when winter means june

by Matt KETTMANN

FOR snow-craving Santa Barbarans, the 30-hour getaway to Mammoth Mountain is an unfortunately familiar reality. If we want to cram some winter mountain riding into our busy schedules, not spend a fortune on two hotel nights, and still manage to sneak in a crystal-clear beach day on Sunday, we gear up on Fridays after work to make the six-hour charge up Highway 395 to Mammoth (or sometimes just the five-plus-hour trek to Bishop, where rooms are cheaper). Then we ski or board all day Saturday, hop back into the car weary and wet, and head home while pounding Red Bull to stay awake. It’s not the safest or most pleasant trip—okay, it’s often plain crazy—but it delivers the snow fix. But with age comes perspective, a bit more disposable income, and—perhaps most pivotal—sorer muscles and less energy. So a few weekends ago, I decided to buck the usual trend, and make the trip a relaxing two nights. And I decided to go about 15 miles farther up on 395 to June Mountain—a smaller, more intimate ski resort than Mammoth, which overlooks the perfectly quaint community of June Lake.
Welcome to June

And so the journey began on Friday, when my girlfriend Joanna and I left work around 3 p.m. to make the long haul. My friends Kevin and Sarah were also headed to June Lake, but they were doing the 30-hour round-tripper. We met up in Bishop for some cheap chow at Jack’s Restaurant and Bakery before continuing up the dark highway toward the June Lake turnoff. Once on that road, I noticed the lake emerging on the right, and then suddenly we hit the Tiger Bar, which serves as the landmark for the entire community. Here we turned right, and then a street later, turned right again, toward the lake, where we found the Lake Front Cabins.

Owned for the past year by native Santa Barbaran Bob Newland and his wife Laura, who’s worked top hospitality jobs at both the Biltmore and the Ojai Valley Inn, the Lake Front Cabins are an ode to the hoteling traditions of yesteryear; the proprietors themselves make your beds, sip coffee with you in the morning, and treat you like old friends. They left the light and the heat on for us, so when we arrived past 10 p.m., our cabin was cozy warm.

We flipped on the tube to some snow sports channel and popped open a bottle of Artiste wine, happily finding plastic wine glasses in the fully stocked kitchen cabinets. These cabins, Laura would tell me the next morning, are often rented out for long periods of time, especially in the summer, so they’re made to feel like home. When crawling into bed a couple hours later, we could smell the fresh sheets, and started making plans for a summertime trip to June Lake, when fishing rules the day.

Onto the Mountain

With the morning light, through the steady snowfall, we could see the big peaks that surrounded the lake basin and made for an impressive little valley. Bob and Laura directed us toward the mountain, which was just a mile up the road to the right of the Tiger Bar. It was almost 9 a.m. when we found ourselves in a rather empty parking lot at the ski resort. By that time Mammoth’s lots would be filling up, but at June, we nearly got a front-row spot. Interestingly, the lower lodge was nothing but an oversize ticket booth selling the 935-day passes, which meant we had to take a chairlift up to the main lodge, where the ladies could rent their ski gear. Immediately, I recalled my trips to Montana, where there are few but friendly people, where there are quirky but endearing aspects to each mountain, and where spirit reigns over style.

Once Joanna and Sarah got their equipment, we were on the green beginner slope called “Silverado,” which was not crowded; very mellow, and perfect for novices. With Kevin on skis and me on a snowboard, we left them alone to learn the ropes, heading up the double black diamonds beckoned.

Once atop the 10,090-foot summit — which, when clear, allows views of Mammoth to the south and Mono Lake to the north — we picked our chutes, finding plastic wine glasses in the fully stocked kitchen cabinets. These cabins, Laura would tell me the next morning, are often rented out for long periods of time, especially in the summer, so they’re made to feel like home. When crawling into bed a couple hours later, we could smell the fresh sheets, and started making plans for a summertime trip to June Lake, when fishing rules the day.

We stuck to that corner of the mountain most of the day, save for lunchtime, when we found that the girls had nabbed a table next to the food line in the very busy cafeteria. We drank some Mammoth Double Nut Brown and Gold after lunch, and then headed back to the slopes. We convinced the girls to follow us up to J7, saying that they could easily take the blue-labeled “Matterhorn” run down. And they did, each and every time, showing that they’d picked up some decent ski skills in just a couple hours of morning practice. We stayed up there for the rest of the day.

Resort-y Relaxation

After the day on the mountain, Kevin and Sarah began the last leg of their 30-hourer with the long haul back to Santa Barbara while Joanna and I turned left from the lot and drove away from June Lake for two miles. We were heading for a Saturday night of relaxation at the Double Eagle Resort, which was the fine-polished, pricey, and spa-toting overnight option on the other end of the swank spectrum from the Lake Front Cabins. (As is standard practice — and for full disclosure — both places comped our stays in return for this write-up.)

The resort was easy to spot: green-roofed, shiny wood cabins surrounding a large pond, complete with the Eagle’s Landing Restaurant and Creekside Spa. Our room, which overlooked the pond where ice skating occurs if it’s cold enough, was exquisite — wood-framed bed, spacious balcony, wall decorations of resident deer, bears, and pine trees, and a big bathroom with Jacuzzi bathtub. After settling in, we walked our sore legs around the resort, and checked out the public spa in the Creekside complex. It was crowded, so we went to the restaurant to make a reservation, and then back to the room to soak in the privacy of our own bathtub.

Though our reservation was for 8 p.m., we went to the restaurant early, hoping to nab a table before then. We sat in the Eagle’s Nest bar, ordered a bottle of Mia’s Playground pinot noir, and happily were called for our table early. Perhaps we looked extra hungry (we were) or like we were about to fall asleep (yeah, that too), but the service was super speedy (which we hoped for). Plus, we knew what we wanted: I had the surf-and-turf special, with filet mignon and lobster tail, and Joanna opted for the macadamia nut-crusted halibut, topped with bananas cooked in Frangelico. The entrees proved better than they sounded — if that’s possible — but the red pepper soup and Caesar salad we started with were equally impressive. The Double Eagle owners clearly had hired some renowned chef into their kitchen.

After a good night’s sleep and a hearty (free) breakfast in the restaurant, it was time to make a leisurely Sunday drive back to Santa Barbara. It had snowed all night, which tempted me to hit the mountain, but it was time to drive. We contemplated visiting the bristlecone pine forest outside of Big Pine or stopping at the Manzanar camp, but settled on just making a quick stop at that roadside jerky place in Olancha. During that drive, with Mt. Whitney peering at us from the right and the salt flats of the once large Owens Lake staring at us from the left, I realized that there’s another reason why the 30-hourer round-tripper isn’t worth it: “The road to and from Mammoth and June Lake is simply too beautiful to only do at night. So take my advice: Make a full weekend out of your next snowy excursion and take the peaceful Sunday drive from June Lake to Santa Barbara while the sun is shining.”

Lake Front Cabins: lakefrontcabins.net, (877) 648-7527
June Mountain: juneamountain.com, 888-JUNEMTN.
Double Eagle Resort: doubleeagleresort.com, (760) 648-7004

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