

OTHER THINGS TO DO/PLACES TO VISIT

FOLLOW THE DONNER PARTY

Background - The wagon train which became known as the Donner Party left Independence, Missouri for California in 1846. They were one of the last parties to leave that season and made slow progress for a variety of reasons. But what eventually doomed the Donner Party was their decision to follow the untested Hastings Cutoff, a promise of a quicker way to reach California. Unfortunately, the cutoff included a long, waterless trek across the Great Salt Lake Desert west of Salt Lake City. The Donner Party finally reached a junction with the original California Trail about seven miles west of present-day Elko, Nevada.

The Donner party finally arrived at what is now Reno, Nevada on October 20, 1846 and spent a few days resting. By October 27th, the party was again making its way westerly toward California, although the Donner wagon was miles to the rear. While crossing a steep pitch, their wagon broke an axle along Alder Creek and they had to stop to make a new axle. Meanwhile, the rest of the party continued to the vicinity of what is now Donner Lake below the Sierra summit, reaching it on October 31st. Unfortunately, a storm was brewing in the Pacific and snow started falling in the Sierras. They pushed on the following day passing around the north side of the lake but were forced back by snow drifts. Ten major storm periods generated exceptionally deep snowpacks at Alder Creek (10-12 feet), Donner Lake (15 to 20 feet), and on Donner Pass (25 feet & more) which stopped both the Donners and the remaining group from continuing any further. While those near Donner Lake had makeshift cabins in which to spend the winter, the Donner Party spent the winter in brush and canvas tents. The two groups spent the entire winter of 1846-47 in the Donner Lake and Alder Creek camps, finally resorting to cannibalism to survive. The first rescuers finally arrived in late February, but the last of the emigrants weren't rescued until mid-April 1847.

The Tour - Start this tour by visiting [Sutter's Fort](#) in Sacramento (2701 L Street, due easterly from the Convention hotels and a block from I-80). In 1839 John Sutter received a land grant in the Sacramento Valley from the Mexican government. He used the land to create a flourishing agricultural empire and named it New Helvetia (New Switzerland.) This empire established Sacramento's earliest settlement and the first non-Indian settlement in California's Central Valley. It was from here that John Sutter dispatched rescue parties to the stranded Donner party.

Then head on I-80 east toward Lake Tahoe. (From the Fort, drive east under I-80 on J or K Street and turn left on 30th Street. There is an on-ramp to eastbound I-80 north of J Street.)

This side of the Sierras is relatively gentle but the far side drops steeply down the east side of the mountains toward the town of Truckee. Today, I-80 crosses the summit at elevation 7,240 feet and about 2 miles north of the original Donner Pass, still crossed by the old highway. Donner Lake will come into view part of the way down the interstate. For your first stop, continue east past the exits to Truckee and exit north onto Highway 89. About 2.5 miles north, turn right at the sign for Donner Party Picnic Ground Historic Site. Although there continues to be controversy about where the Donner Party spent the winter of 1846-47, this is the currently accepted site. Wander the area and consider how you might survive snows 10' deep with only canvas and brush shelters.

The route from this camp south to Donner State Park generally follows the historic wagon trail. Backtrack south on Highway 89 toward I-80 and then turn left westbound onto the I-80 freeway. After getting back on I-80, continue west and exit at the Donner Pass Road and then turn left and cross over the freeway. Continue on this road and turn left into [Donner Memorial State Park](#). The museum here is extremely interesting and a short walk will let you see where others in the party spent the winter of 1846-47. A monument here clearly illustrates the 22-foot depth of the snow that winter.

After visiting the park, return to Donner Pass Road and turn left toward the crest of the Sierras. This is part of the original Lincoln Highway (which extended from New York to San Francisco) and was conceived in 1912 as the first "interstate" route. As you climb up this grade, you'll get a good idea of what the wagon parties had to overcome as their teams struggled to pull their wagons up this same area. To the left on this climb, you'll also see the original transcontinental railroad roadbed along the south flank of the adjacent mountain including its miles of snowsheds. This rail line is no longer in service. Halfway up the grade and after a 180 degree turn, pull off at a turnout on the left with a monument to the [China Wall](#) directly above you. After cresting the summit and passing Soda Springs, you can get back onto I-80.

Heading back to Sacramento, the original wagon road parallels the interstate. Exit I-80 at Rainbow Road (exit 168) and turn left and pass under the freeway. Continue west. Rainbow Lodge will be on your left—this is a very nice place for lunch. Continue west to the Tahoe National Forest Big Bend Visitors Center...you will again be driving on the old Lincoln Highway. Inquire at the Visitor Center and they can direct you to a nearby site where you can still see rust stains on the granite rock from wagon wheels passing here 150 years ago! Big Bend was named after the "big bend" of the South Yuba River here, and was the winter camp of the Stephens party of 1844, the first group of emigrants to cross the Sierra Nevada mountains with covered wagons. Members of the Stephens party were trapped here by heavy winter snows in November 1844, but all of the party survived and made their way to Sutter's Fort in March 1845.

Continue west on the old highway which gets you back onto I-80. Turn west to continue back to Sacramento.

Other Lunch Options - There are a number of places to enjoy lunch this day. If you start late, consider the town of Auburn. Exit on Highway 49 south where there are a number of choices. Truckee is also an interesting place to have lunch (and is also a great place for train watching!) and it also has a number of interesting shops to explore. Although the Highway 89 exit has a number of fast food options, the westbound Donner Pass Road exit leads to downtown Truckee with more choices.

Time Allowance - Allow a couple hours to get to Donner State Park and Truckee. The entire tour will take most of a day including stops for lunch and the Donner State Park Museum.

Note - *These directions are fairly general. You should carry a good map and/or GPS.*