

SEPTEMBER+OCTOBER 2007 | VIAMAGAZINE.COM



via

AAA Traveler's Companion

Step into the Conservatory of Flowers in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park.

Great City Parks 30

PLUS The weird allure of wax museums 40
And the winner of VIA's dream vacation is . . . 38
Oregon's undiscovered wine country 46

Weekender

When 90-year-old Al Pratti tells you that on many Fridays during his childhood in Downieville, Calif., he was nearly run down on Main Street, you wonder if he's pulling your leg. After all, on the tree-lined stretch of Highway 49 that runs through this remote Mother Lode village of 325 souls, it seems—especially on a fall day when the leaves are bursting with color—that a car rarely passes by.

But Pratti isn't talking about dodging automobiles. "On Fridays," he recalls, "horses and asses streamed out of the hills and down the street with the miners coming into town for the weekend. There were five saloons here then, and some of those men turned ornery when they got liquored up. I saw plenty of fights."

It doesn't take a visitor long to realize that folks in Downieville love stories. That's one reason why, amid the town's 19th-century clapboard and brick buildings, narrow lanes, and creaky wooden sidewalks, the past feels a lot closer than it does almost anywhere else in California. Eating apple pie at the Grubstake restaurant, you catch some talk of a gold nugget found in a pot used to cook a river trout. Or you might be nursing a cold one under the watchful gaze of a stuffed bear head at the St. Charles Place saloon when you overhear two locals debating whether Juanita deserved to get lynched. It may take you a while to figure out that in both cases the events in question took place more than 150 years ago, not last week.

For those who would visit, the bad news is that Downieville isn't on the way to anywhere. But that's the good news, too. Hidden away in the conifer-thick mountains of the Tahoe National Forest, a two-hour drive northeast of Sacramento, the town sits where the Downie River tumbles into the north fork of the Yuba. The sound of rushing water is everywhere, relaxing you after a day of hiking, biking, fishing, finding your favorite blaze of autumn color, or in-town pursuits like winetasting and curling up with a book on a riverside balcony.

Downieville serves as the seat of Sierra County, which has zero fast-food outlets, a single blinking red traffic light, and a countywide population of 3,500. After gold was discovered in 1848–49, some 16,000 hopeful prospectors showed up. These days, many people come for the gold—and orange and red—of fall foliage. Others have a different kind of fever: the mountain-biking bug. From May until the snows arrive, usually in early November, Downieville draws flocks of fat-tire cyclists. The longtime veterans come to conquer the legendary Downieville Downhill, the course for a high-profile race in July. Dropping 4,700 vertical feet over 17 miles, it's a thrilling ride but one strictly for experienced cyclists and adrenaline junkies.

For a less-demanding ride or hike, there are plenty of options closer to



The Downie River meanders by the town and through the Tahoe National Forest.

Downieville

A former mining town in the Sierra revels in its golden years—past and present. *By Christopher Hall*

» **DOWN UNDER** Guided tours of the Sixteen to One Mine in nearby Alleghany take the curious a half mile underground for a rare look at a working mine laced with veins of gold and quartz. This isn't for the claustrophobic. (530) 287-3330, www.undergroundgold.com.

Weekender

town. Wandering alongside the Downie River, you may spot ospreys or bald eagles. A half-mile walk takes you from the center of town to the 30-foot-high Pauley Creek Falls. On your way back, make a detour to the hillside cemetery where pioneer tombstones date to the 1850s. If it's a warm day, take a dip in the Yuba at nearby Willoughby's swimming hole.

In town at the Downieville Museum, you can ponder curiosities like snowshoes for horses and a "charm string" of 999 buttons collected by an unmarried woman in the 19th century (the 1,000th button would come from the man she would marry).

Armed with the museum's walking-tour brochure, check out the stone building that houses the *Mountain Messenger*—a newspaper Mark Twain wrote for. Stop into 49 Wines to taste the bold zins and syrahs from the Sierra foothills. Next to the county courthouse, in a grove of trees, you'll come across a restored 1885 gallows. It hasn't been used since the year it was built, and then only once. And, well, that's another story. ♦

CHRISTOPHER HALL has also written for *National Geographic Traveler*, *Preservation*, *Smithsonian*, and *The New York Times*.

{ If you're going . . . }

BASICS

Pick up the AAA *Northern California & Nevada Tour-Book* and *Sierra Nevada-Lake Tahoe Area* map. For more local information, visit the

Sierra County

Chamber of Commerce, (800) 200-4949, www.sierracounty.org. Area code is 530 unless noted.



metal detectors, local guidebooks, gold nugget jewelry. 221A Main St., Sierra City, 862-0630. **Two Rivers Gallery** Ceramics, garden ornaments, gift items, soaps. 310

Main St., 289-2748. **Yuba Theatre** Performing arts, movies. 289-9822, www.sierracountyartscouncil.org.

rooms on the river, some with kitchens. 206 Commercial St., (888) 883-5100, www.downieville.us.

GOINGS-ON

Septemberfest September 1-2. Crafts, music, and food. Downieville, 289-2782. **Fall Colors Quilt Show** October 6-7. Exhibit including nearly 100 quilts. Downieville, 862-1511.

Oktoberfest October 13-14. A celebration of German music and cuisine. Sierra City, 862-9009.

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Downieville Outfitters 114 Main St., #2, 289-0155, www.downievilleoutfitters.com. **Tahoe National Forest** Information on camping, hiking, and more. 288-3231, www.fs.fed.us/r5/tahoe/recreation. **Yuba Expeditions** Mountain bike outfitters providing trail maps, repairs, rentals, and a shuttle service. 208 Main St., 289-3010, www.yubaexpeditions.com.

IN-TOWN DIVERSIONS

Downieville Museum Historical paraphernalia that depict life in the area. 330 Main St., 289-3423. **49 Wines** Sierra vintages for sale. 200 Main St., 289-2782. **Foundry Museum** Small mining and logging collection in an 1855 foundry. 160 Pearl St., 289-3377. **Miners Emporium** Gold pans,

EATS AND DRINKS

The Gallows Café & Pizzeria House-made dough; outdoor deck. 116 Main St., 289-3540. **Grubstake Saloon** Steaks, seafood, salads, burgers, and pies, including apple, coconut cream, and berry. 315 Main St., 289-0289. **Red Moose Café** Breakfast, lunch, some dinners. Home-style dishes like meat loaf, chili, and fish-and-chips. 224 Main St., Sierra City, 862-1502. **St. Charles Place** Saloon in an 1852 building. 101 Commercial St., 289-3237.

SLEEPS

Carriage House Inn From \$75. Eight rooms, four with river-view balconies. 110 Commercial St., (800) 296-2289, www.downievillecarriagehouse.com. **Riverside Inn** From \$80. Eleven

» » » » »

STRIKE IT RICH! Load up on gold pans, rock picks, vials, and a few tips at Sierra Hardware, 305 Main St., (530) 289-3582.



VISIT VIAMAGAZINE.COM for a complete archive of VIA weekend getaways and travel articles, as well as thousands of California, Nevada, and Utah events.