

Tours

ALONG HWY 49

CALIFORNIA GOLD



"In a cavern, in a canyon, excavating for a mine
Dwelt a miner forty-niner, and his daughter Clementine.
Oh my darling, oh my darling, oh my darling, Clementine,
You are lost and gone forever, dreadful sorry, Clementine."

Text and Photography: Robert Smith



Rambling around the western shoreline of Lake Tahoe, I'm reminded how readily the quality of light changes the appearance of things. Yesterday, under clear skies, the lake was a dappled turquoise blue, its waves stippled with sparkling crests, and the brightly painted homes positively glowed in the yellow light. Today's overcast renders a dishwater-dull view of the water and uniformly shades the houses in gray. Heading south, I've left the lakeside resort of King's Beach to explore the Sierra Nevada foothills, where the "forty-niners" of Percy Montrose's famous folk ballad staked their claims, and the rolling countryside of California Highway 49.

The California Gold Rush attracted more than 300,000 prospectors, their wives and children to the region between 1848 and 1855, extracting gold worth billions in today's dollars. Many communities were established and incorporated, with San Francisco quickly becoming the major center of financial and commercial enterprise in the region; and by 1850, the state of California was admitted into the Union.

Down to the Valley

The road winds past rustic cottages hidden amid dense evergreens on one side, and on the lakefront, large but unpretentious mansions line the shore.

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Also, having escaped the callous treatment of a developer's wrecking ball, there are older cabins still standing on some waterfront lots. Obviously overdevelopment has become a losing proposition at the ballot box in these Tahoe communities, where an atmosphere that's more up-country than uptown prevails.

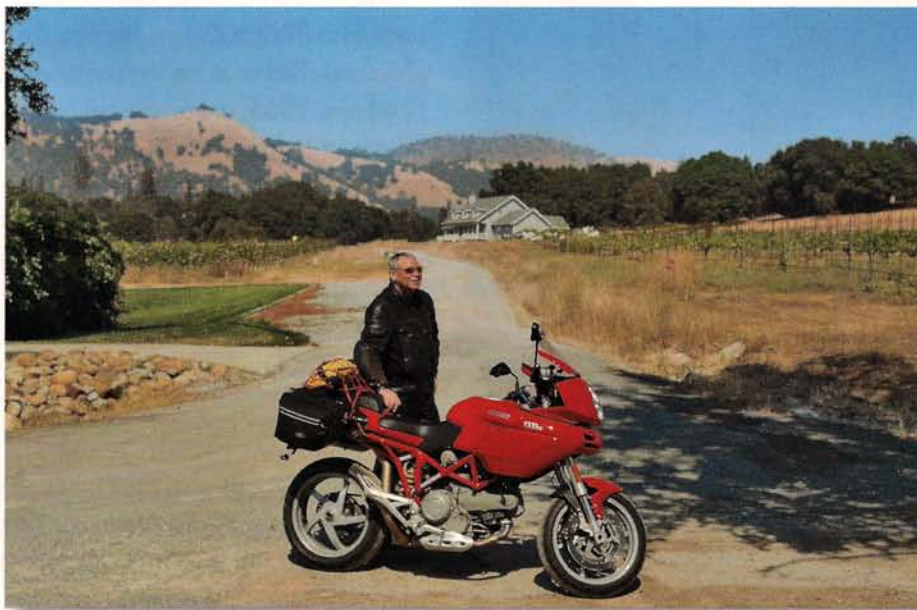
It's surprising to see how much water accumulates here too, with the parched

salt deserts of Nevada just tens of miles away. That's the power of the Sierra Nevada though, pushing the air up and wringing out its moisture, leaving Nevada to thirst in its rain shadow. The terrain is precipitous. California 89 clings to the steep lakeside, and the highway is peppered with avalanche warning signs. At one point I'm riding along a narrow isthmus with sheer drops on either side, which I find quite unsettling.

