the Mount Rose ski resort, the road crests an exposed height of land, allowing my engine



a breather before I pop around the corner and see it.

Take every love-at-first-sight story you've heard about the Grand Canyon, add water, and you'll start to understand how it feels to descend toward Lake Tahoe. The boundless expanse of blue is dizzying. It makes the sky look dull. As I enter the basin in which Tahoe sits, I imagine how it

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must have been for those grizzled prospectors to find this place by accident, when all they really wanted

was to get rich. For those guys, Tahoe was a means to an end—a waterway that expedited their passage to the silver. But today, Lake Tahoe and its natural beauty are as much a prize as the precious metals once culled from the countryside.

The great outdoors is the backbone of Tahoe, which is visited by about 3 million people each year. In all likelihood, some of the silver harvested from Tahoe has actually since come home through

the booming tourism economy. This is impressed upon me when I drive into Incline Village, a resplendent community of woodland homes on the northern shoreline, and when I reach the Hyatt Regency Lake Tahoe Resort. I've bunked at a few Hyatts, but this one is surrounded by huge ponderosa pines and decorated with fire pits and stained wood paneling.

When I check in, the front desk clerk offers me a complimentary glass of champagne and a make-your-own s'mores kit. I accept the s'mores kit, which includes all the sugary ingredients and a big wooden roasting stick. The poolside fire pit is open until 9 p.m., the clerk adds. I'll remember that for later.

History lesson

I'm tempted to spend the afternoon reading by the roaring fireplace in the lobby, but down the road, there's something I've been dying to see. Thunderbird Lodge is the lakeside estate of billionaire investor George Whittell Jr., the scion of an immensely wealthy family, who, even before he bought tens of thousands of acres on Tahoe's Nevada shoreline in the 1930s, had earned a reputation as an extravagant man, a collector of expensive cars and exotic animals. Whittell grew more reclusive in his later years, and his desire for privacy helped prevent developers

from building on this pristine slice of the great outdoors. You could call the late tycoon (Whittell died in 1969) something of an accidental conservationist.

Today the estate functions partly as a history museum, full of curious relics: zebra-skin rugs, secret tunnels, a posh yacht. It's the real-life equivalent of Wayne Manor, only more eccentric, and it's now open for public tours and events thanks to the nonprofit Thunderbird Lodge Preservation Society.

I drive along the lakeshore road and turn onto a driveway that leads to a wrought-iron gate, which I open myself



THE HISTORY OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

↑ **Virginia City** / Just a 30-minute drive from downtown Reno, this well-preserved boomtown looks much as it did in the days of Nevada's 19th-century silver rush. Take a walking tour of the historic buildings, visit an 1860s stamp mill, or stop in for a cold one at an Old West saloon.

Piping Rock Equestrian Center / The Reno Rodeo, which runs for 10 days in June, does much to keep the region's Western heritage alive. But you can tour Nevada like the cowboys anytime by going horseback riding. Piping Rock offers summer camps, private lessons, and trail rides in the Reno-Tahoe area.

National Automobile Museum / Discover more than 200 historic cars, including the 1949 Mercury Series 9CM six-passenger coupe driven by James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* and the 1907 Thomas Flyer that won a six-car race from New York to Paris in the earliest days of the automobile.

before continuing. I reach the sprawling stone lodge itself, perched above Tahoe on a steep rocky hillside studded with labyrinthine footpaths. I'm not even sure how to find the lodge entrance until the bark of a dog directs me to a heavy wooden door that's swinging open.

I'm greeted by Shireen Piramoon, who moved to Tahoe from Silicon Valley to oversee communications and marketing for Thunderbird Lodge. As the lodge's resident pooch, a collie named Frannie, joins us in a glass hallway with views of the lake, Piramoon explains to me that when Whittell bought this land, he wanted to transform the expansive wooded grounds we're now looking over into his "gateway" retreat between the Bay Area and the mountains. "Then he fell in love with the land and committed to preserving 27 miles of forested shoreline from development," she says.

