

TRAVEL



Clara Bosonetto

A WEEKEND IN ...

Mammoth Lakes, Calif.

An outdoor wonderland for soft adventures, Mammoth Lakes is located within an hour of Yosemite National Park. The five glacier-carved lakes of Mammoth Lakes Basin are easily accessible by car (a 10-minute drive) and are ideal spots for fishing, day hikes, picnics and water sports. A drive-through of the lakes takes less than an hour.

Check out the summertime events: Festival of Beers & Bluesapalooza (Aug. 4-7), the classical Sierra Summer Festival (Aug. 11-14), the Mammoth Margarita Festival (Aug. 12-13) and Mammoth Rocks & A Taste of the Sierra (Aug. 26-27). Trip planning: www.visitmammoth.com.

BUDGET



Shallow Mono Lake is an oasis in the dry Great Basin for millions of migratory and nesting birds dependent on its source of brine shrimp. CONTRIBUTED BY JITKA SIGUENZA

MODERATE



The North Fork of the San Joaquin River creates powerful Rainbow Falls at Devils Postpile National Monument, a dramatic outcrop of volcanic basalt. BROCKENINAGLORY

SPLURGE



The nearly 1,200 square miles of Yosemite National Park's ancient giant sequoias, vast meadows and deep valleys have been protected since 1864. WWW.BACKPACO.COM

BUDGET

Stay: The historic (est. 1924) Tamarack Lodge & Resort is a charmingly rustic and elegant midcentury lodge located 2.5 miles from the town center. European lodge rooms (from \$119 with in-room sink and shared bath) feature knotty pine, antique beds, patchwork quilts and treetop views (elevation is 8,500 feet). The lodge has a cozy common area, a bar, a restaurant, a forest chapel and a summer activity center to book tours or rent bikes or a boat. 163 Twin Lakes Road, 760-934-2442, www.tamaracklodge.com.

Eat: Start the day with a hearty meal at the Breakfast Club, a daytime eatery (6:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m.). Classic cafe items from homemade biscuits, eggs Benedict to turkey melts and burgers (bloody marys, too) from \$11. Summer outdoor seating. Cash only. 2987 Main St., 760-934-6944.

Experience: Enjoy tranquil Mono Lake by joining a guided canoe tour. The High Sierra crest rises 6,000 feet above Mono Basin, and the drama is enhanced by eerie carbonate mineral tufa towers built up from bubbling springs. The one-hour tour takes in the natural history of this unique high desert lake. Saturdays and Sundays through Labor Day. \$25 per person (not for age 4 and under). 760-647-6595, www.monolake.org.

MODERATE

Stay: The Swiss Chalet Inn Bed & Breakfast offers two private suites, each with hardwood floors, vaulted ceiling, a sitting area, king bed and private bath. Innkeepers offer personal service to map out hiking trails, reserve tee times, arrange for fly fishing, or secure dinner reservations. This quiet chalet is located in a cozy neighborhood close to downtown. Rates from \$185, include gourmet breakfast. 101 Hill St., 760-914-3452, www.swisschalet-mammoth.com.

Eat: Skadi is a modern European eatery with mountain views to complement the fine Alpine dining experience. Reservations are mandatory (you'll lose your spot if 15 minutes late!) as Skadi has just six tables and four counter seats. Expect dinner to last up to two hours. Starters, \$10-\$18; entrees, \$28-\$38. No children's menu. 94 Berner St., 760-914-0962, <http://skadirestaurant.com>.

Experience: Ride a gondola up Mammoth Mountain's summit of 11,053 feet to take in the 360-degree views of the Sierra peaks and the San Joaquin River Valley. Adults, \$29; \$24 ages 13-22; two under age 12 children ride free with every paying adult. The Reds Meadow Shuttle also departs every 20 minutes (mandatory transportation in summer) from the mountain base to Devils Postpile National Monument and Rainbow Falls (adults, \$7; \$2 with a gondola ticket). www.mammothmountain.com.

SPLURGE

Stay: The Westin Monache Resort is a four-star mountain retreat in the village center featuring studios with fireplaces (from \$219) and one-bedroom suites with a separate living area (from \$233). Amenities include a rustic-chic restaurant, fitness center, and an outdoor pool with two hot tubs. 50 Hillside Drive, 760-934-0400, www.westinmammoth.com.

Eat: The romantic Restaurant at Convict Lake (at Convict Lake Resort) features an eclectic continental menu with specialties such as New Zealand lamb, beef Wellington (\$39), grass-fed steaks, fresh rainbow trout, and pastas (\$25). Lighter fare served in the Lounge during summer. Located 10 minutes south of Mammoth Lakes. 2000 Convict Lake Road, 760-934-3800, www.convictlake.com.

Experience: Ride the public Yarts Shuttle from several locations on Mammoth Mountain to the magnificent Yosemite National Park (daily in July, August). The two-hour drive (it's 30 minutes to the east park entrance) from Mammoth Lakes to Yosemite Valley lets riders sit back and take in the incredible scenery. The stopover in the park is five hours. Round-trip fares (which include park entrance fee) are \$36 adult; \$30 age 12 and under (one child under 12 rides free with each paid adult); <http://yarts.com>.

Clara Bosonetto is a retired travel consultant.

TRAVEL

Save big on off-season summer travel from Atlanta

Fewer crowds, unusual activities await travelers.