📍 *It's a delightful romp through evergreens to Ebbetts Pass on Hwy 4.*



📍 *Vines have replaced the mines along much of 49.*



South Tahoe is the business end of the Lake, but soon – after passing its auto repair shops, strip malls and fast food restaurants and entering the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest – I'm rolling by tall trees alongside a frothing creek. As I turn onto California 4, a huge sign proclaims dire warnings of narrow pavement, tight turns and steep grades – all of which are true, I quickly discover. But the surface is excellent, and it's a delightful romp, with the main hazards being pickups springing out from around blind corners in the middle of the single-track road. There's serene Lake Alpine at the 8,730-foot summit to contemplate before 4 winds down through the Stanislaus National Forest. Inside the park all is peace and tranquility, but as soon as I hit the first town, the road widens and I'm squeezed in heavy traffic.

The big evergreens behind me, I'm soon rambling through rolling brown hills interspersed with rows of dark green vines and deciduous trees. I could be in the Napa or Sonoma Valleys. Even the Stanislaus River resembles Lake Sonoma as I cross over on a smart modern bridge. There's a sign for Jamestown, my destination, and I follow it on a rock 'n' roll ride over hills and around tight twisties until hitting Highway 49 a few miles north of Jamestown. It was here that Benjamin F. Woods staked the first claim in Tuolumne County, in June 1848. I'm booked into the National Hotel, a period charmer that dates back to those good old gold rush days and... Aha! I just realized why the road is numbered 49... Duh.

My plush room, decorated with elegant antique furnishings, has the modern necessities too, including air conditioning. However, the sign on the door informs me that California is under a "Stage 2 emergency" for electricity, so "please use the a/c sparingly." In



📍 *Splendidly serene Alpine Lake greets travelers at the crest of Hwy 4.*

the National's restaurant, my fettuccini Alfredo (washed down with a glass of California Zinfandel) is delicious: rich and tangy, and it requires an after-dinner stroll along Jamestown's narrow, historic Main Street before I head to my two plump pillows and cozy comforter.

Riding the Forty-nine

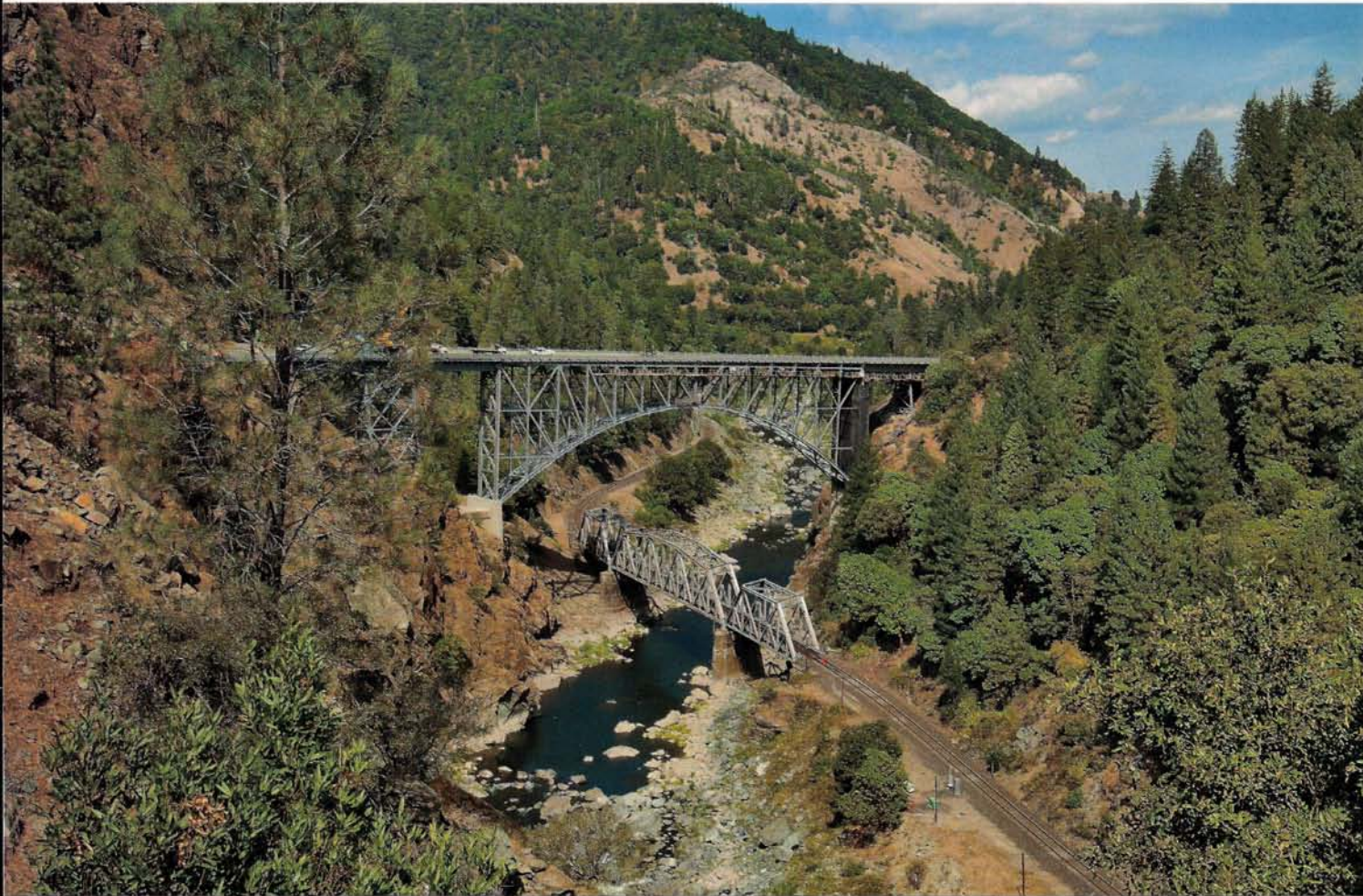
The next morning, back on Hwy 4 in the town of Murphys (which earned the accolade "Queen of the Sierras" for the richness of its gold diggings) 20 miles north of Jamestown, I take a left onto Sheep Ranch Road. The broken, heaved, potholed and patched single lane road gives the Multistrada's sus-

