

Current Frommer's Articles on Sutter Creek & The Gold Country

The Top 10 Up and Coming Destinations For 2006

By Pauline Frommer
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Looking for a recommendation on the next must-see place? As the New Year approaches, it's time to consider where you'll want to go next year. We've selected 10 places that are coming into their own; they're not swarmed with tourists, and travelers can still find bargains to get there.

Amador County, California

Placerville may technically be the center of the Gold Country, however, the small towns a few miles south, Amador City, **Sutter Creek**, and Jackson, provide a picturesque destination spot.

Located in the rolling hill region, scattered with tall oak trees and granite outcroppings, these three cities are a window into its Gold Rush past as many of the old Victorian houses have been converted into bed and breakfasts.

Located 55 miles southeast of Sacramento, windy roads connect the towns provide the visitor with a distinct vacation outside the big city, and due to their proximity, a vacationer can make a pleasant trip out by visiting each one.

A Must: Venture into the gold mines on a one of the mining tours. Don a hardhat before preceding into an old mine and learn about the geology and history of the mines while investigating gemstones and gold deposits on the walls.

Regions in Brief

In fact, the Gold Country is so immense that it would take weeks to thoroughly explore. But rather than provide an exhaustive list of every town, I have narrowed my coverage to include three of my favorite regions, each of which can be explored in just 2 or 3 days:

the charismatic side-by-side towns of Nevada City and Grass Valley to the north;

the well-preserved Gold Rush communities of Amador City, **Sutter Creek**, and Jackson in the central Gold Country;

and at the southern end of the Gold Country, the wonderfully authentic neighboring mining towns of Angels Camp, Murphys, Columbia, Sonora, and Jamestown.

Any of these regions will provide an excellent base for exploring and experiencing the Gold Country, whether you're intent on panning for gold, exploring old mines and caverns, or rafting the area's many white-water rivers.

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Introduction to Gold Country

Cutting a serpentine swath for nearly 350 miles along the aptly numbered Calif. 49, the Gold Country stretches from Sierra City to the foothills of Yosemite. Much of this rugged region still retains its '49er ambience: Mining sites, horse ranches, and Wild West saloons are common sights in these parts. Along with its numerous ghost towns and Gold Rush-era architecture, it's enough to make Gene Autry or Roy Rogers feel right at home.

The town of Placerville, 44 miles east of Sacramento at the intersection of U.S. 50 and Calif. 49, is in the approximate center of the Gold Country. To the north are the old mining towns of Grass Valley and Nevada City, while in the central and southern Gold Country are such well-preserved towns as Amador City, **Sutter Creek**, Columbia, and Jamestown, to name a few.

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The Central Gold Country

Though Placerville is technically the center of the Gold Country, it's the small trio of towns a few miles to the south — Amador City, **Sutter Creek**, and Jackson — that are far and away the most appealing destination in this region of rolling hills, dotted with solitary oaks and granite outcroppings. When the mining boom went bust, most of the towns were abandoned; nowadays, most of these restored Gold Rush towns rely solely on tourism (hence the conversion of many Victorian homes into B&Bs), though a few mines have reopened recently.

One of the advantages of staying in this area, 55 miles southeast of Sacramento, is that both the northern and southern regions of the Gold Country are only a few hours' drive away (via very winding roads, however). If you're intent on seeing as much of the Gold Country as possible in a few days' time, any one of these three towns will suffice as a good home base.