By Shayla Martin
For the AJC

Summer is one of the busiest travel times of the year, and the thought of miles of traffic on I-85 and packed airports are enough to make even the most experienced traveler want to stay home. But there's hope. Destinations both near and far from Atlanta experience their low season during the summer, meaning slashed travel costs, thinner crowds and in some cases, activities usually unavailable during that destination's peak season. Although you may have to deal with some triple digit temperatures or a spot thunderstorm, the trade off is more than fair. We spoke with Atlanta-based Smart-Flyer travel agent Maggie Barton for her top destination and hotel picks for off-season summer travel.

Escape to the mountains

Atlanta is just a short drive from some of the most beautiful mountain ranges in the nation, perfect for a weekend trip to escape the heat. "Just a short three and a half drive from Atlanta, the Great Smoky Mountain range is a great summer spot to cool off. Blackberry Farm (1471 W. Millers Cove Rd., Walland. 865-984-8166, blackberryfarm.com) in nearby Walland, Tennessee, is an idyllic destination for romance and offers topnotch wine and dining. Couples will love hiking, biking, horseback riding, fly fishing, sporting clays and the fabulous spa," says Barton.

"Even closer at two hours from Atlanta, Highlands, North Carolina, is a great spot for a girl's getaway or guys golf trip. The charming



Summer is a great time to visit New Orleans. Plenty of activities await, including the Cajun Zydeco Festival in the French Quarter.

Old Edwards Inn & Spa (445 Main St., Highlands. 866-526-8008, oldedwardsinn.com) is in the heart of the mountaintop village, and you can walk right out to dining and antique shopping, or take a short drive for incredible mountain hiking, fly fishing, golf, and biking."

Rather stay in state? Head to the North Georgia mountains in and around Clayton for similar activities at your doorstep. Barton recommends the intimate Glen Ella Springs Inn (1789 Bear Gap Rd., Clarkesville. 706-754-7295, glenella.com) in Clarkesville, a 16-room inn with fine dining and beautiful gardens bordering the Chatahoochee National Forest and south of Tallulah Falls. There's also the historic Lake

Rabun Hotel & Restaurant (35 Andrea Ln., Lakemont. 706-782-4946, lakerabunhotel.com), with eight luxurious and cozy rooms, an award-winning restaurant with farm to table local dining, extensive wine list and lake views. Spend the weekend on the water fishing, kayaking, white water rafting or leisurely relaxing on a pontoon cruise.

Deep South for deep discounts

For a real deal off season, there are several destination options in South Florida offering great rates, especially at high end resorts. "The Ritz-Carlton Key Biscayne, Miami (455 Grand Bay Dr., Key Biscayne. 305-365-4500, ritzcarlton.com)

cut their rates in half during the summertime, and offer great beach, tennis, and water sports. It's also a great spot to bike, hike, or paddle through the neighboring Biscayne National Park," says Barton. For families, Barton suggests Boca Raton, Florida, for a stay at the legendary Boca Raton Resort & Club (501 East Camino Real, Boca Raton. 888-543-1277, bocaresort.com) Set on 356 beautiful acres, this legendary resort offers something for everyone - golf, tennis, white sand beaches and spa - but kids in particular will love learning to surf on the flow rider during Surf School, or perfecting their swing at Golf Academy.

If you can bear the heat and humidity, summer is

the most affordable season to visit New Orleans and there's no shortage of activities. The summer months overlap with festival season, meaning you can still enjoy cultural festivals like the Cajun and Zydeco Festival held in June, the Tales of the Cocktail Festival in July and the Satchmo Summerfest honoring New Orleans' native son, Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong. Cool off with a snowball from Hansen's Snobliz (4801 Tchoupitoulas St., New Orleans. 504-891-9788, snobliz.com), and with the thinner crowds, you may not even have to wait in line. For a taste of jazz without leaving your hotel, head to the Davenport Lounge at The Ritz-Carlton New Orleans (921 Canal St., New Orleans.

504-524-1331, ritzcarlton.com) for a vocal and trumpet performance by local favorite Jeremy Davenport, Wednesday through Saturday evenings.

Wild wild West

Even more deals are to be found in summer in the western portion of the U.S. "I love Scottsdale, Arizona, and Palm Springs, California, because most desert resorts offer golf, tennis and spa packages at a fraction of the winter rates," says Barton. Stay in an elegant casita at the JW Marriott Scottsdale Camelback Inn Resort & Spa (5402 E Lincoln Dr., Scottsdale. 480-948-1700, marriott.com) and indulge in desert-specific spa treatments like the Natural Agave Toning Wrap made with Prickly Pear cactus gel. Off-season in the Colorado mountain towns of Crested Butte and Breckenridge offer activities like white water rafting, mountain biking, horseback riding and fly fishing.

Summer abroad

"For an international travel, the best bang for your buck this summer is Mexico, Costa Rica or Bahamas. The dollar is strong, and it's a great time to explore the beaches, culture, nature, and history of these destinations without spending an arm and a leg or fighting the crowds," says Barton. In Riviera Maya, Mexico, you can snorkel through jungle caves at the Rio Secreto underground river, or in Costa Rica try volcano hiking with waterfall repelling. Looking for a further jaunt? "There are great deals to New Zealand, now that Air New Zealand has a new nonstop flight to Auckland from Houston," says Barton. "It's still a fantastic destination during their winter with the North Island offering balmy weather and ski season in full swing on South Island."