



*The 16th hole under the watchful eye of local deer.*

## *Tee it High and Let it Fly: Mammoth's Sierra Star Golf Course*

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Eight thousand feet above sea level in the Eastern Sierra, the scenery is as breathtaking as the thin air. Mammoth Mountain and its neighboring peaks stretch above miles of tall pines, and clouds breeze briskly past the snowy summits.

**It's another great day to play in Mammoth.**

But on this day, there isn't a skier or snowboarder in sight. This is Mammoth in late spring, when the change of seasons necessitates a change of equipment. The boots, parkas and skis have been stored for the season, swapped for spikes, shorts and clubs. We're not on the blue runs at Mammoth Mountain Ski Resort. We're on the blue tees at Sierra Star Golf Course, in the town of Mammoth Lakes. Playing up to 8,050 feet, it's the highest elevation golf course in California. The expression "tee it high and let it fly" takes on new meaning at Sierra Star.



*The 18th green with the Sherwin Mountains as a backdrop.*



The setting is simply spectacular. If you could magically Photoshop out everything above the tree line at Sierra Star, it would still be a challenging, picturesque golf course. Move the course down to sea level and drop it into urban sprawl, and you'd have a beautiful course that provides a tight test from the tees, and creates debate among golfers about which stretch of holes is their favorite. But situated as it is, framed by snow covered peaks that climb above 11,000 feet, Sierra Star is a Mammoth masterpiece.

When the snow melts, Sierra Star sheds its winter blanket and a spectacular golf course comes out of hibernation, revealing lush green fairways less than five miles from Mammoth Mountain's Main Lodge. While some squeeze a final few runs from the sparse snow on the

slopes, others plant their tees in the firm, frosty ground on the course.

*“Some years, if you hit it just right, you can ski in the morning and play Sierra Star in the afternoon,”* says Joani Lynch, Marketing Manager for Mammoth Mountain Ski Resort, which partially owns and operates the golf course. “We’re one of the few resorts in the United States where you can do that.”

While some consider May to October Mammoth’s off-season, some call it the best time of the year in the town 300 miles north of Los Angeles. A scenic drive up Highway 395 traces the eastern edge of the Sierra. As you climb past Bishop, a sign reads: “Inyo National Forest: Land of Many Uses.” Summer visitors flock to Mammoth for

camping, mountain biking, hiking and fishing, and some come to golf at Sierra Star, Mammoth’s only 18-hole golf course.

“It’s surprising to our winter visitors, but we have just as many visitors, if not more, during the summertime,” says Lynch, a Mammoth resident since she was eight. “There are a lot of people that think of us as just a ski resort. The recreational opportunities open up so much in the summer here.” Conventional wisdom among locals is that you come to Mammoth for the winters, and you stay for the summers.

Dave Schacht made the move permanently ten years ago—and is now the resident PGA pro at Sierra Star. “Currently, we’re the best kept secret in Eastern Sierra,” Schacht says proudly. That secret can be well-guarded in the winter months. Drive past the course after the snows start and you might not even know it’s there, though it winds right through the center of town. “I think that’s really one of the things that is special about Sierra Star,” says Lynch. *“It’s cut out of the forest. Even though you’re in the center of town, it feels like you’re miles away from everything.”*

The target date to open Sierra Star to play each year is the Friday before Memorial Day, but winter weather dictates the length of the golf season. The 2005 and 2006 seasons were delayed by record snowfalls, but this spring’s warm temperatures allowed the course to open right on schedule.

Sierra Star opened in 1999, and as they approach their tenth anniversary, Dave Schacht says it’s a course that gets better each year. He gives

much of the credit to course superintendent Jon Cook. “Jon has been in the business for thirty some years, and he’s a savant. Taking care of a golf course that’s at 8,000 feet is a tricky thing at best,” Schacht says. He talks about the winter ritual that succeeds in bringing the greens back to life each May. “We just cover them in sand and some snow mold treatment, kiss them good night and wait until spring. They seem to respond pretty well to that.” Golfers enjoying the first rounds of the season also respond favorably, marveling at fairways that were knee deep in snow drifts just a few weeks earlier.

