

The Press Democrat

Fall is festival season in Lake County



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Lake County is a mere 1.5 to 2-hour drive from Santa Rosa Plaza, yet many Sonoma County residents have never come to call. Perhaps that's because the region, surrounded by mountains and accessed from only a few narrow back-country roads, seems far away. But that semi-isolated, off-the-everyday-track aspect helps to make The county of Lake a great getaway, one with much to offer.

For decades, this region had limited amenities for travelers, but in recent years a strong but modest tourist infrastructure has emerged, offering excellent wineries, charming and even luxurious boutique hotels and highly rated restaurants. Outdoor activities abound and cultural events are on the rise. And yet, the region retains a wonderful feel of California in decades past. There's a touch of frontier here — an outlook more “countrified” than gentrified — and a slower pace that's both infectious and calming.

For Sonoma County residents, Lake County’s treasures are just a short drive away — and autumn is a perfect time to visit. Vineyard leaves are ablaze with brilliant reds and yellows. Thousands of migrating birds are paused along the region’s intricate complex of waterways to feed and mate and play, and massive Clear Lake — where waters remain high thanks to last winter’s bountiful rains — is peaceful, clear and mesmerizing.



Get outdoors

The natural wonders here start with the dozens of waterways that gave the county its name. The two side-by-side Blue Lakes, spring-fed and unspoiled, are exceptionally beautiful havens for swimming and fishing. Borax Lake played such a major role in California’s Native American history that it was declared a National Historic Landmark in 2006. Loch Lomond Vernal Pool is populated by sensitive plant species such as spike rush and coyote thistle, which only exist in the pool’s rarefied habitat.

The county’s largest water body, Clear Lake, is huge. At 19 miles long and 60 feet at its deepest, it’s the biggest natural freshwater lake in California (Lake Tahoe is larger, but lies partly within Nevada). It’s also the oldest lake in North America (about 2.5 million years), holds more fish per square acre than any other lake in the nation and has been called the “Bass Capital of the West” by many fishing organizations.

Dominating views of Clear Lake and much of the surrounding area is Mt. Konocti, a 4,299-foot stratovolcano that last erupted 11,000 years ago. Keep an eye out for prized Lake County “diamonds,” small shards of volcanic silica glass (quartz) that sparkle like precious jewels. Among the county’s other volcanic features — including lava domes and cinder cones — is The Geysers. The world’s largest geothermal field complex, it supplies 60 percent of average electricity demand in the coastal region from the Golden Gate Bridge to the Oregon border.

The region’s significant wilderness areas and waterways have resulted in numerous officially protected areas. In 2015, the county’s Cache Creek Wilderness and Wildlife Areas, along with wilderness lands in six other contiguous counties, were designated by President Barack Obama as the Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument. Other notable protected areas in the county include Boggs Mountain Demonstration State Forest, Anderson Marsh State Historic Park, Boggs Lake Reserve, Loch Lomond Vernal Pool Ecological Reserves, Rodman Slough Preserve and Clear Lake State Park.

With all this natural splendor, there’s plenty for outdoor lovers to do here. Take the steep 3-mile climb to the top of Mt. Konocti via the Wright Peak Summit Trail. You’ll not only earn boasting rights for toughness, but revel in an absolutely amazing view from the top. Or go for the 9-mile, 4-5-hour kayak tour of bubbling volcanic vents in Soda Bay, which leaves from Clear Lake State Park.

Feeling less active? Take a horse-drawn wagon ride through a pear orchard, or take a leisurely drive to one of the wilderness areas. At Anderson Marsh SHP, where Cache Creek moves slowly through tule marshes, wildflowers are still in bloom. Located on the southeast corner of Clear Lake, Anderson is filled with native and migrating birds. Walk one of the park’s trails, or, if a docent is available, tour the historic ranch house dating from the 1860s.

Something everyone will enjoy is “Eyes of the Wild,” a pontoon boat tour with a focus on wildlife. The tours are captained by bird/wildlife photographer Faith Rigolosi, who loves showing off the lake’s grebes, great blue herons, cormorants and egrets.

And when you’ve done all that, there’s plenty more, including boating, birding, fishing, camping, hiking, biking, horseback riding and hunting.

Tour wineries

Making wine is nothing new in Lake County. The first vineyards were planted in the 1870s, and it wasn’t long before the local wines began winning international awards thanks to the region’s Mediterranean microclimates and varied soil types (rich in volcanic ash on the slopes, nourished by waterways in the lowlands). With prohibition, production ceased and vineyards were replaced with other crops, most notably walnuts and pears.



But — similar to Napa and Sonoma — vineyards began to be planted again in the 1960s and the Lake County wine industry began a comeback.

In recent years, Lake County wines have begun to stand proudly on their own, winning awards and enthusiastic reviews in the process. The county is divided into seven appellations, each with a distinct terroir. The county has approximately 50 small-lot wineries now, and more than half are open to the public for tastings — often poured by the owner.

For a winery overview, head to The Wine Studio in Upper Lake, which features most of the county's wines, from Aliénor to Wildhurst, with stops along the way for more than 40 others, including Brassfield Estate, Gregory Graham, Langtry/Guenoc, Lajour, Mt. Konocti Winery, Six Sigma and Tejada.

