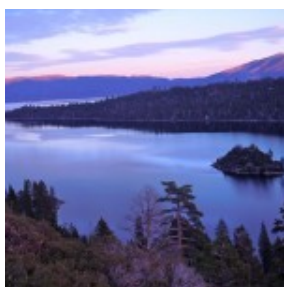


Extended hiking season in Tahoe worth braving the cold

By Kathryn Reed

Conflicted between wanting to go slow enough to embrace the beauty and fast enough to ward off the biting cold – such are the hazards of hiking in Lake Tahoe in December.

Hiking in the basin this time of year feels so foreign. But with no snow at lake level to snowshoe or cross country ski on, hiking becomes the default sport. The positive thing about the current weather is being able to visit trails I usually reserve for another season.



Emerald Bay at sunset on Dec. 18.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

Our intent was to do a one-way between the parking lot for Vikingsholm and D.L. Bliss State Park. While the distance to drive the route is two miles, the hike is more than four miles. On a warm summer day it's great to start at one end (we've always started at Emerald Bay because it's closer to home), have lunch at the beach, and then traipse back to the starting point.

Not starting until the afternoon last Sunday we knew we didn't

have enough daylight to do a roundtrip. But we didn't want to start sooner because being out in the cold any earlier could have meant excessive whining.

The problem was when we got to the stream-waterfall (I use those words extremely loosely) crossing. With ice having formed on either side of the path and the amount of water just deep enough to get my boots wetter than I wanted on this day, the rocks looking slippery, and the fall (if there were to be one) treacherous, I called "uncle".

It became an out-and-back hike.

Still, it was worth it.

The Rubicon Trail has some of the most stunning views of the lake. *San Francisco Chronicle* outdoor writer Tom Stienstra calls it one of the most spectacular hikes in the U.S.

The only bad part about it is the one-mile trek from the parking lot to the Vikingsholm castle feels like at least three miles going up.

Few people are on the trail compared to the number of cars in the lot. All I could think is "no wonder California State Parks is broke" when I saw the parking was free and the lot was full.

My dismay subsided as we got to the bottom and we started walking along the north side of Emerald Bay. Hikers going in the opposite direction saying hello sporadically break up the solitude.

No campers at the boat in campsites. If only it were warmer, the bay is like glass. On the way back the only ripples on the water are from the mallards.

Shades of emerald dot the shoreline in the bay as well as along sections of the trail paralleling Lake Tahoe.

This is what makes this hike so stunning – the varied colors of the water, cedars too large for Sue and I to wrap our arms around, boulders seeming to bob, distant peaks without snow belying the time of year.

Much of the trail to the point is flat. Then it goes up a bit, with some granite staircases of sorts in a few spots.

Starting at the hour we did meant seeing the sunset. With clouds strewn across the sky, it made for a dramatic ending to an already spectacular hike.

Getting there:

From South Lake Tahoe, take Highway 89 north past Camp Richardson and to the far side of Emerald Bay. Park to the right in the lot for Vikingsholm.

Descend the path, then go the to left before reaching the castle.

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