

# Tahoe Heaven

## Lake Tahoe, USA

Lake Tahoe has long been at the top of the list of homegrown, year-round holiday destinations for American families (and celebrities!), and its famous ski fields, including Heavenly and Squaw Valley, positively pulsate with happy snow-lovers in winter. In late spring and autumn, Tahoe turns on all of its natural charm, offering abundant water sports and soft adventures for all ages, to the great delight of **BARRY STONE** and his family.

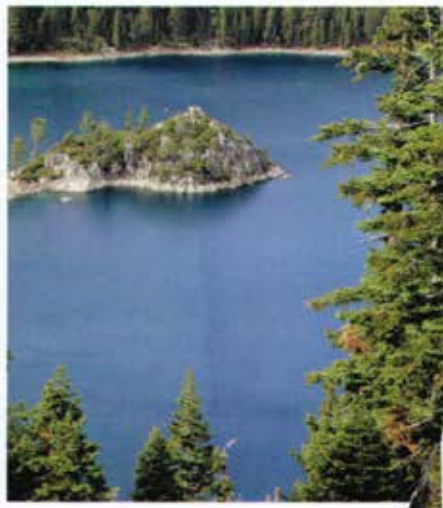




**H**igh in the Sierra Nevada mountains on the California/Nevada border, the Stone family were in a reflective mood. Warmed by the communal campfire that has long been a nightly event at Cedar Glen Lodge on the northern shoreline of Lake Tahoe, North America's largest alpine lake, we sank into our Adirondack chairs, sipped hot chocolates and munched on our *s'mores* - fire-roasted marshmallows and Hershey's chocolate sandwiched between graham crackers (which tastes a whole lot better than it reads). And we were licking our wounds. Our pursuit of 'soft adventure' had resulted in a couple of, well, mishaps ...

Earlier that day my 15 year-old son Jackson and I were kayaking the frigid waters off Vikingsholm Beach in Emerald Bay, once a drowned glacial valley now a teardrop-shaped slice of typical Tahoe heaven, on our way to Fannette Island, the lake's only island and so tiny you could probably circumnavigate it in ten minutes.

Like all who paddle out to, or otherwise wash up on, this granite speck, we clamboured up its 10m 'summit' and into the ruins of its stone "Tea House". Built in the late 1920s by



Fannette Island, Emerald Bay



**“ ... I saw my boys perched on a granite outcrop, all played-out, staring westwards across the lake to the setting sun ...”**

Lora Knight, who owned the island and a considerable portion of Emerald Bay's foreshore, this was where she delighted in bringing guests for afternoon teas. Even in its heyday the 4m x 4m Tea House only had four oak chairs, a table, and a fireplace. Now it's just four crumbling walls and a roof that's long since collapsed. But it remains a genuine sanctuary, especially in Tahoe's crowded high season. And ohhh, the views . . .

After an hour or more spent casting our eyes over the ridge lines of the Tahoe Basin we scrambled back down to our kayak, wedged between two boulders on the island's granite-strewn shoreline, began paddling back towards the beach . . . and straight into the wake left behind by the *MS Dixie II*, a 500-passenger screw-driven paddle wheeler that has been sailing these waters since the mid-1990s. Failing to get our bow around in

time, its waves hit us side-on, and the lake's 13 degree Celsius water spilled into our kayak, drenching us from our waists down.

Around the time we were calculating the onset of hypothermia, wife Yvonne and 11 year-old Truman were hiking the Cascade Falls Hiking Trail, an easy 1.5 hour round trip ideal for families, with 60m falls and views over nearby Cascade Lake a great reward for minimal effort. Heading back to the trailhead, however, Truman slipped and fell against a rock, badly bruising his arm. Fortunately, not his ping-pong arm . . .

We met up and shared stories of our mutual misfortunes before heading back to our lodge, stopping only at the gated estate which in 1974 was used as the location for the Corleone family compound in *The Godfather Part II*. The house is now gone, but the

Previous page:  
Truman at Sand Harbor

From far left:  
Thunderbird Lodge

View through the window  
of the Tea House

A makeshift mooring at  
Fannette Island

Thunderbird Yacht on  
Lake Tahoe



Above:  
Jackson kayaks on  
Emerald Bay

## Getting there

Qantas, United and American Airlines all fly from Australia to Reno Nevada, via either LA or San Francisco. Check airline websites for flights from your nearest capital city.

United Airlines flies daily from San Francisco to Reno (1 hour); United and American Airlines fly daily direct to Reno from Los Angeles (1.5 hours).

## Plan your Tahoe trip

Visit Go Tahoe North  
[gotahoenorth.com](http://gotahoenorth.com)

Car Hire  
[driveaway.com.au](http://driveaway.com.au)

Cedar Glen Lodge  
[tahoecedarglen.com](http://tahoecedarglen.com)

boathouse featured in the movie is still there. Back at the lodge Jackson hit the sauna, Truman played ping-pong with a Texas boy in a Donald Trump "Make America Great Again" t-shirt (yep, they have kids sizes), while Yvonne and I looked to the next day, and the two treasures to come: Sand Harbor, and the stunning Thunderbird Lodge.

I first visited Thunderbird Lodge eight years ago while driving south along the lake's eastern shoreline, after passing its driveway and glimpsing just enough to cause me to make a hasty U-turn which turned out to be one of the more memorable U-turns of my life. Never underestimate the possibilities born of spontaneity.

In the 1930s, not long after Lora built her Tea House, George Whittell, an eccentric and reclusive millionaire with a love for women (and giraffes, but that's another story) built one of North America's most coveted residences on a granite promontory south of Sand Harbor. An Arts & Crafts-era masterpiece the 16,000 sq ft main building of locally quarried stone is surrounded by a fairytale, Alice in Wonderland world of waterfalls, ponds, paths and drystone walls that delight adult and child alike, a folly so perfectly conceived and executed it almost improves upon nature. You know the real estate mantra "location, location, location"? Thunderbird Lodge is that mantra's purest expression. And if you think the lodge is fab, wait until you see the boat!

A 200m-long tunnel blasted through solid granite connects the house to the boathouse, home to the

16m-long Art Deco masterpiece, the incomparable, unforgettable *Thunderbird Yacht*. With its triple-planked mahogany deck wrapped around a tapered stainless-steel cabin shaped to mimic the fuselage of Whittell's DC-2 aircraft, its two V-12 Allison jet engines give it a top speed of 60 exhilarating knots. Cruises are rather expensive, and infrequent too, so check availability. Annoyingly after two visits I'm still to get onboard because of scheduled maintenance works. But just to emerge from the tunnel and see it before you in all its considerable glory, is gob-smacking enough.

We spent our final Tahoe hours at Sand Harbor, a crescent-shaped yellow sand beach with a backdrop of Jeffrey pines beneath a sky as deep a blue as the water before us. The Lake Tahoe Shakespeare Festival is held here each summer, and it's here you'll find the best example of the lake's most recognisable landform - its massive rounded granite boulders - the product of what geologists call Spheroidal weathering, and a natural playground of infinite possibilities.

But Sand Harbor is more than that. Imagine the Olgas, or the Bungle Bungles made small, accessible. *Climbable!* This beach, like Tahoe itself, if you let it, can reach deep inside you. I realised this when I saw my boys perched on a granite outcrop, all played-out, staring westwards across the lake to the setting sun as it dipped below the far-off peaks of the Desolation Wilderness, sitting on igneous rocks that millions of years ago were forced to the surface through uplift and erosion, just so they could provide a seat from which to view the end of another perfect Tahoe day.