To reach Amador City, **Sutter Creek**, or Jackson from Placerville, head south along Calif. 49 past Plymouth and Drytown. If you're coming straight here from Sacramento, take U.S. 50 to Placerville and head south on Calif. 49; Calif. 16 from Sacramento is another option, but only slightly faster. For more information about any of these towns, contact the **Sutter Creek Visitor Center, P O Box 600, Sutter Creek, CA 95685, (tel. 1-800-400-0305 www.suttercreek.org) or the Amador County Chamber of Commerce, 125 Peek St., Jackson (tel. 209/223-0350; www.amadorcountychamber.com).**

Poor but Proud—Three miles south of Placerville is the funky little town of El Dorado, whose claim to fame is gold of another kind — Galliano liqueur. Legend has it that, long ago, one of the town's locals became the proud owner of a gold-colored Cadillac. To celebrate his purchase, he went to the town saloon, Poor Red's, and asked the bartender to whip him up a commemorative drink, preferably something to match the color of his Caddy. Grabbing the only golden-hued elixir he could find, the bartender mixed a little of this with a jigger of that and presto! The Golden Cadillac cocktail was born. Word got around quickly about how great the drink was, and soon people from all over the *world* were lining up for a glass of Poor Red's finest.

What? You don't believe me? Right then, go see for yourself. At the end of the bar in a glass showcase is a plaque — sent directly from the Galliano company in Italy — that honors Poor Red's as the largest user of Galliano liqueur in North America. And while you're there, try their barbecued chicken, ham, steak, and pork ribs — all of which are served big and priced small. **Poor Red's**, 6221 Pleasant Valley Rd., in El Dorado (tel. **530/622-2901**), is open for lunch Monday through Friday and daily for dinner.

Amador City

Once a bustling mining town, Amador City is now devoted mostly to dredging up tourist dollars. Although Amador City sounds impressive, it is so tiny that it is the smallest incorporated city in California. Local merchants have made the most of a refurbished block-long boardwalk, converting the historic false-fronted buildings into a gallery of sorts; the stores sell everything from early 1900s antiques and folk art to handcrafted furniture, Gold Rush memorabilia, rare books, and Native American crafts. Parking can be difficult, however, especially in summer.

A Modern Gold Mine Tour—One of the most entertaining and educational attractions in the Gold Country is the **Sutter Gold Mine Tours'** hour-long excursion into the bowels of a modern hard-rock gold mine. With an emphasis on authenticity, the tour starts with a ride on a mining shuttle to the mine, where you'll have to "tag in" and go through the safety training room, just as if you were one of the miners. Wearing your hardhat, you'll proceed deep into the mine, learning about geology and the history of mining while marveling at the gemstones and gold deposits embedded in the quartz of the Comet Vein (you'll even learn to spot the difference between real gold and "fool's gold").

After the tour, be sure to buy a bag of mining ore — about \$5 per bag — head over to the wood sluice, grab one of the gold pans or sluice boxes, and pan for real gold. Each bag is guaranteed to hold either gold or gemstones (emeralds, amethysts, topaz, and many other birthstones), and there's always an assistant on hand to show you how it's done. The kids get a real kick out of this. Other diversions include the Company Store gift shop filled with a huge assortment of inexpensive semiprecious gems and minerals, and a small movie theater that offers a 1-hour documentary about the Gold Rush and a half-hour movie about modern gold mining (a heavy-machinery flick that kids will love). And if you're truly a gold-mine enthusiast, there's also a 3- to 4-hour "Deep Mine Experience" that really goes deep into the mine, but it's by reservation only.

The **Sutter Gold Mine** (tel. **866/762-2837** or 209/736-2708; www.suttergold.com) is open daily year-round from 9am to 5pm in the summer and 10am to 4pm October through May. The 1-hour Family Tour is \$15 for adults and children ages 14 and older, \$13 for AAA members and seniors 55 and older, and \$10 for kids 4 to 13; kids under 4 are not allowed on the tour. The Family Tours take place on the hour and reservations are not necessary. The mine is located at 13660 Hwy. 49, about half a mile south of Amador City, just north of Sutter Creek.

Sutter Creek

The self-proclaimed “nicest little town in the Mother Lode,” Sutter Creek was named after sawmill owner John Sutter, employer of James Marshall (whose discovery of gold triggered the 1849 Gold Rush). Railroad baron Leland Stanford made his fortune at Sutter Creek’s Lincoln Mine, and then invested his millions to both build the transcontinental railroad and to fund his successful campaign to become governor of California.

