

High Sierra lakes are a cure for urban life's blues

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Gold mining put Sierra County on the map, but by the late 1800s, city folk were arriving for rest and relaxation. Doctors of the era, recognizing the restorative value of time spent in nature, developed a treatment “for relief from the frantic pace of urban life.” They called it the “Wilderness Cure,” and more than a century later Sierra County is still filling the prescription.

Times may have changed in the rest of the world, but in this forest-clad pocket of Northern California it’s as if time has stopped, or at least come to rest.

Swaddled by the rugged folds of the northern Sierra Nevada, Sierra County has a total population of just over 3,000. The old Gold Rush Highway (Highway 49) meanders along the North Fork of the Yuba River through the historic towns of Downieville and Sierra City. (On

your way through, be sure to check out the gallows in Downieville, near the courthouse.)

Just past Sierra City, visitors enter the Lakes Basin Area, which offers more than 50 clear alpine lakes for fishing, swimming and boating. Because much of the area lies within Tahoe and Plumas national forests, the same natural beauty that attracted visitors 100 years ago still exists. There are no stoplights in Sierra County, and visitors won't find fast food or any other signs of modern development. Life is slow, with nothing to pull you away from nature.

The only sounds are of the river and creeks rushing by or the call of birds. Starry nights, clear blue skies, rustic cabins and historic inns give a feeling of timelessness, of what California was like decades ago.

Warning: After taking the Wilderness Cure, you may not want to return to the frantic pace you left behind. The feeling of wilderness can absorb you.

There are a lot of choices of where to stay: cabins, motels and camping. Some families have returned annually for 30-plus years. At Packer Lake Lodge, parents and grandparents relax and sip wine as the kids run in and out. Life still feels sweet here.

Though cabin reservations can be scarce during the summer, many have openings after mid-August; the lakes are still warm, the fishing good and you can enjoy the warm days and cool nights of Indian summer. (Most cabins close for the season mid-October.)

Camping sites, part of the Tahoe National Forest, abound along Highway 49 and the North Yuba River, beginning before Downieville and continuing through Sierra City.

Along Gold Lake Road, many more campsites pop up along the lakes and creeks. These campgrounds have running water, vault toilets and cost \$18-\$24 per night, with a 14-day limit. You can find a list of them at plumascounty.org, or call (877) 444-6777 for reservations.

For mountain-biking enthusiasts, Yuba Expeditions, yubaexpeditions.com, offers shuttles to the many local mountain biking trails.

The choices for dinner are many. At Packer Lake Lodge, you'll find rustic charm with rough beams and wagon wheel lights, lanterns and fresh flowers on the tables. During the summer, a Wednesday night Italian buffet is followed by Bingo that starts at 6 p.m. It's loads of good old-fashioned family fun. Be sure to call for reservations. (Closed Tuesdays.)

Sardine Lake Lodge, on one of the area's most picturesque lakes, also offers dinners in a rustic cabin setting. Call way ahead for reservations. Gray Eagle Lodge serves dinners in its majestic high-ceilinged building.

The Pacific Crest Trail winds through this area, and the hiking possibilities are endless with hikes for all skill levels. Maps are available through the Tahoe National Forest or the Sierra County Chamber of Commerce.

The Sierra City General Store is famous for Larry's "gut-buster hamburgers," a favorite for hikers stopping off from the Pacific Crest Trail. The store also stocks camping supplies.

The Sierra Buttes, the rugged and craggy peaks that jut up from the surrounding tree-lined hills, reach an elevation of 8,700 feet at the summit lookout tower. To hike the Buttes trail, visitors drive to a parking area and begin part way up, so don't be intimidated by how high they look from the road. The hike is best done early in the day. A picnic at the top is a great celebration, and the view is worth the effort.

Be sure to take plenty of water, wear good hiking shoes and allow three to four hours for the climb. If you're wary of heights, skip the last minute of the ascent, up the stairs of a former fire lookout station.

After you've hiked back down, head to Bassett's Station for a well-deserved ice cream cone. For a friendly price, they give generous scoops, the kind that threaten to topple over. They also serve breakfast and lunch and old-fashioned milkshakes that arrive at your table in a frosty metal container.

Mary Erwin of the Sierra County Chamber of Commerce says, "Life slows down here. Come and sit by the river or a lake and relax."

So go ahead and take the Wilderness Cure. Get a glimpse of what California used to be, and return home feeling relaxed and refreshed in ways you can only imagine.

Diane Covington-Carter is a Nevada City-based travel writer. Contact her through her website, dianecovingtoncarter.com.

If You Go

Take I-80 east to Auburn, then Highway 49 north to the Lakes Basin Area, a 4- to 5-hour drive from Sonoma County. Stop for a creekside lunch break in Nevada City at Lefty's Grill, leftysgrill.com.

For a different drive back, continue on Highway 49 through the ranchlands of Sierraville. Then take Highway 89 to Truckee where you can rejoin I-80 west.

For information about where to stay, what to eat, things to do, maps and extensive lists of cabins and campgrounds, visit:

Plumas County, plumascounty.org

Sierra City, sierracity.com

Sierra County Chamber, sierracountychamber.com

Downieville campsites, recreation.gov, (877) 444-6777

Mountain biking, yubaexpeditions.com