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Sonoma Adventure

Taking the Long Way Home

BY ANDREW COLLINS

We all have our backup plans. Mine involves moving to Sonoma County. It's not likely to happen, at least anytime soon. I'm happy living in Portland. But if I had to go somewhere new, I'd steer my car toward this wine-soaked county about an hour north of San Francisco. It's a land of breathtaking vistas with a mild climate, a progressive mindset, exceptional restaurants and proximity to city, coast, mountains and forests. Plus there's all that wine.

Sonoma County (inside-sonoma.com) is surprisingly large and varied in its terrain. You may picture shallow, sunny valleys strewn with vineyards when you think of this part of California, and these are certainly a prominent feature, but the county stretches west through the Russian River, home to dense groves of immense redwoods and a small but thriving gay resort scene, and it continues clear to the rugged coast, which is fringed by famously twisting and scenic Highway 1. The county seat, Santa Rosa, isn't exactly a pulsing metropolis, but this city of 168,000 does offer a nice balance of arts, dining and shopping—and San Francisco is never far.

Also, although it can get nearly as rainy in Sonoma from December through March as it can in the Willamette Valley, fall and spring are considerably drier, and winter highs are typically 10 to 15 degrees warmer than in Portland.

As much as I appreciate Sonoma County, one reason I don't feel especially compelled to move there is that it's remarkably easy to visit from Portland—I go once or twice a year. Daily direct flights to Santa Rosa's small, user-friendly airport take just under two hours, or you can fly into one of the Bay Area's three airports, which offer a greater variety of flights and typically cheaper fares.

Usually, though, I drive down from Portland.

If this sounds like an ambitious, perhaps even foolish way to get there, it is. But I like the drive and all the wonderful things to see and do along the way, and I've developed a favorite road-trip strategy over the years, driving down by way of Interstate 5 and spending a night in Medford or Ashland. I return up the longer but more scenic coastal route, Highway 1 and U.S. 101, overnighing in Mendocino, Eureka, or both, and then cut inland up U.S. 199 at Crescent City, joining I-5 again in Grants Pass. Getting to Santa Rosa—not counting stops—can take as little as 10 hours via I-5 or as long as 14 hours via the coastal route.

I made my most recent road trip in May, driving down with my good friend Pennie Lane, the Sauvie Island resident whom you may know as the real-life character Kate



Above: Tomales Bay

Right: Boutiques in downtown Healdsburg

Hudson portrayed in the classic movie *Almost Famous*. Upon reaching Sonoma the following afternoon, we drove directly to the coast, actually just into the northern tip of Marin County, to spend a night at one of the most idyllically situated inns on the West Coast, a collection of shabby-chic cottages called Nick's Cove (nickscove.com). The small compound includes a marvelous waterfront restaurant that serves oysters caught right outside the window in Tomales Bay.

The following morning we continued north up Highway 1, stopping in the sleepy hamlet of Bodega Bay, which most visitors recognize as the setting of the delightfully creepy Hitchcock thriller *The Birds*. For a nice vantage point of the bay made so famous in that movie, we drove along Westshore Road for a picnic-table lunch at Spud Point Crab Company—you won't find better clam chowder or sweeter crab-salad sandwiches in the area.

From Bodega Bay we cut inland toward the neighboring gay resort communities of Monte Rio and Guerneville, the heart of the Russian River (russianriver.com) and home to a magnificent preserve of redwoods and hiking trails called Armstrong Woods. A longtime weekend getaway among Bay Area gays and lesbians, the Russian River offers a mix of rustic resorts and upscale inns. One of the swankiest is Applewood Inn (applewood-inn.com), a romantic place to spend the night and also home to a fantastic restaurant and small but excellent spa. The gay-owned Sonoma Orchid Inn (ridenhourinn.com) has lovely rooms and a peaceful setting, while the Highlands Resort (highlandsresort.com) is an affordable collection of cottages nestled under the redwoods. Downtown Guerneville



has several informal, inviting places to eat (Boon Eat + Drink is particularly good), an atmospheric gay bar called the Rainbow Cattle Company, and a funky little espresso café, Coffee Bazaar, that's perfect for people-watching.

As you head east along Highway 116 from Guerneville, you'll quickly enter the Russian River wine region, one of the most prestigious in Sonoma. You can spend weeks visiting tasting rooms in the area and never run out of them, but here are a few bits of advice if you only have a day or two for exploring. First, stop by Sophie's Cellars in the village of Monte Rio—the knowledgeable staff at this gay-owned wine shop and cheese market can furnish you with maps, advice and even contacts at some of the area's best wineries. Also, as you're heading east out of Guerneville, the first winery you'll come to is Korbel Champagne Cellars, which is home to a terrific deli-café and is a fun place to kick off your vino tasting.

Sonoma wineries tend to be fairly infor-