

Gold Country



Gold Country is where California was born. These hills were technically still Mexico when James Marshall caught a glimpse of a curiously shiny rock at John Sutter's Mill, starting the uproar that became California. The stampede of 300,000 '49ers who rushed these hills jump-started the new state's economy. They only got a fraction of the gold before the catastrophic environmental impacts caused a halt to the mining. The scars have healed beautifully though, leaving hills covered in pine, oak and a string of historic towns – some restored to lacy Victorian elegance, others wilting in the high heat. And, without discounting the subtle thrill of tales of bloodlust and banditry outlined on historical markers, the region's more tactile pleasures include an icy plunge into the swimming holes of California's powerful rivers, and tasting some of the state's most exciting wines.

Many small Gold Country cities compete in the region's beauty pageant but all have similar draws: antique shops, ice-cream parlors and small museums piled with Gold Rush artifacts. Accommodations options abound, from sleeping under the stars to the frills of countless B&Bs. Even if you are only passing through, working a bit of Hwy 49 into your itinerary has rich rewards.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Best white-water rush** Rushing past canyons on frothing Class III rapids of the Middle Fork of the American River (p337)
- **Most haunting history lesson** Wandering to the river's edge near the famous find at Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park (p338)
- **Richest digging for your ears** Pulling vinyl from Nevada City's matchless record shop (p334)
- **Most down-to-earth wine tour** Sipping some of California's best wines, without a whiff of pretension, at Amador vineyards (p341)
- **Strangest sip** Mustering the courage to order a Moose Milk at the St George Hotel (p343) in Volcano
- **Best place to feel little** Craning upward at the big lumber in Calaveras Big Trees State Park (p345)
- **Best place to stare down a bandit** Pondering the portrait of the Gold Rush bandit Joaquin Murrieta at the Murphys Old Timers Museum (p346)
- **Most exhilarating lesson about gravity** Bombing down the best mountain-bike trails in the West in Downieville (p332)



NEVADA COUNTY & NORTHERN GOLD COUNTRY

From the time Rushers tore up the hills of Nevada County looking for loot, this part of Gold Country has always offered some of the state's greatest rewards. Back in the day, it spewed forth more gold than any other part of the mother lode, and the profit built one of the most picturesque remaining boomtowns in Nevada City. Get out of town and you'll find some of the loveliest wilderness in the state, as well as a clutch of historic parks and rusting relics of the long-gone miners. This is also a magnet for woody adrenaline junkies looking to bomb down single-track mountain-bike lanes or plunge into icy swimming holes that are remote enough to go suit-free.

NORTH YUBA RIVER

The northernmost segment of Hwy 49 follows the North Yuba River through some stunning, remote parts of the Sierra Nevada, which feel isolated from the rest of the state, and are known for a tough, short season of white water and great fly-fishing. An entire lifetime could hardly cover the trails that are crossed every season by hikers, mountain-bikers and skiers. Even in summer, snow is likely at the highest elevations and many places have roaring fireplaces year-round.

The best source of trail and camping information is the **North Yuba Ranger Station**

FAST FACTS

Population of Placerville 9610

Average temperature low/high in Placerville Jan 33/57°F, Jul 57/93°F

San Francisco to Nevada City 148 miles, 2½ hours

San Francisco to Marshall Gold

Discovery State Historic Park 132 miles, two hours 20 minutes

Sacramento to Plymouth 38 miles, 45 minutes

Yosemite National Park to Columbia State Historic Park 62 miles, 1½ hours

Los Angeles to Murphys 355 miles, six hours

(☎ 530-288-3231; 15924 Hwy 49; 🕒 8am-4:30pm Mon-Fri) in Camptonville.

Sierra City

pop 300 / elev 4187ft

Sierra City is the primary supply station for people headed to the **Sierra Buttes**, probably the closest thing to the Alps you'll find in California without hoisting a backpack. There's a vast network of trails, including access to the famous Pacific Crest Trail, which is ideal for backpacking and casual hikes. Get the *Lakes Basin, Downieville - Sierra City* map (\$2) from the **Sierra Country Store** (☎ 530-862-1181; Hwy 49; 🕒 9am-7pm; wi-fi), which welcomes Pacific Crest Trail refugees with its Laundromat and deli. The town has a useful website (www.sierracity.com).

Sierra City's local museum, the **Kentucky Mine** (☎ 530-862-1310; adult/child \$7/3.50; 🕒 10am-4pm Wed-Sun Jun-Aug), has tours of a gold mine and stamp mill, just north of town.

To reach the Buttes, and many lakes and streams nearby, take Gold Lake Hwy north from Hwy 49 at Bassetts, 9 miles northeast of Sierra City. An excellent hiking trail leads 1.5 miles to **Haskell Peak** (8107ft), where you can see from the Sierra Buttes right to Mt Shasta and beyond. To reach the trailhead, turn right from Gold Lake Hwy at Haskell Peak Rd (Forest Rd 9) and follow it for 8.5 miles.

One of several US Forest Service (USFS) campgrounds recommended for camping north of Hwy 49, **Salmon Creek campground** (☎ 530-993-1410; tent & RV sites without hook-ups \$18) is 2 miles north of Bassetts on Gold Lake Hwy. It has vault toilets, running water and first-come, first-served sites for RVs and tents, but no hook-ups.

Going east from Sierra City along Hwy 49 are Wild Plum, Sierra, Chapman Creek and Yuba Pass **USFS campgrounds** (☎ 530-993-1410; tent sites \$18). They have vault toilets and running water (Sierra has river water only), and first-come, first-served sites. Wild Plum (47 sites) is the most scenic.

The 1862 **Old Sierra City Hotel** (☎ 530-862-1300; 212 Main St; r \$55; 🕒 Jun-Oct) is cozy, with a welcoming bar and a wood-burning stove. Each of the simple four rooms has a private bathroom. On weekends it serves good fried-chicken lunches and dinners.

In the heart of Sierra City, the small **Buttes Resort** (☎ 530-862-1170, 800-991-1170; www.sierracity.com; 230 Main St; cabins \$55-145) occupies a lovely