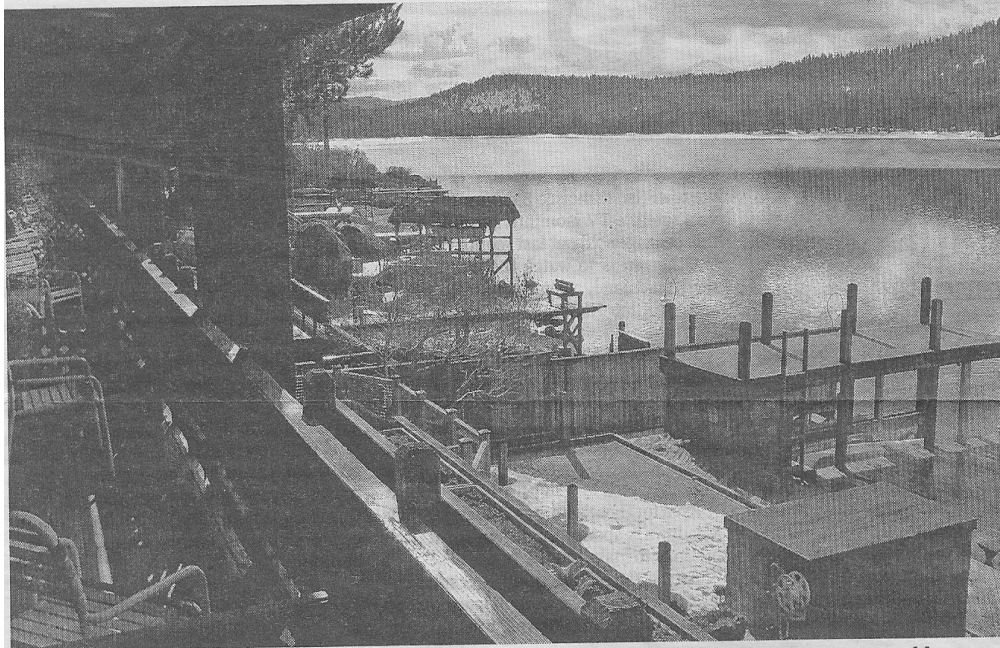


Under covers



Loch Leven Lodge on the shores of Donner Lake in Truckee features fabulous views, rooms that resemble cozy cabins with fireplaces, and little kitchens so snacking and small meals are no problem.

SIERRA TREASURE

:: Loch Leven Lodge :: Reviewing Loch Leven Lodge feels a bit like giving up the location of Sierra Nevada gold. This unpretentious eight-room inn on Donner Lake is the kind of place you visit year after year, the place you take annual snapshots showing how the kids have grown. The place has old-fashioned charm — they still give guests real keys with a room-numbered plastic tag — although nothing looks shabby or old. And the view from every room is worth each penny paid, which makes the charming accommodations and glorious back deck (with a perfectly heated hot tub) feel like giveaways.

— Jill Tucker, jtucker@sfgchronicle.com

Vitals: 13855 Donner Pass Road, Truckee. (877) 663-6637 or (530) 587-3773, www.lochlevenlodge.com. Eight rooms (including one with handicap entryway access). \$100-\$240, double occupancy rate. Minimum stay may apply on weekends and holidays.



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Comfort Zone

This miniature resort offers one two-story townhouse, six suites and studios with kitchens as well as one basic bedroom. Wood-plank wainscoting, rustic decor and environmentally friendly gas fireplaces make each room feel like a cozy mountain cabin despite the exterior's motor inn appearance. The small kitchens are well-stocked with basic gear as well as a canister filled with Starbucks coffee. The gas-inducing view that fills the back wall of windows rivals any alpine panorama pictured on a European postcard. Second-floor rooms each have a small balcony separated from neighbors by a small gate — perfect for families or friends in adjoining rooms.

Bath and beyond

The bathrooms are the only downside, they're nothing fancy with a stall shower in the suite, a wall-mounted hair dryer and little shelving to hold personal items. Judith Jackson Spa toiletries are provided. The townhouse, which sleeps up to six, has two bathrooms, including one with a heated floor. The linens and towels, happily, are better than those found in most rental cabins or motels.

Geared up

This 56-year-old resort is all about gearing down, rather than up. There are no telephones in the rooms and no Internet access, but there is good mobile phone reception. A nod to modernity comes in the form of a flat-screen television mounted on the wall with a long list of cable channels available.

In the vicinity

Donner Lake is often passed by with only a glance to the right while on the way to Truckee or Lake Tahoe's North Shore, and while it feels more remote down at the shore, it's about 15 minutes from several ski resorts, a few minutes outside central Truckee (where the old part of town boasts some lovely restaurants) and about a 20-minute drive to Lake Tahoe.

Good to know

Managers Daniel and Timi Nelson greet guests like family and perform all tasks at the lodge, which means they don't always answer the phone for reservations, but they call back quickly. There is no housekeeping during the stay, although extra linens are available, and guests must clean the kitchen prior to check-out or face a \$20 fee. Also, there is a \$20 charge for every extra guest over the double occupancy and that includes babies and kids. There is a barbecue available on the deck (from which you can fish), a quirky putting green and row boats for use in the summer. From the hot tub, one can watch trains pass across the mountain on the other side of the lake, a surreal sight. But beware of the bears that wander about at night. Seriously.

Highs and lows

The Loch Leven Lodge is a throwback to the days of old-school family resorts. Noise can be an issue, as neighbors pack up in the early mornings and the rooms are not palatial. Yet this largely undiscovered mountain resort is a Sierra Nevada treasure — a rare find.