

## OFF-GRID UPGRADES

The newly built cabins on the shores of Frog Lake, in the Castle Peak backcountry near Truckee, California, come complete with a chef's kitchen and hutmaster who brews your coffee each morning.

*by Megan Michelson*

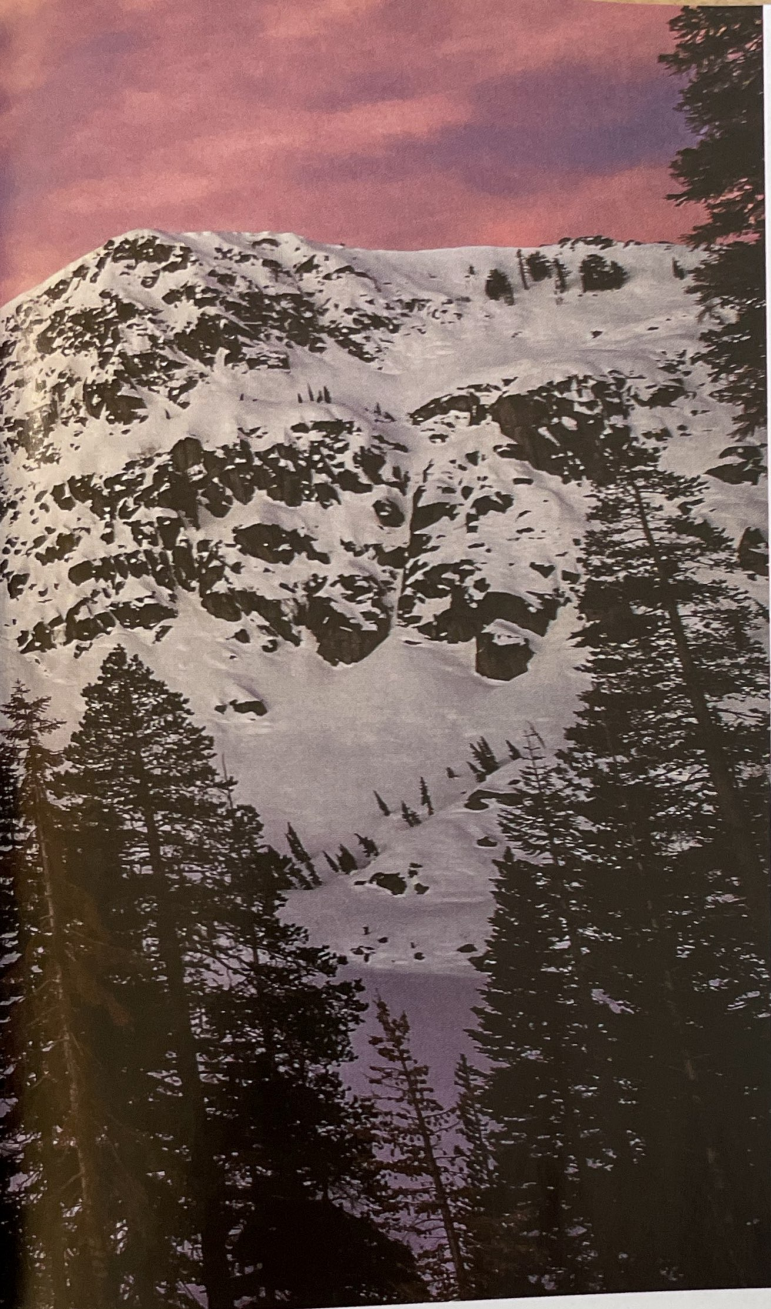
The huts are nowhere to be found. I'm atop the precipitous, thousand-foot-high Frog Lake Cliffs in the Lake Tahoe backcountry. I'm staring down toward Frog Lake, where three backcountry cabins have recently been built. But, seriously, where are they?

Turns out, the Frog Lake Huts—tucked into a quiet corner of wilderness at 7,600 feet of elevation—were designed to blend in with their surroundings, and the architect did a very good job, because the stand of red firs along the lake completely ensconces the cabins from view. To reach them, we toured uphill through mellow slopes and dense trees for around 4 miles and 1,400 vertical feet from a parking area off Interstate 80—the highway that grinds over Donner Pass—eventually reaching our clifftop perch.

Finally, my ski partners and I spot the huts and make our way toward our home base for the next two nights. We ski careful turns down a ramp-like chute that angles toward the lake, toting heavy packs loaded with sleeping bags, cans of beer and food items you might not normally bring into a hard-to-reach hut—fresh fruit to top pancakes for breakfast; baguettes, olives and cheese for après ski; and cookie dough to bake in the oven for dessert. >>



Cold water and no cell reception? Think again, California's Frog Lake Huts near Donner Pass offer luxury and a roof. [ ] Daniel J. Noll



This isn't your normal bare-bones backcountry hut, where you melt snow for drinking water, pack in salt and pepper and fall asleep to strangers snoring.

Instead, three neighboring cabins sleep 20 people total in a combination of bunkrooms and private quarters. Each cabin has flush toilets, hot water sinks, a gas stove and custom metal racks for drying gear. You can even charge your phone from solar-powered outlets.

Next door sits the 100-year-old renovated Eschenbach Backcountry House, named for Ralph Eschenbach, an inventor who created the first commercial GPS receiver and a donor to the local land trust. Part of the site's original buildings, the stone house has a fully outfitted kitchen designed by a Truckee chef, dining tables, two wood-burning stoves next to comfy leather sofas and a library filled with mountaineering books. This is the kind of place where an on-site hutmaster brews coffee at 6:30 a.m. for all guests and the spice rack comes prestocked with cumin and oregano.

