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Travel

THE 8 SMALL TOWNS TO VISIT RIGHT NOW

*Adventure base camps, wine havens and other
out-of-the-way destinations to put on your to-do list.*

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TRAVEL: SMALL TOWNS

OUT OF THE WAY, WORTH THE TRIP

From its southern border to its northern reaches, California covers about 164,000 square miles. That's more than the area of the United Kingdom, South Korea and Denmark combined. And yet, when long weekends come around, it's easy to fall back on the same destinations — places we know, and love, and have been a dozen times.

But scattered among the Sierra foothills, along the Humboldt coast and within the Central Valley are under-the-radar small towns with all the makings of a great vacation. Think adventure base camps where mountain biking is religion, coastal enclaves with lighthouses you can climb, Gold Rush relics

reborn as wine havens and north country retreats where you can kayak among the redwoods.

Or do nothing at all. One of the distinct pleasures of a small-town visit is the lack of pressure to research and plan. There's no need to scroll Yelp reviews or search out Instagram highlights.

When Main Street only stretches a few blocks, best to slow down and really enjoy it.

We asked writers all over the state for recommendations, and they pointed us toward eight out-of-the-way escapes and petite mountain idylls. These are the California small towns to visit right now.



Todd Trumbull / The Chronicle

POPULATION 6,805

Crescent City

By Joe Jackson

Crescent City, the northernmost coastal town in California, is wild. It is tough to imagine that a city as sleepy and isolated exists in the same state as its bustling southern siblings with which it shares a coast. But 20 miles south of the Oregon border, Crescent City is an excellent place to spend a day. What the town might not deliver in Michelin-starred restaurants or five-star accommodations, it makes up for in easily accessible dramatic coastline, dense redwood forests and pristine rivers.

Paddle out: Rent an 8-foot foam board from **Local Boys Surf Shop** and go surf one of the ample fun peaks spread out over South Beach. If the wind puts a session-ruining chop on the water, grab a basic kite from **Tidal Wave 101**, which sells tie-dye and beach supplies, and spend a few hours enjoying the hypnotic effects of flying those simple machines. *Local Boys Surf Shop*, 503 L St., Crescent City, 707-460-6060, www.localboysurfsurfshop.com. *Tidal Wave 101*, 1070 Highway 101 N., Crescent City, 707-951-5129.

Boat the Smith: **Redwood Rides Adventure Out-**



Redwood Rides Adventure Outfitters

Redwood Rides Adventure Outfitters' half-day kayak trip takes visitors down a leisurely 5.5-mile stretch of the Smith River.

fitters offers a 5.5-mile guided inflatable kayak trip along the Smith River that delivers a genuinely unique angle from which to ogle the redwoods. The giant trees appear even more magnificent because the river's low vantage point adds a layer of perspective into their impressive root systems. Called **Redwoods By River** (\$84 adult half day), the trip is kid-, dog- and beginner-friendly thanks to its continuous class I and II rapids while never slowing down enough to get boring. *2100 Highway 199, Crescent City*,

707-951-6559, www.redwoodrides.com.

Taco time: Whether you spend your morning at South Beach or on the Smith River, lunch awaits at the **North Coast Grill**. Get the **Three Baja Tacos** (\$12.99) and make sure to get one fish, one calamari and one grilled shrimp taco to celebrate every option the restaurant offers. Pair it with a local **Port O'Pints Agate Ale** (\$4.75) and make sure to snag a seat in the glass-walled patio so you can reminisce about how fun your surf was

as you replenish the calories you burned. *110 Anchor Way, Crescent City, 707-465-1465, northcoastgrill.com.*

Feel the force: Five miles northeast of town, **Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park** boasts the best hikes in wild river country. Hike through Stout Grove and you'll quickly see why George Lucas chose this park as the location to film the Endor scenes in "The Return of the Jedi." The massive old-growth redwood trees and densely mossed forest floor make the place

look truly otherworldly. Before leaving, take a dip in the gin-clear Smith River to freshen up for dinner. www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=413.

Ale aboard: Born in a barn during family get-togethers, today **SeaQuake Brewing** has graduated to a 15-barrel brewhouse and restaurant where you'd be wise to grab dinner. Start with the **Fog Line Pale Ale** (\$5.50), then move on to food. While the whole menu is worth checking out, you'd be blowing it if you didn't order one of their wood-fired pizzas, which range in flavor from classic Margherita to the Jobiano, topped with ranch sauce, chicken, mango habanero jack cheese, tomatoes and bacon. You're unlikely to find another spot open for a nightcap, so fill a growler with **SeaQuake's Chocolate Porter** before you go. *400 Front St., Crescent City, 707-465-4444, seaquakebrewing.com.*

Detour: Bull Creek Flats: Avenue of the Giants is often a favorite stop for travelers headed to Humboldt County, and though the scenic drive is fantastic, skip it for a hike on **Bull Creek Flats** inside Humboldt Redwoods State Park. This considerably less-utilized grove of redwoods is no less majestic at 10,000 acres, and boasts loads of low-key hikes without the hordes of visitors. www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=28272.

