



Tioga Pass

High-country meadows and stark, rocky slopes converge at this towering mountain gap. Though peaceful in summer, the scene turns violent in winter when wind and snow replace cars heading over the pass.



Every September, runners charge up Lee Vining Canyon in search of a mountaintop experience.

Cut off at the pass

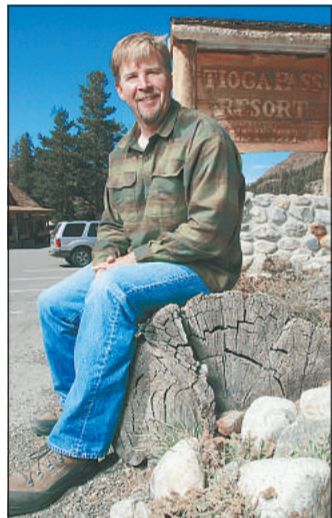
Life on Tioga Pass is a blast — especially in winter, when the temperature plunges to 20 below zero and the wind comes howling over the mountains at up to 80 mph.

“It’s unlike anything anywhere else,” says Dave Moretz, 41, manager of the Tioga Pass Resort, a collection of 10 cabins and four motel rooms at the 9,640-foot level, about a mile east of the pass. “We’re snowed in for eight months of the year.”

The resort receives 50 to 60 feet of snow every winter, he says. The thick blanket cuts off the tiny outpost from the rest of the world, but provides a wealth of back-country skiing opportunities for those willing to hike up Tioga Road to the resort on snowshoes.

“The only way in and out is by snowmobile, snowcat or snowshoes,” says Moretz, who has spent the past three winters at the resort. “Coming here in the winter isn’t for everyone.”

Moretz, a native of Portland, Ore., worked in computer operations for the Albertsons grocery chain



Dave Moretz says it gets lonely at the top during winter.

Of note

■ The amount of rock moved during the modernization of Tioga Road east of Yosemite National Park — 1.5 million yards — was enough to fill a loaded freight train 430 miles long.

before taking a seasonal job at the resort seven years ago. He says living near Tioga Pass gives him a healthy respect for the road that leads to Lee Vining and civilization.

“In the summer, sometimes I get a little too comfortable with the road, and then something happens that reminds me that you’ve got to keep your eyes on the road all the time,” he says. “In the winter, getting down the road can be difficult. Storms come through and the wind will leave drifts 60 feet high. We see some strong winds. One year, it shattered the windows in a pickup truck and left the paint looking like it had been sandblasted.”

The wintertime isolation at the resort can be exhilarating or drive a person crazy, says Moretz. There’s nothing like stepping out the front door and being 10 to 15 minutes away from some of the most beautiful scenery in the Sierra. But winters can be long and demanding.

“If we didn’t have the Internet, it would be pretty tough,” Moretz says. “Living up here is not the kind of thing you can do for a long stretch of time.”

But even harsh weather and isolation can seem like friends after a while.

“I kind of have mixed feelings when the road opens in the spring,” says Moretz. “You’re happy to have easy access to Lee Vining. But during the winter, it feels like my road, and when you see traffic on it again, it takes some getting used to.”



Early morning light reveals the broad-shouldered glory of the Sierra’s eastern slope.



Lee Vining Canyon

Keeping rubber on the pavement becomes a priority as drivers descend more than 3,000 feet without guard rails on a narrow shelf carved into towering canyon walls.

Uphill and downhill struggle

The eastern approach to Tioga Pass can take your breath away — in more ways than one.

From the passenger seat of a car, the rapid descent of more than 3,000 feet in the 10 miles from Yosemite’s eastern gate is a little like riding a roller coaster.

And running uphill against traffic not only burns throat and lungs, it forces athletes to follow a narrow path between oncoming cars on the right and a sheer dropoff to the left.

Kathie Kortering found that out 21 years ago when she moved to California from Florida, where she was a member of the women’s cross country team at the University of Miami.

“I heard about the Tioga Pass run and thought it would be fun,” says Kortering, 44, a chiropractor who lives in Benton, 34 miles north of her office in Bishop.