We admire artifacts like Whittell's ancient ham radio and Mrs. Whittell's walk-in closet before descending a secret staircase into the catacomb-like tunnels that run underneath the lodge. They bring us to the boathouse, where Whittell's renovated 55-foot yacht is bobbing in the water. (In the summer, the boat becomes operational.) Outside, it's gusty, and whitecaps are forming on the lake. Herbs are growing in a garden along the stone walkway—rosemary, sage, thyme, chives. A wave crashes against the shoreline and sends mist spraying in our direction.

The magic of Thunderbird Lodge warms me like a blanket as I drive back to Incline Village against a fuchsia sunset. There's something humbling about the countryside, and this has no doubt played a role in Lake Tahoe's evolution from a bustling steamship hub for miners and loggers to one of the most beautiful destinations in America. The western landscape here is no longer stripped for resources. The houses and businesses blend in with the natural scenery. The resorts are more like basecamps for experiencing the outdoors.

But like Reno, Tahoe also keeps an eye on the road ahead, especially when it comes to outdoor recreation. Tomorrow, I'll get an extremely visceral taste of what that looks like.

Alpine glow

People here will challenge themselves with a "dual sport day." As in, you wake up, crank out one athletic activity before noon, refuel with lunch, and then break a second sweat in the afternoon. I set my alarm for 6 a.m. because the morning activity I've chosen for my dual sport day is on the California side of Tahoe, at Squaw Valley Resort.

The Tahoe Via Ferrata climbing route opened a few weeks before my arrival. Guided climbs take adventurers, using steel anchors and cables, up an awe-inspiring rock face. As a hiker who can't handle traditional freestyle rock climbing, I would appear to be the ideal customer.

The sun rises over Squaw Valley as I pull into the resort parking lot and see what I'll be climbing. Tram Face,



a sandstone-colored obelisk of rock, towers above the resort. Was this really such a good idea? I'm thinking of bailing, but once I walk into the office of Alpenglow Expeditions, I'm immediately put at ease by my Patrick Swayze-esque guide, Dave Nettle, who shakes my hand and says, "You ready to do this or what?" How can I say no to this guy?

We're joined by a pair of middle-aged adventurers from San Francisco, and Nettle walks us through the specialized harnesses we'll be using. Then we pile into the back of a hulking cage truck called "The Beast" and rumble up a steep mountain road to the start of our climbing route.

The next three hours might be the most adrenaline-soaked of my life. The Via Ferrata takes us up some of the sheerest exposed rock faces I've encountered. But there's always a rung or a handrail to grab, and that makes all the difference as we traverse towering cliffs, as well as ridgelines, chimneys, and some "monkey bridges" made of cables. Dave leads initially and then says to me, "Your turn, buddy." So I lead. On the drive to Squaw, I could barely keep down my granola bar breakfast from anxiety. Now I'm blazing the trail as we circumvent a buttress bulging from the cliff. The West brings out everyone's inner mountain man at some point.

Later, I spend the afternoon paddling around the north shore of Tahoe in a yellow kayak with a well-traveled expedition guide from Tahoe Adventure Company. The lake



is still making waves and our boats take on water as we paddle parallel to the distant Sierras. By the time we return to land, my "dual sport day" coming to an end, I'm beat but satisfied.

The new west

I have an early supper back in Incline Village with two old friends. They live in nearby Truckee, and drove in for work today. As we munch on savory tri-tip tacos at T's Mesquite Rotisserie, they regale me with tales about the snowdrifts they endured last winter—for weeks, they were able to ski right off their roof.

We walk down the road and grab a round of malty schwarzbier at Alibi Ale Works before hugging goodbye. It's dark now, and getting colder by the minute. I'm getting sleepy. But there's something I still have to do.

My last marshmallow bubbles and chars over the fire pit at the Hyatt. I'm the only s'mores roaster here. The two women to my right finished their kits when I arrived, and they're now audibly planning their pitch for an interior design conference. Sparks kick up into the night sky. Pine boughs rustle overhead. I smile. The West is back. I saw it, finally, in Reno-Tahoe.

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