POPULATION 3,874

Idyllwild

By Nick Marino

Drive 5,000 feet up into the San Jacinto Mountains above Palm Springs, traversing a series of knuckle-whitening switchbacks, and you will eventually arrive at an artsy little town called Idyllwild. It is, as the name suggests, both idyllic and wild. The community is surrounded by woody parkland and great rocks, like a junior-varsity Yosemite, and the town itself combines a crunchy off-the-grid feel with the retro vibrations of Wes Anderson's happy-camper fantasia "Moonrise Kingdom."

Up here, you'll spend most of your time outside, and you'll be amazed at how different the climate is from the desert down below. Pack a cozy sweater and a hardy pair of boots.

If your goal is to rack up miles on long walks through the trees, you can certainly do that. But Idyllwild also makes an ideal place for quiet contemplation. Stressed out? Burned out? Need a place to bliss out? Head to Idyllwild, find a panoramic view, spread out a blanket and just sit. Then,



Steff Waik

At **Hicksville Pines**, guests stay in cabins and rooms inspired by icons like **Dolly Parton** and **Dita Von Teese**.

once you've got your mind right, proceed with the following itinerary.

Post up at Hicksville Pines: The hipster sister property of a "trailer palace and artist retreat" in Joshua Tree, **Hicksville Pines** is a combo of campy motel and mountaintop chalet where each room has its own look and theme. Solo travelers and couples should snag the rustic one-bedroom tribute to **Dolly Parton**, complete with a wood tub and **Dolly** pinball machine. If you have a large group (or are a **David Lynch** fanatic), stay in the **Great Northern**, a three-

bedroom ode to "Twin Peaks." *23481 CA-243, Idyllwild, 310-584-1086, hicksville.com.*

Go for a hike: Hiking is to Idyllwild what skiing is to Tahoe: a physical activity that borders on religion. Try the **Ernie Maxwell Scenic Trail**. At five round-trip miles, it's easy, but not too easy, and it affords gorgeous scenery. The massive granite **Tahquitz Rock** looms overhead at the start, and you'll step lightly over creek water as you wind your way through the **San Bernardino National Forest**. Bonus: The parking lot is about six inch-

es away from the trailhead, so you just get out and go. *Adventure Pass* (\$5) required for parking at **Humber Park Trailhead** can be purchased at ranger station or businesses in town. fs.usda.gov/recrea/sbnf/recrea/?recid=26487.

Stock up on crystals: No hippie mountain town is complete without a store selling turquoise earrings, beaded necklaces and obsidian arrowheads. **Larry and Janet Everitt** run the one in Idyllwild, **Everitt's Minerals & Gallery**, where you can even buy loose stones for them to cut and set in custom jewelry. *54300 North Circle Drive, Idyllwild, 951-659-7075, everittsminerals.com.*

Meet the mayor (and rub his belly): The mayor of Idyllwild will never lie to you. He will never have a campaign-finance scandal. He will, in fact, always be a good boy. Because the mayor of Idyllwild is a 6-year-old golden retriever named **Max**. You can peruse his calendar of appearances online — though if you hang around town long enough, you'll surely run into him carrying out his official responsibility: "to make the world a better place by conveying unconditional love." mayormax.com

Drink a well-earned beer: An indoor-outdoor tavern just on the edge of town, **Idyllwild Brewpub** serves as a casual clubhouse where weary hikers rest their legs and wet their whistles. Grab a seat on the deck, order the saltiest soft pretzel down to man and wash it down with a **Resilience IPA**, proceeds of which benefit victims of the **Camp Fire**. *54423 Village Center Drive, Idyllwild, 951-659-0163, idyllwildbrewpub.com.*

Detour: Pioneertown: For a particularly interesting diversion in the wild scrub of Southern California, come down from the mountain and drive through **Palm Springs** toward **Joshua Tree** until you hit **Pioneertown**. You'll know you're there when you feel as though you've stumbled onto a 1940s movie set built by **Gene Autry**... because that's exactly what it is. Or was. Today, new shops fill the vintage facades, and the local roadhouse is **Pappy + Harriet's**, a bar and restaurant that doubles as a 300-seat rock venue for national indie bands, local open-mickers and the occasional legend. In 2016, **Paul McCartney** played. visitpioneertown.com.