The race is held the second weekend in September and covers a 12.4-mile course from Lee Vining to the Tioga Pass entrance station to Yosemite National Park.

As an experienced distance runner, Kortering thought she would have no trouble reaching Tioga Pass. She didn’t know the road can be a demanding taskmaster, especially when fall winds turn cold.

“It started snowing on the way up,” she says. “This was the weekend after Labor Day. I had to stop after 7½ miles. It’s the only race I’ve ever quit.”

Regardless of the weather, Kortering says running up the hill can be eerie. With no guard rail on the left and cars passing on the right, runners have little room for error. Views are spectacular, but the dropoffs are sheer in places, and if the wind kicks up, the illusion of being blown off the road makes the heart beat faster.

“When both feet leave the ground, you feel like the wind is pushing you backwards,” Kortering says.



Flowers and foliage brighten Lee Vining Canyon in the spring and fall.

Despite her failed first effort, Kortering kept running, determined to conquer the pass. She trained on flat land and mountain trails. After her daughter was born in 1993, she pushed her in a stroller on a run covering 16 miles; that’s when she knew she was ready for another run up the hill. A year later, she made it to the top.

Kortering has finished the race six times and has been race director for the past five years. “The scenery is beautiful, and when you’re walking or running on the road, you can take note of it,” she says. “The fall colors are wonderful and the lakes are gorgeous.”

One year, while setting up for the race, Kortering found a boulder the size of a Volkswagen in the middle of the road. Another time, after setting up a table at an aid station nine miles up the canyon, she came back and found the table missing.

“I looked over the side but never found it. The wind can be pretty scary, but I think maybe somebody took it.”

What you might see

■ Bighorn sheep are an endangered species. Only a few herds live in the Sierra, from Yosemite National Park to south of Mount Whitney. They live in rocky, steep terrain and eat grasses, herbs, twigs and leaves.

■ The leaves of the quaking aspen produce a rustling sound in the slightest breeze and turn golden yellow or red in fall.



Of note

■ The completed Tioga Road in Yosemite National Park was dedicated on June 24, 1961. Total construction cost was \$5.5 million. The Lee Vining Canyon section of Highway 120 outside the park was rebuilt from 1963 to 1967 at a cost of more than \$5.5 million.



Lee Vining

The tranquil waters of Mono Lake welcome travelers to the end of Tioga Road and invite them to explore the vast open areas of the Sierra’s eastern slope.

Lee Vining’s lifeblood

In 1852, Leroy Vining led a group of prospectors over the mountains in search of gold beyond Tioga Pass. Today, in a town bearing his name, businesses depend on Tioga Road to bring them gold.

“The road is our lifeblood,” says Bill Banta, 53, owner of the Best Western Lake View Lodge in Lee Vining. “When the road is open, our occupancy is 100%. When it’s closed, we’re at 5%.”

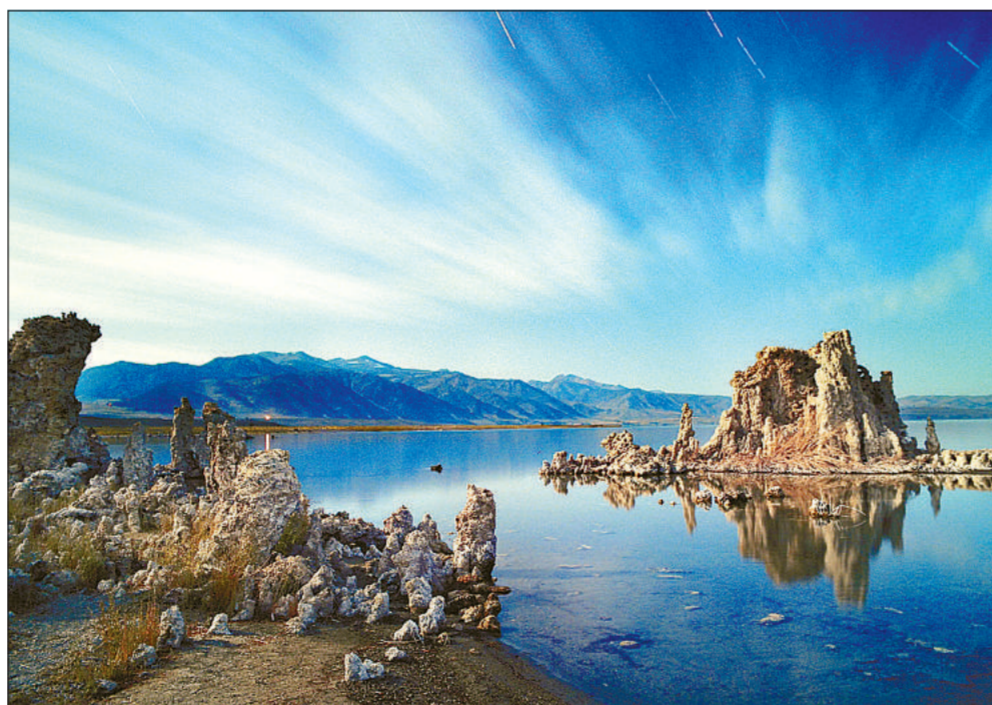
Tioga Road usually opens around Memorial Day every spring, but this year, because of heavy snowfall, traffic did not start moving across the pass until June 24.

