Cut off at the pass

Leaving on Tioga Pass is a shock — especially in winter, when the temperatures plunge to -20 below zero and the wind howls howling over the mountains to -40 or -50 mph. "It's nothing like anywhere else," says Dave Morley, 41, manager of the Tioga Pass Resort, a collection of 50 cabins and four vacation homes at 8,600 feet, about a mile short of the pass. "We're only open eight months of the year."

The day brought 10 inches of snow every hour. He says the thick blanket cut off the tiny amount that came out of the east of the world, but provides a wealth of backcountry skiing opportunities for those willing to hike up Tioga Road to the pass on snowshoes.

"The only way in and out is by snowmobile, unmarked roads that are hard to find," he adds, "Roads you've never been on, roads you've never driven on and everyone."

Close to the door of the lodge, Morley worked in composting toilets and unpacked the Alberton's grocery chain.

Lee Vining says it's a good idea to top the top during winter.

Lee Vining's birthday

In 1977, Larry Vining led a group of prospectors over the mountains in search of gold. He found Tioga Pass. Today, in a town bearing his name, businesses depend on Tioga Pass to bring them gold.

"This is our birthday," says Bill Morley, 79, owner of the Best Western Lake View Lodge. "When the road opens, we're happy. When it's snowed in, we're happy."

Tioga Pass usually opens around Memorial Day every spring, but this year, because of heavy snowfall, traffic did not start moving across the pass until late this month. In fact, the whole month of June is still in use.

Lee Vining comes alive when the road begins. Travels from California to Tioga Pass to enjoy the recreational activities and wide-open spaces of the eastern slope of the Sierra. Northwest mountains are covered in snow. "A lot of people come through here in the summer, thinking they're on 'Crazy People,"" says Rains. "When they find out the road is closed, it messes up a whole day of their plans."

Rains estimates that the travelers who come to Tioga Pass and make their way down through the mountains. Many fly into San Francisco or Yosemite National Park and head across Tioga Pass on route to Lee.

Lee Vining and the Sierras

Every September, runners charge up Lee Vining Canyon in search of the Sierra's eastern slopes.

Lee Vining Canyon

Running rubber on the pavement becomes a priority as drivers descend more than 3,000 feet without guard rails or a ramrod course carved by towering canyon walls.

Uphill and downhill struggle

The passenger seat of a car, the quick descent of more than 1,000 feet off the 10-mile route from Yosemite's eastern gate is a little like riding a roller coaster.

But running uphill against traffic not only harrows hearts and lungs, it forces athletes to follow a narrow path between steam pipes on the right and a sheer cliff on the left.

Kathleen Kortering found that out 15 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," she says. Kortering, 44, a chiropractor who lives in Mammoth Lakes, 36 miles north of the office in Bishop.

"The race is held in the second weekend in September, so it's after the Tioga Pass from Lee Vining Canyon 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 was a demanding task, especially when it comes to the snow.

"It was a shock," she says. "The second week of Labor Day, I had a run after 7:30 a.m. It's the only race I've ever quit."

Regardless of the weather, Kortering says running up the hill can be over. With no guard rails in the left and right sides past the runners have little room for error. "They're spectacular, but they're very steep, and if the road is covered with snow and ice, you're not going to make it."

"When both feet leave the ground, you have to be careful of the speed and that you're not going back up tonight," Kortering says.

Despite her said fist effort, Kortering kept running, determined to conquer the run. She trained on the Tioga and mountain trails. After her daughter was born in 1986, she pushed herself to a trail on a run covering 10 miles. That's when she knew she was ready for the run. It was 10 miles later. After a year, she made it to the top. Kortering finished the full 10-mile run in 1987, the next five years. "The scenery is beautiful, and when you're walking or running on the road, you can take it off," she says. "If you consider the fact that the roads are wooden and the lakes are gorgeous."

One year, while setting up the race, Kortering found a bareback the size of a Volkswagen in the middle of the hill. "Another time, after setting up a table at an inn and going over to this town, she found a "horrible mess of shells from a .30-30 bullet," Kortering says. "I looked over the side but never found it. The wind can be pretty strong, but I think maybe somebody took it."

Mountains and Tioga Uphill and downhill Canyon on the spring side.

What you might see

• The California bighorn sheep, a species of the Sierra Nevada.
• The Sierra Nevada mountain range in summer, with snow in the peaks, in the summer, in the mountains, in Yosemite National Park.
• All you can expect to see during the Tioga Pass run in search of gold. Pursue a needle to supply water to the empty mine cam and basin up excavation before death in the mine. The town of Lee Vining said it has been used in the town of Lee Vining since 1883.

Stories by Gay Keeler Photos by Eric Paul Zamora Graphics by John Alvis Share your stories of Tioga Pass and see more photos of the area at www.fresnobee.com/leelife.