The par 70 track plays between 5,430 and 6,708 yards from four sets of tees. If you’re not straight off the tee, Sierra Star can seem like the course where the phrase ‘tree trouble’ was coined. Every hole challenges you to guide the ball between dense stands of Jeffrey and Lodgepole pine trees. Errant tee shots can lead to playing Pachinko in the pines. But assuming you do split the fairway on every hole, can you expect the ball to carry fifty yards farther off the tee at 8,000 feet?





Schacht says you'll see a difference in the distance more in your irons than with a driver. "When they do fly farther, it's not necessarily off of the tee. It's when you hit wedges, 9-irons and 8-irons. The higher you hit it, the longer it seems to stay in the air. It just kind of floats." A note on the scorecard tells players to use discretion in club selection, suggesting **the altitude may be as much as a two-club difference on how far you hit the ball**, closing the admonition by teasing "... in which direction is entirely up to you."

For me, an example of altitude over aptitude comes on the 177-yard par 3 seventh hole. I hit a six-iron, and stare it down thinking it could be in the hole. "Down hill, down wind, down grain," Schacht reminded me later. The ball never touched the back side of the green in flight. **Tee it high and let it fly... and fly... and fly.**

The sequence of the following four holes is as scenic as any I've ever played. Alternating par fives and fours, the run starts with the beautiful eighth hole, with a risk-reward opportunity for big hitters, with water left, and the Inyo National Forest right. Tall carved bears keep their backs to the golfers and fish the pond on the edge of the eighth green, fronted by a stream that flows

down from an adjacent hole. Number nine is a short par four that demands an accurate drive to set you up for a second shot through the "goal posts", two towering pines that flank the ninth fairway. If you take on the goal posts from the wrong angle, you can do your own play-by-play. "It's up... It's... no good!"

Number ten leads you back uphill toward the Sherwin Mountains in the distance. Pick a peak as a target on approach. A small deer meanders across the back of the green, which creates a slight — and welcome — delay. It's a perfect chance to take in the surrounding scenery, as the deer takes honors. Sierra Star is not a course you're in any hurry to finish, which mirrors the general pace of the mountain community. Cross an intersection in mid-town Mammoth Lakes, and the 11th hole takes you back downhill on a tight par 4 with water following the fairway to another small pond right of the green.

It's debatable whether this actually is one of the most scenic four-hole stretches in California... or even on the course, for that matter. "Eight, nine, ten and eleven are some strong golf holes, and aesthetically stunning," agrees Schacht, but counters with his own favorites. "I actually

think three through six are pretty strong too." *Hmmm... it may be best to play again to see if Dave is right.*

Light winds whistle through the trees at Sierra Star, and the stillness is only broken by the sounds of a few multi-million dollar homes being built on the front nine. Still, Sierra Star is far from being over-developed, and the gorgeous new homes are unobtrusive. The course capitalizes on its dense forestation to create a sense of privacy. "Because of all the forest out there between each hole, you've got a very private experience," says Schacht. "You're kind of sequestered from the other groups, even though the golf course may be full." In fact, the only people you may see from the course are a few miles in the distance, riding the gondolas that ferry skiers and

snowboarders to the summit in the winter and mountain bikers during the summer season.

If there is one shortcoming at Sierra Star at this point, its *après* golf, and the fact that there isn't a grand clubhouse on site currently, though those development plans are in the works. "The experience on the course cannot be beat, but the rest of the infrastructure isn't in place yet," says Lynch. It's one reason the course isn't marketed as widely as might be expected for such a desirable golf resort.

For now, it means Sierra Star retains its status as one of the best kept secrets in the Eastern Sierra, and unquestionably holds the title as the pinnacle of golf in California. We thought we'd let you in on the secret.

