

Icy Emerald Bay a treat to Hwy. 89 foot traffic



Emerald Bay is frozen at the west end. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

EMERALD BAY STATE PARK – Splintered ice on the bay’s edge gives way to a deep sapphire hue. Inviting, mesmerizing, magical. Emerald Bay.

With Highway 89 closed, now is the time to explore this area on foot. For decades it was the norm for the South and West shores to be cut off all winter. Now, with modern technology, the highway is rarely closed more than a few days in the winter.

But this has not been an ordinary winter.

“The amount of snow and the timing of the storms are what have made this season challenging so far to keep it open. We have snow piled up as high as 30 feet on the highway in some locations,” Steve Nelson, spokesman for Caltrans, told *Lake Tahoe News*. “There are about a dozen slide areas in that 4-mile section of the highway, and it’s not just snow that falls down – it’s large boulders, tree limbs, entire trees in some

cases.”



A large amount of snow still on Jan. 28 covers Highway 89, making it off-limits to vehicles. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Compounding the problem is that three blowers are in the shop for repairs and crews have not even reached the main slide.

The good news is that the scar from last fall's Emerald Fire is remaining in place. Kit Bailey, Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit's chief fire officer, told *Lake Tahoe News*, "The Emerald Fire area is holding up great." He has been making periodic visits to that section of Highway 89. "It's a testament to the excellent post-fire mitigation that took place on a slope with a high-use transportation route."

When the original highway was built in 1930-31 it was to link Highway 70 on the north to Highway 50 on the south.

“With the construction methods available at that time, the road closely followed the lay of the land, following ridge lines and older wagon trails along the edge of the lake. This resulted in a number of very dramatic vistas from the route, particularly in the area around Emerald Bay,” according to the Federal Highway Administration.



According to Caltrans, profile grinding on the highway makes the road level. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Sixty years later this stretch of highway was overhauled a bit. Slope stabilization was a main part of the \$9.2 million, 18-month project that started in April 1992. The entire road was closed for six weeks, with alternating traffic the rest of the time.

On Saturday people in all types of footwear were walking along the road. On the south side it is pavement – though slick in some locations – from the gate to just past Inspiration

Point. After that a fairly worn path is accessible without the need for snowshoes. Those coming from the D.L. Bliss area to the north had snowshoes on.

Others took off into the trees to make fresh tracks on their skis and snowboards.



Cascade Lake looks like an ice rink in need of a Zamboni machine. Photo/Kathryn Reed

We stopped as the trail narrowed and the path went up a bit. One slip and that would have easily been a fatal fall. After all, this is prime avalanche area.

We had seen what we came for – Emerald Bay in all her glory. And the views were not going to get any better.



Most of the road signs near Emerald Bay are at least partially buried. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Most of the area between the western shore and Fannette Island is a layer of ice. It's obvious a boat has plowed through it. Chunks of ice float near the mouth of the bay. A sailboat barely enters before deciding to turn around.

The last time the entire bay froze was January 1993 when the mercury hit minus 28 degrees in South Lake Tahoe. Prior to that the bay was solid ice in February 1989; the temperature in South Lake Tahoe was minus 29.

With not a whisper of wind, the bay is like glass. The few clouds seem to dance across the water, looking more like steam rising than a reflection.