Frog Lake Huts opened in December 2021 on a chunk of remote land that was privately owned and inaccessible to the public for nearly 100 years. Under President Abraham Lincoln, the federal government granted railroad companies ownership of every other square mile of land in the Sierra Nevada to build the first transcontinental railroad line, keeping the squares in between as national forest land. This created a checkerboard pattern of private and public land as companies sold some of their sections to private entities to cover the cost of railroad construction.

In the early 1930s, Felix T. Smith, Sr., a senior partner of a major San Francisco law firm and an avid outdoorsman and fly fisherman, was searching for a privately owned lake in the Sierra Nevada with a mountain on the west side to provide a shadow on the water for better afternoon fishing. He planned to visit three sites, but after seeing Frog Lake, he knew it was perfect and bought the land from the Southern Pacific Railroad Company. >>




[Above] William Wordsworth couldn't have pictured a better sunset when he wrote this opening line: "It is a beautiful evening, calm and free." □ **Ryan Salm**

[Left] Skiers gather by the wood stove in the Eschenbach House, debating either the next day's lines or that night's board game. □ **Ryan Salm**

[Middle] Historic buildings meet modern amenities in the Frog Lake Huts, where guests have access to an industrial kitchen. □ **Courtesy Truckee Donner Land Trust**

[Right] You still have to hear your friends snore, but the bunkrooms are more comfortable than many other options out there. □ **Courtesy Truckee Donner Land Trust**

Is this the way out of Moria?  
Kimberly Hall escapes  
through a cleft in the Warren  
Lake Chutes.  Daniel J. Noll



The Smith family proceeded to spend summers there, a tradition Smith's three sons continued with their children after their father's death in 1947. "Our dad thought his three sons should experience life outside of the city; this was a way to have us understand much more about life," son Larry Smith says. "The family treasured the beauty and history of the area and over the course of 90 years of ownership always kept the integrity of the land as their highest priority. When my brother Nathan and I decided to sell the property, we felt that our dad would have liked to see the property preserved

as he had done."

In 2020, the Smiths sold their land to Truckee Donner Land Trust, a nonprofit, as part of a \$15 million deal that included neighboring land from other entities, conserving around 3,000 total acres.

"As a conservation organization, we considered knocking down the existing structures and returning the land to a natural state," says Greyson Howard, communications director for the Truckee Donner Land Trust. "But a big part of our mission is public recreation. We saw this as a unique opportunity to get people farther out and have a different kind of experience on >>

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the lands, both in the winter and summer.”

The new huts were built off-site—to minimize disturbances—and trucked in. They are open for winter and summer bookings; during shoulder seasons, they are closed for repairs and to reduce year-round traffic on the site.

The area sees an annual average of 400 inches of snow. But when I was there last winter, it was late March during a particularly dry Tahoe season. We were happy to settle for smooth, stable, weeks-old corn. From the hut, you can plan a big day touring Castle Peak’s high-alpine bowls and steep chutes, or access moderate, short slopes through the trees behind the hut.

On our first full day, after a hearty pancake breakfast, we skin out the door and up the peak directly behind the huts. It’s called Perry’s Peak, named after Perry Norris, who retired in 2022 from his longtime role as the Land Trust’s executive director. Norris, an avid backcountry skier, and current Executive Director John Svahn, spent 20 years talking with the Smith family about purchasing their land for conservation.

“It was this long-running conversation about what they wanted to do with this property, what they wanted the legacy to be,” Howard says. “Sometimes sellers are interested in preservation; sometimes they just want money. The Smiths were really focused on preservation, and they chose the Land Trust as the buyers.”

From the summit of Perry’s Peak, the green tops of the pines in the Euer Valley stretch toward

a shimmering Donner Lake. We rip skins and drop 1,800 feet off the north-facing side to the valley floor below, where a creek tumbles through the mossy forest. Completing a long traverse around Perry’s Peak, we find our way back to the top of the Frog Lake Cliffs, eyeing our line down to the hut, where cheese and salami and beers chilling in the snow await.

That evening, sitting in lawn chairs by the lake, my friends and I start chatting with John Gilchrist, a splitboarder from Utah, who, alongside his partner, Jessica Reece, took time off from his regular job to be a hutmaster. The two have been living out here for much of the winter, taking care of the hut and exploring the surrounding terrain.

“It doesn’t get much better than this,” Gilchrist says, the tangerine sun sinking below the cliff band behind him. That night, we eat marinated tri-tip cooked on the grill and roasted Brussels sprouts hot from the oven and hatch plans for tomorrow’s tour. I hit the pillow—yes, I packed a pillow—and drift into a deep sleep, with no snoring stranger in earshot.

The next morning, Gilchrist is the first person I see: He’s just made a fresh pot of coffee, and the sun is cresting over Frog Lake Cliffs. Yep, it doesn’t get much better than this. ❄️

*[Overnight fees at Frog Lake Huts range from \$56 to \$112 per person, per night. Alpenglou Expeditions, NASTC, Blackbird Mountain Guides, Alpine Skills International and Tahoe Mountain School offer guided backcountry ski trips into Frog Lake Huts. Book the hut at [TruckeeDonnerLandTrust.org/frog-lake](http://TruckeeDonnerLandTrust.org/frog-lake)]*

[Left] Guests can enjoy 100 years of history and a hot meal inside the Eschenbach Backcountry House.

❏ Courtesy Truckee Donner Land Trust

[Right] After a bright sunrise like this, the hutmaster might greet you with a cup of coffee. ❏ Daniel J. Noll