pension a real workout and I have to proceed carefully. The route, though, is really quite intriguing as it scrambles over rough hills and rounds tight hairpins, passing old gnarled trees set in golden fields. There are tantalizing stretches – never more than a few hundred feet long—where the road has been resurfaced, although by the time the town of Sheep Ranch appears, I'm on two narrow twisty lanes of fresh tarmac, which allow me to give the Multistrada its head.

Sheep Ranch Road becomes Railroad Flat Road at Mountain Ranch, and I follow it over more great miles of un-

dulant countryside. Busily investigating the third dimension – up and down – sometimes means I can't see exactly where the road goes until I've crested a rise!

Hooking up with Route 26 in West Point, I roll west to Mokelumne Hill on another terrific riding road with few straights connecting the fast, sweeping turns. I then rejoin 49 until I see signs for Fiddletown, a settlement dating from 1849 and looking much the way it did then with many original buildings still intact. Apparently the creek the 49ers relied on for gold processing, Dry Creek, lived up to its name in the summer



📍 Near Pulga, CA, Highway 70 soars over the Union Pacific Railroad and the Feather River.

months, at which time the prospectors (mostly Chinese) turned to fiddling.

I follow the sign for River Pines and Somerset and find Cedar Ravine Road: one of the best yet, a rollicking romp of a road – except that I’m stuck behind a dawdling pickup with no chance of passing.

Placerville, once an important mining center, was named for the “placer” (pronounced “plass-er”) mining process, which extracts gold ores from alluvial riverbeds. But in 1849, due to the final judgments rendered in proceedings there, the town was known by an altogether more sinister name: Hangtown. Almost all of the buildings date from the 1850s. As I wander along,

imagining how it must have been to live back then, I come to the small settlement of Coloma, a working heritage town. The sign at the city limits notes that James Marshall discovered gold here in January 1848, though it’s doubtful he could have foreseen the extent of the clamor he set off. The historic buildings include a working smithy that produces only horseshoe nails.