POPULATION 1,395

Kernville

By Gregory Thomas

Tucked in a rocky valley at the bottom of the Sierra range is Kernville, an old gold mining town at least an hour from the nearest city. It's the type of getaway that has inspired nostalgia among generations of families from across Southern California who return each year for one main reason: the Kern River.

Camping, hiking, swimming, whitewater rafting and fly-fishing are all within reach of town, which was established as Whiskey Flat during the Gold Rush era and straddles the river. Today, Kernville manages to maintain its Old West roots while operating primarily in service of summer tourists.

Though small and relatively remote, the town has nurtured the qualities that make you want to come back again and again. The local astronomy club is leading the charge to cut down on light pollution and earn the town a dark-sky designation. Rafting outfitters loan free life jackets to anyone going out on the river. Cell service is solid. The local brewery churns out top-notch ales.

Visit once and you'll wish you'd stuck around longer.

Chill by the river: Campsites in Sequoia National Forest typically fill up the moment they become available to book online — six months in advance — but you don't have to risk carpal tunnel clicking and re-clicking on ReserveCalifornia.com to enjoy a campground during the day.

Limestone Campground abuts the Kern at a beautiful bend featuring one of the river's nicest point bars. The 20-foot-long beach is sandy and remote; directly across the water you'll spot Alligator Rock, a massive chunk of geology that tapers into a distinctive snout with two bloodshot eyes painted near its crown. When the flows settle down, this is the perfect spot to kick back, set up



Photos by Gregory Thomas / The Chronicle



Top: The Kern River flows into Isabella Lake, just south of Kernville. Boaters, campers and day users enjoy the lake on a hot July afternoon. Above: Nearby, the Kern Valley Airport offers cheap campsites to pilots in a picturesque setting.

a picnic, dip a toe and swim. **Limestone Campground**, Mountain Highway 99 about 15 miles north of downtown Kernville.

Sip the local brew: The only brewery in town is a local institution. Live music, long dining tables, a wrap-around porch and friendly atmosphere make **Kern River Brewing Co.** the place to be on a Friday or Saturday evening. The menu offers standard pub fare, but the beers are exceptional. The Chuurch West Coast IPA alone is worth a visit for

any hophead. If you're in a hurry, grab a six-pack or growler on the way back to your campsite. Make sure to ask about the paintings hanging behind the bar depicting an anachronistic cowboy character jaunting around like a man out of time. 13415 Sierra Way, Kernville, 760-376-2337, www.kernriverbrewing.com.

Go on a whitewater adventure: Getting on the river is a must, and rafting is a great way to soak in the landscape deep in Kern Valley. Several outfitters run

guided whitewater trips throughout the summer along all three forks of the river, and there are trips for all experience levels. If you want a proper ride, check out the 22-mile overnight adventure from **Kern River Outfitters**. It takes paddlers over Class IV whitewater and Class V drops through spectacular canyons. 760-376-3370, kernrafting.com.

Take a hike: Natural beauty is a cornerstone of Kernville's appeal, and the **Whiskey Flat Trail** gives hikers easy access to the landscape.

(Also, dogs are allowed.) It's a moderate 11.8 miles (out and back), but don't let the distance discourage you. Two miles into the trail will get you past Bull Creek — a great place to cool off in summer — and high enough to glimpse panoramic views of the surrounding mountains. Note: Summer temperatures hit triple digits early in the day, so if you want to take on the whole trail, leave first thing in the morning. **Burlando Road and Rio Del Loma**, Kernville, alltrails.com.

Stroll through downtown: On the west side of the Kern River, you'll find the town's historic business corridor, a cluster of Old

West facades adjacent to Circle Park. Here is where you'll find **Kernville Saloon** (local dive), the **Cracked Egg Cafe** (greasy spoon), **Kern Valley Museum** and the village's collection of boutiques. Take a casual stroll around and admire the false-front architecture and laid-back vibe. Swing by **Big Blue Bear** for an ice cream cone, then head a couple blocks east to the Kern River Bridge and watch the rafters pass beneath you. **Circle Park** is on Kernville Road, just west of Kern River, Kernville.

Detour: Isabella Lake:

Just south of town, the Kern River tails into **Isabella Lake**, a large reservoir rimmed by dry mountains. It's not known for its beaches, but if you're into swimming, trout fishing, paddling or boating, the lake offers a nice respite from the summer heat — especially in the early part of the season, when the Kern flows high, cold and dangerous. Drive the west side of the lake and look for any small dirt roads or turnoffs; any one may lead to a secluded spot to set up for the day. Tip: Bring a canopy or beach umbrella. There are no trees or shade along the edges of the lake. **South of Kernville along Highway 155**.

