

Avoiding Echo Summit – scenic, but definitely longer

By Kathryn Reed

Scenic – definitely. An hour longer – without a doubt. More windy – no avoiding it. Tiresome – if you have to do it more than once.

That's the report on having driven the Highway 50 scenic detour – so named by local officials. Road closure is not the phrase they want to use even though that is exactly what is going on.



Detour signs are throughout the route.
Photos/Kathryn Reed

Echo Summit shutdown May 11 for 10 to 14 days while a construction firm hired by Caltrans fixes the deteriorated rock wall that links the South Shore with points west. Of course if the work isn't done, it will be more than a two-week closure.

Although the work was interrupted for more than 24 hours because of snow, Caltrans said the gang was back at work Monday. But that could be short-lived with the winter weather advisory that is in effect until 10 this morning – which is

calling for more than a half foot of white stuff above 7,000 feet. Echo Summit is at 7,382 feet.

Road well traveled

Making the trek from Contra Costa County to Kirkwood Mountain Resort via back roads, and mostly highways 4 and 88 was commonplace growing up because that's where my dad liked to ski. In many ways it's still easier than dealing with Highway 50 or Interstate 80.

But it's not the way most people choose to come all the way to the South Shore. That's because 50 is faster, shorter – and, actually, more scenic. Something about that American River Canyon never gets tiring.

Still, headed for San Francisco on Saturday we had few options for getting there. We opted to follow (for the most part) the Caltrans route over Highway 88.

It was a good thing the Amgen Tour de California never intended Luther Pass to be part of the route because the debris on the west side looked treacherous and the water coming off the opposite side onto the road was no better. Of course then there are the numerous potholes, but cyclists in the Lake Tahoe Basin are accustomed to those on highways and city streets.

More traffic than usual for a Saturday in May is headed to Hope Valley.

Watching the Carson River gush it's hard to tell where its bank is – the water is that high.

Atop Carson Pass the lots are full. Backcountry skiers are eager to get in some runs. With the amount of snow the season – and it still dumping – wildflower season is something to only dream about.

Ice is melting on Caples Lake, with shades of blue piercing

the surface like an iceberg. By Monday, the blue is gone – covered with a fresh layer of snow.

A group of snowmobilers is gathered at the 8,000-foot mark. Winter is not over for them. Spots near the Carson Spur have drifts of snow 20-feet high.

Farther along is the Bear River Reservoir, which may have part of the Kirkwood Mountain Resort power line going through it.

Panther Creek is off to the left. Back in a ways reportedly is a waterfall worth seeing. But the road was closed a few weeks back when we were thinking about scouting it out.

Dirt roads continuously connect with Highway 88. It looks like a mountain bike and ATV haven.

Snow is getting spotty at 6,000 feet and is gone at 5,000 – at least on May 14.

Omo Ranch Road is on the right. This is the back way to Fair Play wineries. Get on those roads and you can find your way to Placerville. Just have plenty of time.

Finally, the road is improving at about 4,000 feet, just past Cooks Station. The terrain is changing. Not so many pine trees. More filler trees that are too hard to name whizzing by.

New signs to read – like, “Owl and Bat Houses”, bars touting karaoke, Saturday prime rib, “Food, Gas, Sporting Goods,” “Haircuts \$12” – and all those fruit and vegetable stands.

A little more pro-active marketing by these folks might get people to stop.

Jackson Rancheria seems out in the middle of nowhere. Maybe because it is. But just driving by it is more inviting than any gaming venue on the South Shore.

Making our own detour

We zip through Jackson. On the outskirts is the Highway 50 detour sign that we ignore. It leads people to Highway 49. Instead, we stay on Highway 88. Going back to the childhood route.

As we leave Jackson the terrain flattens out. Definitely agricultural land. Hills are turning golden, with only faint hints of green lingering.

Homes near Ione are selling for \$159,900. Don't want to know if our house in Tahoe is worth more.

Sign for Pardee Reservoir brings back memories of a camping trip a few years back when we were in search of warmer weather and just started driving.

Tasteful sign says, "Thank you for visiting Amador County." El Dorado, Placer, Douglas – are you listening?

Cows cover the grasslands.

Lake Camanche is another refuge for Tahoeans looking for warmth.

At the intersection of highway 88 and 12 we go right.

Vineyards, apple trees, cherry trees and row crops cover the landscape.

Most of the small towns we hit have gas prices similar to Lake Tahoe.

The scenic trip to agriculture land turns urban on the outskirts of Stockton.

From Highway 88 we take Highway 99 south, then quickly onto Highway 4 west, which merges with Interstate 5.

We pass a sign for Highway 120 at Manteca. For now, this is

the main road into Yosemite National Park because Tioga Pass isn't likely to open until July.

Off I-5 we merge onto Interstate 205, which leads us to Interstate 580, then to Interstate 80 over the Bay Bridge.

It took 208 miles and four hours.

Headed back to Tahoe

With about the same miles driven, the route we took May 16 back to South Lake Tahoe seemed faster. But with stopping at a winery and for lunch, we're not really sure of the exact time.

We left The City, and in Sacramento took Power Inn Road. This leads to Highway 16 toward Jackson.

Allow your passenger to sleep through this section of road.

As the golden hills full of oak trees emerge it becomes that scenic route people keep touting.

Up ahead is Highway 49, where we turned right. Not far up is Drytown Cellars. It's the only winery actually on the detour that doesn't require turning off on a non-designated road. Business is picking up, according to Jon.

Jon is pouring us sips of red. He tells us this area at about 2,300 feet had several inches of snow over the weekend. We recommend the house red for 10 bucks a bottle.

Fresh snow covers the green grass in Pioneer at 3,000 feet. It wasn't there two days before.

Clouds are forming. Sky darkening. Trees at 6,000 feet are full of snow.

Flurries are falling at the Kirkwood Inn. We stop for a bite and to decompress in front of the roaring wood fire. Built in 1864, the dark wood interior looks like it has stories to tell.

Our waitress says it's the weather that is keeping people away. Thursday and Friday business had picked up, but by Monday it was so-so. Such are the hazards with snow in the parking lot and no plow to clear it.

Sue raves about the chicken tortilla soup. Their portabella mushroom sandwich is one of the better ones I've had.

Back on the road, back over Luther, back into South Lake.

Fingers crossed Echo Summit opens soon.

AAA's Sierra Nevada map is good one to carry while traveling this scenic route.

Susan Wood contributed to this story.

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