Welcome to the Crystal Basin Recreation Area of the Eldorado National Forest, spanning 85,000 acres of pine and fir forests along the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada. Capped by the majestic, granite peaks of the Crystal Range and traversed by lakes, reservoirs and streams, the Crystal Basin’s four seasons and varied terrain offer a diverse range of rugged outdoor adventure.

History
The Crystal Basin was once the home of the Miwok, Washoe and Maidu people. In the 1800’s, ranch settlers grazed dairy cattle on the high mountain meadows now covered by reservoirs. In the early 1900’s, the USDA Forest Service opened the Crystal Basin to the public. In 1957, Sacramento Municipal Utility District (SMUD) began construction of the Upper American River Project (UARP), a series of hydroelectric power plants in the Crystal Basin. Today, the UARP is capable of producing 1.8 billion kilowatt-hours of clean, affordable electricity — enough energy to power about 200,000 homes a year in Sacramento.

As part of the Upper American River Project, SMUD created a network of beautiful mountain reservoirs and built a variety of recreational facilities around the reservoirs. Working together, SMUD and the Forest Service continue to provide land and water-based recreation opportunities for all forest visitors to enjoy.

Camping
Over 700 developed campgrounds are available in the Crystal Basin. Most require fees and/or reservations and have a fire ring with grate, a table and parking spur. Campgrounds have bear proof storage and trash bins. Most sites accommodate recreational vehicles (no hookups). The maximum stay is 14 days. Camp in an undeveloped setting is allowed in most areas of the National Forest. When you pick your spot, make sure it is at least 100 feet away from streams and lakes, to protect streamside vegetation and prevent pollution.

Fishing
Anglers can cast for kokanee salmon, small mouth bass, mackinaw or rainbow trout at Union Valley Reservoir. SMUD and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife for fishing enthusiasts eager to reel in a wild brown trout, try your luck at Gerle Creek.

Recreational boating is a favorite pastime on the clear lakes, to protect streamside vegetation and prevent pollution.

Boating
Recreational boating is a favorite pastime on the clear mountain lakes of the Crystal Basin. Ice House, Union Valley and Loon Lake Reservoir have paved boat ramps and are large enough to accommodate motorboats and water sports.

Hiking
The Crystal Basin provides a gateway to Desolation Wilderness, offering access to 117 miles of hiking trails across the Sierra Nevada. Many of the trails located within the Crystal Basin offer easy to moderate day hikes. For an easy, informative hike, try the accessible Gerle Creek Summer Harvest Trail and learn how Native Americans utilized the resources available from the forest.

Accessible
Many of the developed areas throughout the Crystal Basin are accessible for people with disabilities. The Crystal Basin Information Station, fishing pier and trails at Gerle Creek, many of the campgrounds, parking areas and the paved boat ramps at the reservoirs accommodate wheelchairs.

Snow Sking
Cross-country skiers can traverse miles of exquisite, pristine ski trails near Loon Lake Reservoir, the highest elevation reservoir in the Crystal Basin. The ungroomed trails are rated “Easiest” to “Most Difficult”. Trail maps are available from the Forest Service. Keep safety in mind, know your limits and stay within your difficulty level.

OHV
For those who prefer 4-wheels, the Crystal Basin is home to one of the most famous OHV trails, the Rubicon Jeep Trail. Another popular trail is Barrett Jeep Trail near Wrights Lake. Please check the latest Motor Vehicle Use Map (MVUM) and only travel on designated roads and motorized trails.

Bicycling
The Crystal Basin has trails for both road cyclists and mountain bikers to enjoy. For families with children and cyclists who prefer a relaxed ride on pavement, Union Valley Reservoir has a paved 5.5 mile bike trail that winds along the edge of the lake. Mountain bikers can enjoy a 3.1 mile stretch of single track trail along the Ice House campgrounds.

Big Hill
For a panoramic view of the captivating scenery of the Crystal Basin, visit Big Hill Vista and Lookout. It offers views of the Crystal Range and west to Sacramento and Mount Diablo.
Please be aware of hazardous winter road conditions. Check in with Eldorado National Forest for current conditions and road closures before setting out on your trip.