North again, on 49 to Pilot Hill, I turn south toward Folsom on Salmon Falls Road, a real ace of a road with plenty of challenging bends and little traffic. Another view of the American River seems to pop up around every turn, but I don’t happen across a scene that’s inspiring enough to stop for photos;

and so I join the commuter stream flowing toward the gated communities of Eldorado Hills. Then, hitting 20 west going to Sacramento, I start looking out for 193, which will take me across country to Auburn tomorrow.

That little scouting expedition completed, I retrace a few miles on 49, falling into line with the evening commuters and scads of logging trucks to find my lodgings in Coloma. In the failing light, as I approach the American River bridge, I have to do a double take: two people on horseback are riding the opposite bank with a third person running alongside – but in an instant they’re gone, and I’m left wondering if I only imagined them in the gloaming.



📍 *Wolf Creek runs alongside Hwy 4 in the Sierras.*

Its ground floor taken up with the bar/restaurant, the heritage Sierra Nevada House has six rustic rooms above, which is certainly convenient for lodgers who have overindulged in the bar. Not wanting to miss out on the experience, and with the Multistrada safely parked for the night, I quaff a couple of pints of excellent local ale and order a hamburger. Perhaps the beer helps, but it's maybe the best burger I've ever eaten: a hand-made patty, properly cooked, but still moist and juicy, and with lots of beef flavor. The fries are hot, crisp outside and real potato inside. My room called "The Ranch Hand" ("The Bordello" was already occupied) is furnished as its name would suggest: basic but clean and adequately equipped.

Into the Sierra Nevada

My plan is to take 49 all the way to Chilcoot on the eastern side of the Sierras, so I head north again to Auburn. I stop for breakfast in Grass Valley where a forest service worker tells me 49 is closed at Sierra City. I decide to take the local roads from Grass Valley to Oroville, then 70 to Quincy, my next overnight. Taking 49 as far as Camp-tonville on great rolling, sweeping roads, I then turn left onto county road E20 through Dobbins and Oregon House to Loma Rica, and follow the signs directing me to Honcut and Palermo. These are farm roads (and not particularly "technical," but cruising across fields of waving corn in the warm California sun is very therapeutic.

I join 70 in Oroville and soon climb into the Sierras on wide, weaving roads lined with towering evergreens. The North Fork of the Feather River swings through an ever-narrowing canyon assaulted by innumerable dams, and I'm pleasantly surprised by Quincy, a sometime logging town where it seems a large contingent of old counterculture warriors have congregated, perhaps to escape the hysterical hubbub in other California cities. The town now has an urbane, eclectic atmosphere.

Ada's Place (my B&B) is another nice surprise, newly renovated, clean, bright and tastefully decorated with European and Oriental touches. Mike and Valerie have left books everywhere,

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so when you sit down, there's always one to hand. Stepping out for a beer at the Pangaea pub, all tie-dye and Birkenstocks, I notice the Morning Thunder restaurant and resolve to check it out for breakfast.

Tahoe Regained

And so I do, ordering a side each of toast and bacon to construct my simple favorite, the perfect British sandwich: hot, fresh toast and crispy bacon. South on 70, I turn west back into the Sierras on National Forest Road 120 for La Porte and quickly climb on a surprisingly wide two-laner with new tarmac. A strong breeze litters the road with pine cones, needles, rocks and pieces of bark. It's a clear day, but the dark tunnel of foliage I'm boring through provides only occasional glimpses of the Feather River. Through La Porte the county roads are still smooth and new until Yuba County, where it's a rough, aged surface with frost and snowplow damage. The density of the forest is an imposing sight on this stretch along the windward side of the crest, with swaths of ferns, grasses and saplings swaying underneath the evergreen canopy.

The next town is Brownsville, which leads me to Browns Valley on 20, where I turn east for Grass Valley. I creep through it in heavy traffic and rejoin 49, stopping to check in at the forest ranger station. Forty-nine is still closed, the man says, so 20 has to be my route east. The continuing tedium of thick traffic now includes groups of bikers heading for "Street Vibrations" in Reno. Where 20 joins I-80 the flow is almost wall-to-wall bikes, and the way they ride, so close together, makes me very nervous...

I leave I-80 at Truckee and turn north on 89 for Sierraville. There are forest fires in the area (the reason 49 was closed) and fire camps line the road.



