

Understand Northern California

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From rapidly evolving high-tech companies to the revolutionary 'Slow Food' movement, this is Northern California's cultural snapshot.

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Meet the characters who shaped Northern California's past, from Native Americans and crooked priests, to gun-slinging '49ers and guitar-strumming hippies.

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Computer programmers, political outcasts and tree sitters – Northern Californians are a different breed.

THE LAND & SUSTAINABILITY 528

Comprehend the wild forces of nature that formed the NorCal landscape, and the human efforts made to protect it.

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Northern California's menagerie of wild animals includes gray whales, mountain lions and rare condors – know what to look for.

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Delve into the heritage of Northern California's vibrant cultural scene in this primer on music, art and the built environment.

Northern California Today

Water is on everyone's mind. At the time of writing, the state was in the third year of its worst-ever drought. Wells are going dry, fields fallow and lawns brown. Another Brown, Jerry, famous governor from the 1970s, is again governor, and, for the first time in years, the state has a balanced budget and surplus of cash. But that doesn't stop everyone from arguing over his legacy plan – a high-speed rail line, already under way from San Francisco to Los Angeles.

Best NorCal Films

Maltese Falcon (Houston, 1941) Humphrey Bogart as a San Francisco private eye.

Vertigo (Hitchcock, 1958) Alfred Hitchcock's noir thriller, set in SF and San Juan Batista.

Dirty Harry (Siegel, 1971) Clint Eastwood as an SFPD inspector, investigating murder.

The Joy Luck Club (Wang, 1993) Intergenerational struggles between mother and daughter, in and around San Francisco.

Blue Jasmine (Allen, 2013) New York socialite disappears to Northern California.

Best NorCal Albums

Workingman's Dead The Grateful Dead

Green River Creedence Clearwater Revival

My Ghetto Report Card E-40

Time Out Dave Brubeck Quartet

Stand! Sly and the Family Stone

Dookie Green Day

Crooked Rain, Crooked Rain

Pavement

Mama Tried Merle Haggard

NorCal in a Nutshell

The story of California has always been a story of water, now more than ever. With the state in the middle of its worst-ever drought, local officials are sounding the alarm, setting limitations on usage, but stopping short of rationing, which nobody wants. Reservoirs are dangerously low, and many creeks and wells have gone dry. Dowsers and well-drillers are in high demand. Portions of the agricultural Central Valley have gone unplanted, farmers are slaughtering cattle because they've nothing to feed them, and food prices have begun to climb. Even the honey bees are swarming because flowers aren't blooming and there's no pollen for them. Nobody knows what's going to happen, but this being California, expect creative solutions.

But even in this (mostly) forward-thinking state, not all creative solutions to ongoing problems are met with open arms. To wit, the governor's legacy plan to build a high-speed rail link from San Francisco to LA in under half the time it takes to drive, with the goal of improving air quality and getting Californians out of their cars. Though the voter-approved project began preliminary construction in August 2014, opponents have fought vigorously to defeat it, with a series of seemingly endless lawsuits. It's slated for completion in 2029. Stay tuned.

Roots of Environmentalism

Californians originally kick-started the world's conservation movement in the midst of the 19th-century's industrial revolution, with laws curbing industrial dumping, and protections for pristine wildernesses that helped establish the national parks system. In the 1970s, the modern-day environmental movement was born, when then-President Nixon established the Environmental Protection Agency, following an oil spill off the Santa Barbara coast. Today Northern Californians