

Enjoy scenic backroads of historic Sonoma wine country

Contributed by Cary Ordway
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The California wine country in and near Sonoma County is known for its world-class wines, but you don't have to be a wine aficionado to marvel at this area's scenic backroads and the abundance of historical attractions all within a short drive. Case in point: a drive up the central part of the county that begins in the historic city of Petaluma.

We had spent an enjoyable weekend on a previous trip in the town of Sonoma ? the best-known visitor destination in the county and a less corporate, less developed version of nearby Napa ? but this time we wanted to get off the beaten path a bit and experience the Sonoma County countryside.

Because we had heard about the historic downtown buildings there, we decided our first stop would be Petaluma, a city of about 60,000 people that is about 32 miles north of San Francisco.

Driving up from Southern California, we went straight to the Sheraton Petaluma to rest up and begin a day of exploration the following day. This particular hotel is located on the Petaluma River with its full-fledged marina providing both moorage for local boaters and ambiance for the hotel. The river also provides a pleasant backdrop for hiking trails that begin at the hotel and take you several miles into the local marshland ? the perfect start to a sunny day in Sonoma County.

After a brisk morning walk we drove just a couple of miles to Downtown Petaluma, which was just as advertised. The small downtown area had the good fortune to survive the San Francisco earthquake of the early 20th Century and today offers the visitor a complete collection of historic buildings, both business and residential. It's all within easy walking distance and it was fun to pick up local publications and do our own historic walking tour of the area. The river adds a special feeling to the downtown area and it's apparent that the locals have put great emphasis on creating boardwalks, special docks and other amenities to add to the area's overall charm.

As we ventured outward a few blocks from the downtown, we were awed by rows and rows of Victorian homes, most in good repair. Petaluma's Historic Downtown, in fact, is on the National Register of Historic Places. It soon became apparent why so many people choose to use Petaluma as a base of operations for exploring nearly 200 wineries in Sonoma County.

The area's history is formally celebrated at the Petaluma Historical Library and Museum, where the building and everything inside are part of the town's history. Also, about three miles east of town, we came across the Petaluma Adobe State Historic Park, a 41-acre park that features the former adobe ranch of General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo.

Dating back to 1834, the house is a historical landmark and today features authentic furniture and interpretive displays. After our morning of history it was time to venture on with our daytrip by driving about 30 miles north on Highway 101 to the quaint town of Healdsburg. The town derives its name from Harmon Heald, an Ohio entrepreneur who initially set up the town grid back in the 1850's and sold lots for \$15 apiece. Healdsburg was built around a Spanish-style plaza which, today, remains the centerpiece of a downtown that still retains many historic buildings.

The town has something of a Mayberry feel with its Sweet Shop selling gumballs on the corner and institutions like the Raven Performing Arts Theater that hosts local plays and features dinosaur rock acts such as Bo Diddly, the performer in town during our visit.

But while the town may seem as simple as Mayberry, life here is definitely more sophisticated. There is a high per-capita number of gourmet restaurants, and high-end galleries, jewelry, apparel and other gifts are clustered around the plaza. More than anything, though, Healdsburg is a jumping off point for gorgeous drives through the Central Sonoma County countryside where one begins to see just how important wine and grapes are to the local economy. You can get started at one of the many wine tasting rooms in town or wait until you visit the wineries along the way ? in this part of Sonoma County, a glass of premium wine is never far away.

A local resident directed us north and west on Dry Creek Road, a country road that almost seems European it is so lush and colorful. As promised, the road meanders through vineyards and bright fields of flowers, offering mystic vistas of the nearby hills. We passed farmhouse settings so idyllic they seemed like they were created for fairy tales.

And, of course, every couple miles or less there was another winery, many with tasting rooms beckoning the traveler to stop in and just "drink up" some of this famous Sonoma County atmosphere.

The Dry Creek Road runs parallel to Highway 101 for several miles and then we took a right on Canyon Road to cross back under the freeway and head over to Geyserville, just east of 101. This town of about a thousand souls is home to some inns and is known for its location right in the heart of wine country. It's estimated that about 70 wineries are within a 15-minute radius of town.

From Geyserville we headed south on scenic Highway 128, which eventually climbs out of the valley, over and through the hills and, finally, down into Napa County and the historic town of Calistoga. This area was settled back in the mid-19th Century by Samuel Brannan, who published San Francisco's first English language newspaper and was California's first millionaire. He became fascinated with Calistoga's natural hot springs and purchased more than 2,000 acres that he intended to develop as a spa similar to Saratoga in New York. It opened in 1862, and was an immediate hit with the rich and famous of the day.

The privileged still come to Calistoga ? along with plenty of ordinary people. The appeal remains the area's hot springs, and several inns and resorts offer a hot spring experience as part of their amenities. Still a small town with only about 5,000 people, Calistoga prides itself on being a center of wellness that attracts visitors looking for therapeutic benefits from the hot springs. Day spas are available and visitors can take a dip in the hot springs without staying at one of the local inns.

We enjoyed the down-home feel of Calistoga, a main street that seems a bit Western and ? expensive spa resorts notwithstanding ? not just for the affluent. We especially enjoyed spending some time over at the Sharpsteen Museum where they have a large diorama depicting Calistoga as it looked like when it was settled by Brannan. The museum was a project of Ben Sharpsteen, an animator, producer and director for Walt Disney Studios. Calistoga was an ideal stop for the day, and put us in position for a drive further into the Napa Valley for another day trip that was bound to bombard the senses just as this day's journey had. It was a backroad odyssey that had shown us some of the best that California wine country has to offer

? that is, that doesn't come in a bottle.

AT A GLANCE

WHERE: This journey begins in Petaluma, about 32 miles north of San Francisco, and ends at Calistoga, about 27 miles north of Napa. It takes you through some of the most beautiful regions of California wine country.

WHAT: California wine country is the perfect antidote to big-city hustle and bustle: idyllic farms, colorful fields of flowers, stately wineries with vineyards clinging to the rolling hills.

WHEN: Any time of the year.

WHY: To enjoy historic attractions, gorgeous scenery, upscale shopping and ? oh, yes, great wine-tasting. HOW: For more information on Sonoma County, please go to <http://www.sonomacounty.com>. For information on Calistoga, go to <http://www.calistogachamber.com>. For information on the Sheraton Petaluma, go to <http://www.starwoodhotels.com> or phone 707-283-2888. The classically styled Sheraton Petaluma features 183 over-size rooms, many with excellent views of the marina or valley. The hotel is completely updated and includes high-speed internet access as well as many other major-hotel amenities. It's a great choice for moderate to upscale visitors who want quick and easy access to Sonoma wine country.

Cary Ordway is a syndicated travel writer and president of Getaway Media Corp, which publishes websites focused on regional getaway travel. Among the sites currently offered by GMC are <http://www.californiaweekend.com> , and <http://www.northwesttraveladvisor.com> .