📍 A turnout on Hwy 431, near Lake Tahoe, offers great views over the same road below.

I gas up at a wild country store operated by an interesting crew in bib and brace coveralls before hooking up again with 49 near Loyalton. On that run across open range there are warnings everywhere about the potential for wildfires, and all of the vegetation, toasted a golden brown, looks tinder dry. Then 70 takes me to 395 for the run south into Reno.

The highlight of the day is the great riding found on 431, from Reno over Mt. Rose to Tahoe, which peaks at over 8,000 feet: the "highest year-round pass through the Sierras," or so the sign says. At King's Beach, the elegant

Ferrari Crown Motel awaits. "Ah, Ducati," sighs the clerk when spotting the Multistrada, "the Ferrari of motorcycles."

This has been a surprising tour. I hadn't expected Sierra towns like Quincy to be so cosmopolitan. And I learned plenty about the gold mining heritage of the foothill communities, too. Jamestown in particular charmed me with its authentic period buildings. And I didn't even have time to visit the many vineyards in the region. Scheduling a return trip with more time to spare is a must! **RR**

To view more photos and post your comments, visit www.roadrunner.travel

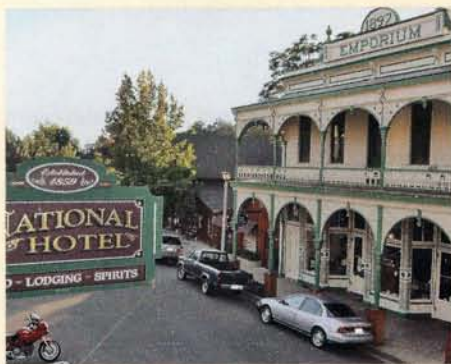


Ferrari's Crown Motel

8200 N. Lake Blvd (Hwy 28)
Kings Beach, CA 96143
(800) 645-2260 or (530) 546-3388
www.tahoecrown.com

This family owned and operated motel offers bright, cheery rooms overlooking its own private beach on Lake Tahoe. There's a large swimming pool

and, for those cooler evenings, a capacious hot tub where you can watch the sunset over the mountains. My room was spotless, comfortable and fully equipped—including Internet access. As it says over the door, Ferrari's Crown has been a "Home Away From Home" since 1957. Great location close to stores and restaurants in Kings Beach.



National Hotel

18183 Main Street
Jamestown, CA 95327
(800) 894-3446 or (209) 984-3446
www.national-hotel.com

In continuous operation since opening in 1859, the National Hotel is a charming heritage hotel with cozy rooms and beautiful antique furniture. The present restoration dates from

1974, but is also "ongoing." The restaurant serves good wholesome food in its elegant restaurant, and you can sip your pre-dinner cocktail from the vine-covered patio. Tastefully restored, yet retaining all of its period charm, the National Hotel is as far away from a cookie-cutter chain hotel as you can get. It has a friendly ghost, too!



Sierra Nevada House

835 Lotus Road Coloma, CA 95613
(530) 626-8096
www.sierranevadahouse.com

Historic, too, though more "country casual" is the Sierra Nevada House in Coloma. Situated right by the American River, Sierra Nevada House is a great stepping-off point for exploring the wilderness of the Sierra foothills or for

river sports. The bar is obviously popular and serves a wide selection of local beers, and the restaurant served me possibly the best hamburger I've ever eaten. All of the rooms have a colorful history dating back to gold rush days, though they have been thoughtfully modernized where needed. For an authentic touch of the Old West, the Sierra Nevada House is hard to beat!



Ada's Place B&B

562 Jackson Street
Quincy, CA 95971
(530) 283-1954
www.adasplace.com

Quincy is one of the best-kept secrets in the Sierras, and Ada's is the ideal Place to stay. It's actually a "complex" of four B&Bs, each with its own kitchen, bathroom, bedrooms and sitting room.

All modern facilities are included. I stayed in Ada's Place itself (the other units are the West Wing, Ruth's Garden and Hop Sing's) and was delighted with the modern Scandinavian décor and oriental artifacts. It was also freshly renovated with premium fixtures, peacefully quiet, and spotlessly clean. A real gem!