POPULATION 737

Graeagle

By Megan Michelson

This region is called the Lost Sierra for a reason: Enter this hidden pocket of Northern California, an hour past Truckee on Highway 89, and your cell phone barely works, crowds don't exist, and the mining vibe and historic towns make you feel like you've traveled back in time. But Graeagle (pronounced gray-eagle) is becoming a current destination, thanks in part to a recent uptick in purpose-built mountain bike trails.

Nearby Downieville has long been a mountain biker's haven for its Downieville Downhill, which packs 5,000 vertical feet of descent into 17 miles. Now bikers are flocking to Graeagle for the 9-mile Mills Peak Trail, a 3,033-foot drop with views of the entire Lakes Basin Recreation Area, now entirely single-track after a final section was completed in 2018. Not into biking? The town also has a championship 18-hole golf course, hiking along the Pacific Crest Trail and, come September, the four-day Lost Sierra Hoedown, a campout with live music that's not your average festival.

Get outfitted: **Yuba Expeditions** in Downieville has bike rentals, chain lube and trail beta for cyclists tackling the Downieville Downhill or Graeagle's Mills Peak. Ask about the Triple Down Day of Descent, a



AJ Marino / Special to The Chronicle

Two visitors check out the annual arts and crafts fair hosted at the downtown Graeagle Park in Graeagle (Plumas County) last weekend.

40-mile, 12,000-vertical-foot tour de trails, or shuttle service, if you'd prefer not to pedal uphill. **The Graeagle Store**, a red, barn-like building that opened in 1918 to serve local lumber mill workers, has trail maps and snacks for hiking and biking, plus cold beer and homemade pies for afterward. **Yuba Expeditions**, 208 Main St., Downieville, 530-289-3010, www.yubaexpeditions.com. **Graeagle Store**, 7386 Hwy. 89, Graeagle, 530-836-2519, mssc.membernetwork.org/mssc/mem/GraeagleStore.

Backyard brews: After your day spent outside, head to the **Brewing Lair**, a dog-

and kid-friendly BYOF (bring your own food) brewery on 15 acres of forested land just outside Graeagle. Opt for a tasting flight of five 4-ounce pours, like the Take a Hike IPA or Acclimation Sour Ale, then partake in the yard games: There's a 9-hole disc golf course, slackline and cornhole. Show up on a Saturday or Sunday night and there just might be a band playing on the stage out back. **Groot**, Hwy. 70, Blairsville, 530-394-0940, www.thebrewoinglair.com.

Bacon and shakes: Thick slabs of homemade bread bookend the tasty sandwiches at **Bread & Butter**,

a permanently parked food truck on the outskirts of town. Grab a BLT with avocado and post up at the picnic tables out front (there's even a play area for the little ones), or opt for a burger and strawberry milkshake from **Graeagle Mountain Frostee's** walk-up window. **Bread & Butter**, 21 Bonta St., Blairsville, 530-394-0303, www.catatbreadandbutter.com. **Graeagle Mountain Frostee**, 28 Hwy. 89, Graeagle, 530-836-4811.

Will hike for views: To reach the top of the old **Sierra Buttes fire lookout**, you'll hike 2.5 miles one way, including a section on the Pacific Crest Trail, and as-

cent 1,800 vertical feet. That's before you tackle the 178 stairs up to the tower at 8,587 feet. It's worth it for the view: On a clear day, you can spot the volcanic peak of Mount Lassen to the north and Sardine Lakes below. Afterward, relax dockside at the waterfront bar at Sardine Lake Resort. alltrails.com.

Sleep well: Pitch a tent or park your van amid the lodgepole and ponderosa pine forest at **Plumas-Eureka State Park**, five miles from Graeagle, where you'll get a lesson in California mining history from the on-site museum housed in a former miner's bunkhouse. Or go more upscale with a stay at **Nakoma Resort** (from \$204), on the area's acclaimed golf course with a clubhouse designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. **Plumas-Eureka State Park**, 310 Johnsville Rd., Blairsville, 530-836-2380, www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=507. **Nakoma Resort**, 348 Bear Run, Clois, 877-462-5662, nakomaresort.com.

Detour: Sierra Hot Springs:

Thirty minutes away via Highway 89, you'll find **Sierra Hot Springs**, in the quaint town of Sierraville. Stay for the night in the on-site lodge or drop in for the day to soak in the resort's piping hot, outdoor mineral tubs. Tack on a body treatment like a charcoal mud wrap or a raw sugar scrub, if you're into that sort of thing (and really, who isn't?). 521 Campbell Hot Springs Rd., Sierraville, 530-994-3773, www.sierrahotsprings.org.