At Cache Creek Vineyards in Clearlake Oaks, you'll spot tule elk (the surrounding land is a wildlife sanctuary). At Boatique Winery in Kelseyville, you can take a self-guided tour of the owners' world-class collection of rare antique wooden boats.

Also in Kelseyville: the tasting room of Rosa d'Oro Vineyards, housed in a 1910 bank building, and horseshoes and 15,000 feet of wine caves at the Moore Family Winery. In Lower Lake, sustainably farmed Vigilance Winery overlooks beautiful Anderson Marsh and makes for a great picnic spot.



Explore something new

If you're traveling with kids, or if you'd just like to experience the laid-back side of goat farming, schedule a tour at Yerba Santa Goat Dairy in Scotts Valley. Brothers Javier and Daniel Salmon will give you a cheese tasting and show you how they make their Peruvian-style Bodega cheeses. It's also fun to watch the goat herd frolic in its huge, beautiful pasture.

Or enjoy a horse-drawn wagon tour pulled by huge Live Oak Belgian draft horses. Susan and Kenn McCarty will take you on a memorable trek through walnut and pear farms.

Far removed from city lights, Lake County skies are pitch black at night. Take advantage of that fact with a public stargazing at Kelseyville's Taylor Observatory-Norton Planetarium, which has a 16-inch research grade scope under a dome, a 32-seat planetarium with a 20-foot domed ceiling and an Epsilon Model Digitarium Star Projector System. Public events take place on the fourth Saturday of each month from 8 to 11 p.m.

Pears are one of Lake County's major crops, so why not grab a bottle of sparkling pear wine while you're here? Mt. Konocti Winery makes its bubbly, "Lady of the Lake," in the traditional method.



Upcoming Fall Festivals

A string of festivals are lined up for early fall to celebrate another successful harvest and herald the coming of winter. Here's a rundown:

October 7-8

16th annual Falling Leaves Quilt Show: More than 200 quilts in traditional and modern style, wearable art, demonstrations, a silent auction, door prizes and more. This year's featured artist is notable quilter Lynn Wilder, founder of Sew'n Wild Oaks pattern company.

27th annual Konocti Challenge: For cyclists of all levels, with challenge courses of 40, 65 or 100 miles, and a 20-mile family fun ride for recreational riders. In 2014, Cycle California Magazine voted the Konocti Challenge the year's Best Metric Century.

Oktoberfest Lakeport: Free admission to this street festival in downtown Lakeport, where you'll find great German food, all-day music, dachshund races, dirndl/lederhosen costume contests, beer steins, corn hole toss, and a microbrew beer tasting garden.

October 14-15

Steele Wines Harvest Festival: Fulfill your fantasies of stomping grapes, join a 5K or 10K Run (or a 5K walk) to raise funds for literacy, enjoy great music, wine tasting, a 4H Barbecue, kids games, face painting, a pie eating contest and more.

October 28-29

Tallman Hotel & Blue Wing Saloon Whiskey Celebration: This month-long event at Upper Lake's elegant Tallman Hotel kicks off with a whiskey lover's dream. The weekend features a talk by Sherry Monahan and Jane Perkins, authors of "Golden Elixir of the West;" a class, Whiskey 101, covering whiskey's history from moonshine to malt; a formal whiskey tasting/pairing; a course in how to drink whiskey and create cocktails; and a whiskey-inspired Sunday brunch. A special hotel package, "Whiskeyed Away," includes a two-night stay and two tickets to all events.

If you go STAY



Tallman Hotel: Lovingly-restored 19th-century hotel/livery stable with 17 individually-designed rooms. 9550 Main St., Upper Lake, 707-275-2244, tallmanhotel.com.

Lakeport English Inn: Historic inn built in 1875 offering beautiful rooms, English amenities. 675 N. Main St., Lakeport, 707-263-4317, lakeportenglishinn.com.

Featherbed Railroad B&B: A unique resort offers lodging in nine vintage railroad cabooses. 2870 Lakeshore Blvd., Nice, 707-274-8378.

EAT



Blue Wing Saloon: Worth-the-journey comfort food. 9550 Main St., Upper Lake. 707-275-2244, tallmanhotel.com/restaurant.

Park Place: Mouth-watering, Italian-influenced dishes rule here and are done to perfection. 50 Third St., Lakeport, 707-263-0444:

Richmond Park Bar & Grill: Outdoor/indoor dining on the lake, docking for boats, large screen for big games, and burgers, ribs, beer. 9435 Konocti Bay Road, Kelseyville, 707-277-7240, richmondparkbarandgrill.net

OTHER DESTINATIONS

Lake County Wine Studio: Sample wines from most Lake County wineries. 9505 Main St., Upper Lake, 707-275-8030, lakecountywinestudio.com.

Clear Lake State Park: 5300 Soda Bay Road, Kelseyville, 707-279-4923, parks.ca.gov

Norton Planetarium and Taylor Observatory: 5725 Oak Hills Lane, Kelseyville, 707-262-4121, taylorobservatory.org.