

ONE FINE WEEKEND



The well-preserved buildings of Nevada City reflect the area's storied past.

Strike It Rich

California Gold Country sets the stage for a treasure-filled getaway that includes shopping, vintage hotels, and outdoor adventures.

BY DANA REBMANN

The Old West lives on in Nevada City. Established in 1849 by outlaws and fortune seekers, this quaint stretch of California Gold Country exudes romance and charm. Comprised of century-old brick buildings and narrow streets, the entire downtown district is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

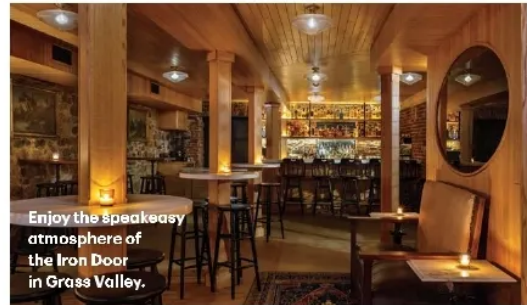
But this area, a two hour or so drive from the East Bay, wasn't always so calm. In the 1850s, Nevada City and its neighbor Grass Valley were as rough-and-tumble as they come, with prospectors, gamblers, entertainers, and gunslingers making up the local population.

Flavors of the Past

Grass Valley's historic downtown is compact and best explored on foot. The vibrant and impossible to miss mural

depicting a glowing sky and colorful cast of flowers—at the intersection of Mill and Main streets illustrates how old and new blend harmoniously in this Sierra Foothills community. The art deco tower of the Del Oro Theatre rises some 70 feet into the sky and is a helpful focal point as you traverse the pedestrian-friendly promenade lined with shops and restaurants. Among the top choices: Middle Eastern favorite Mezé and Old Town Cafe; Lazy Dog Chocolateria, if you want to satisfy a sweet tooth; and Lucchesi Vineyards and Winery, for vintages produced in small lots.

But it's when you step into the lobby of the Holbrooke Hotel that you truly begin to grasp the region's history. Founded in 1879, the Holbrooke is one of the oldest continuously operating hotels in California. Past guests



Enjoy the speakeasy atmosphere of the Iron Door in Grass Valley.

include Mark Twain, Jack London, and outlaw Black Bart. (According to legend, Black Bart preferred to stay in room nine; located next to an exit door, it allowed for a quick getaway.)

The Holbrooke has stacks of hotel register books from over the years; peruse a record from 1898 on display in the lobby before sauntering up to the original bar at

the **Golden Gate Saloon**. Constructed in Italy with mahogany, stained glass, and marble, the bar made the journey around Cape Horn and into the San Francisco Bay via ship, predating the Golden Gate Bridge. Alongside creative libations, the saloon serves California-Mexican-inspired dishes ranging from huevos rancheros and cornmeal pancakes to a tuna tostada.

Consider raising a glass at the hotel's cocktail lounge, **Iron Door**, if it is open. Located in the Holbrooke's cellar, the subterranean space has served the community as a brothel and morgue over the years and is said to be a hot spot for paranormal activity. Legend has it that the women's bathroom is a favorite haunt of a Victorian madam of days past.

Living History

Working miners were drawn to Grass Valley, but most mine owners settled less than a 10-minute drive north in Nevada City. Their wealth fueled its business district and collection of Victorian homes. During the height of the Gold Rush, Nevada City was the third-largest city in the state, surpassed only by San Francisco and Sacramento.

Nevada City is very pedestrian friendly, and shoppers can easily spend an afternoon wandering in and out of favorite retail outlets such as clothing store **Tysa**, or stop by **Good Morning Supply Co.** and **J.J. Jackson's** for home goods and decor. **Nevada City Winery** stakes a claim as the oldest operating winery in the county, while **Three Forks Bakery and Brewing Co.** pours flights of craft beers served with tasty eats such as wood-fired pizza, soups, and sandwiches. The menu at **Heartwood**, owned by former Chez Panisse chef Scott Weidert,



The National Exchange Hotel provides lodging in an opulent setting.

features selections like ricotta beet toast and quinoa salad.

It seems like just about every building in Nevada City is adorned with a plaque explaining its historical significance. Opened in 1865, the **Nevada Theatre** is the oldest continually operating theater on the West Coast; Jack London, Mark Twain, and Mötley Crüe have graced its stage. Built in 1856, the **Flagg Building** once served as the city council chamber, and **400 Broad Street** is said to have housed the office of one of the earliest physicians to administer penicillin. There's even a plaque in the parking lot of the **National Exchange Hotel** commemorating ladies of the evening for their role in the settlement of the West.

Built in 1856, the National Exchange Hotel is arguably the grand dame of the neighborhood; even if you're not staying here, you'll want to spend some time dining at its French-inspired restaurant, **Lola**, or enjoying the ambiance of the **National Bar**. Dedicated to the women of the Wild West, the bar is decorated with personality-laden historic photographs.

In the late 1800s, the National was Nevada City's social center—boasting a saloon, a bank, a post office, and the companies that would later become Pacific Gas and Electric, in addition to lodging. A contemporary hot topic at the National is its wallpaper, as vivid William Morris paper artfully covers what seems like every room in the recently renovated property. History buffs will want to book room



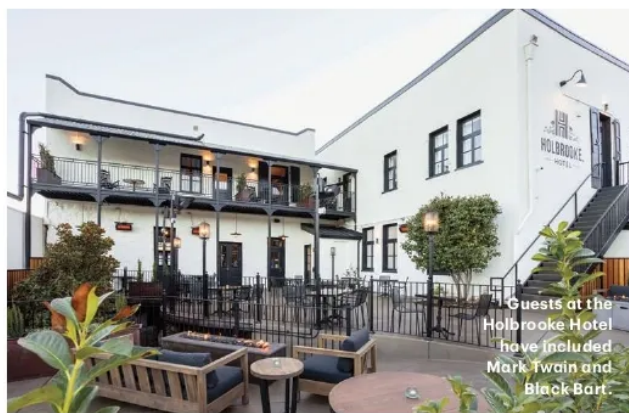
Shop for gifts at Nevada City's Good Morning Supply Co.

313, where President Herbert Hoover lived long before making the move to Washington, D.C.

Walking Tours

Beyond the historic attractions, the region also promises amazing outdoor exploration. A moderate walk from downtown Nevada City, the mostly shaded **Deer Creek Tribute Trail** leads hikers across a suspension bridge. Visit the working blacksmith shop at **Empire Mine State Historic Park**, then stare into the dark maze of 367 miles of abandoned mine shafts—the deepest of which is more than 5,000 feet down. Formerly one of the state's richest gold mines, Empire Mine produced more than \$8 billion in gold by modern standards (and it's believed there's still gold to be found).

Set aside time for the half-hour drive to **South Yuba River State Park**. There, you can walk across the **Bridgeport Covered Bridge**, the longest single-span wooden covered bridge in the world. Built in 1862, its striking curve shades the riverbank below, providing an ideal spot for a dip in the river or for modern-day fortune seekers to pan for gold.



Guests at the Holbrooke Hotel have included Mark Twain and Black Bart.