“We lost the whole month of June this year, and that’s one-fourth of our income,” Banta says.

Lee Vining comes alive when the road opens. Travelers from California head over Tioga Pass to enjoy the recreational activities and wide-open spaces of the eastern slope of the Sierra. Westbound motorists pass through on their way to Yosemite.

“A lot of people come through here in the spring thinking they can use Tioga Pass,” says Banta. “When they find out the road is closed, it messes up a whole day of their vacation.”

Banta estimates half the travelers who come through Lee Vining are from foreign countries. Many fly into San Francisco, visit Yosemite National Park by car, then head across Tioga Pass en route to Las



A time exposure taken between 2 a.m. and 3 a.m. reveals tufa stone formations in Mono Lake while stars create light trails overhead.

Vegas. Area residents also use Tioga Road as a shortcut across the mountains.

Banta saves several hours by using Tioga Road on trips to visit his sister in San Luis Obispo or participate in shotgun shooting competitions in the San Joaquin Valley.

“Fall is the best time to visit Lee Vining,” he says. “Crowds are down and the weather is nice. You also have a better chance to see some bighorn sheep. You never see them in lambing season, but in early spring and in the fall they come down to a mineral lick near the road at the 8,500-foot elevation.”

As much as he would like to see more people come to Lee Vining, Banta says it isn’t realistic to keep Tioga Road open in winter. But he says there is one way it could be safely opened a little earlier in the spring.

The original road bypassed Olmsted Point, he says. The old route could be improved and used as a temporary detour around the Olmsted Point avalanche chute.

“That would solve the safety issues and allow them to open the road a few weeks earlier,” he says.



Carved lawn ornaments await buyers in Lee Vining.

What you might see

■ The California gull migrates to Mono Lake in summer to mate and raise its young. In some years, up to 65,000 pairs have nested on the islands in Mono Lake.



Of note

■ Leroy Vining’s luck failed him after he came over Tioga Pass in search of gold. He built a sawmill to supply lumber to area mining camps but wound up accidentally shooting himself to death in an Aurora saloon.

The town of Lee Vining was named for him in 1923.

Open and closing dates

Open and closing dates for Tioga Road vary from year to year depending on conditions. The road usually opens in May or early June and remains open through October.

	Open	Closed
1980	June 6	Dec. 2
1982	May 28	Nov. 15
1984	May 19	Nov. 8
1986	May 24	Nov. 29
1988	April 29	Nov. 14
1990	May 17	Nov. 19
1992	May 15	Nov. 10
1994	May 25	Nov. 10
1996	May 31	Nov. 5
1998	July 1	Nov. 12
2000	May 18	Nov. 9
2002	May 22	Nov. 5
2004	May 14	Oct. 17

Source: Yosemite National Park

Stories by Guy Keeler Photos by Eric Paul Zamora Graphics by John Alvin

Share your stories of Tioga Road and see more photos of the area at www.fresnobee.com/lifestyle.