The town is a charmer, lined with beautiful 19th-century buildings in pristine condition, including **Downs Mansion**, the former home of the foreman at Stanford’s mine (now a private residence on Spanish St., across from the Immaculate Conception Church), and the landmark **Knight’s Foundry**, 81 Eureka St., off Main Street, the last water-powered foundry and machine shop in the nation. There are also numerous shops and galleries along Main Street, though finding a free parking space can be a real challenge on summer weekends.

Coloma: Where the Gold Rush Began

On Calif. 49 between Auburn and Placerville, the town of **Coloma** is so small and unpretentious it’s hard to imagine the significant role it played in the rapid development of California and the West. It was here that James Marshall first discovered that there was gold aplenty in the foothills of California. Over the next 50 years, 125 *million* ounces of gold were taken from the Sierra foothills, an amount worth a staggering \$50 billion today.

Although Marshall and Sutter tried to keep the discovery secret, word soon leaked out. Sam Brannan, who ran a general store at Fort Sutter, secured some gold samples himself — as well as significant amounts of choice Coloma real estate — and then headed for San Francisco, where he ran through the streets shouting, “Gold! Gold! Gold! From the American River!” San Francisco rapidly emptied as men rushed off to seek their fortunes at the mines (and make Sam Brannan’s as well).

Coloma was quickly mined out, but its boom brought 10,000 people to the settlement and lasted long enough for residents to build a schoolhouse, a gunsmith, a general store, and a tin-roofed post office. The miners also planted oak and mimosa trees that shade the street during hot summers. About 70% of this quiet, pretty town lies in the **Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park** (tel. **530/622-3470**; www.coloma.com/gold), which preserves the spot where James Wilson Marshall discovered gold along the banks of the south fork of the American River.

Farther up Main Street is a replica of the mill Marshall was building when he made his discovery. The largest building in town, the mill is powered by electricity during the summer. Other attractions include the **Gold Discovery Museum**, which relates the story of the Gold Rush, and a number of Chinese stores, all that remain of the once-sizable local Chinese community. The park also has three picnic areas, four trails, recreational gold panning, and a number of buildings and exhibits relating the way of life that prevailed here in the 19th

century. Admission is \$5 per vehicle; hours are daily from 10am to 5pm, except on major holidays.

Folks also come here for white-water thrills on the American River. (Coloma is a popular launching point.) **White Water Connection**, in Coloma (tel. **530/622-6446**; www.whitewaterconnection.com), offers half- to 2-day trips down the frothy forks of the American River. It's great fun and one of the Gold Country's best outdoor attractions.

Jackson

Jackson, the county seat of Amador County, is far livelier than its neighboring towns to the north. (It was the last place in California to outlaw prostitution.) Be sure to stroll through the center of town, browsing in the stores and admiring the Victorian architecture. Although the Kennedy and Argonaut mines ultimately produced more than \$140 million in gold, Jackson initially earned its place in the Gold Rush as a supply center. That history is apparent in the town's wide Main Street, lined by tall buildings adorned with intricate iron railings.

Make no mistake: This is not a ghost town, but rather a modern minicity that has worked to preserve its pre-Victorian influence. At the southern end of the street is the **National Hotel**, 2 Water St., at Main Street (tel. **209/223-0500**; www.national-hotel.com), one of California's oldest continuously operating hotels since 1862. Will Rogers, John Wayne, Leland Stanford, and many other celebrities and big-time politicians once stayed here. Today the hotel's **Louisiana House Bar** — a cool, dark establishment where weary travelers can rest while a honky-tonk pianist beats out ragtime tunes and classic oldies — does a brisk business (alas, the guest rooms aren't nearly as enjoyable).

The **Amador County Museum**, a huge brick building at 225 Church St. (tel. **209/223-6386**), is where Will Rogers filmed *Boys Will Be Boys* in 1920. Today the former home of Armistead Calvin Brown and his 11 children is filled with mining memorabilia and information on two local mines, the Kennedy and the Argonaut, that were among the deepest and richest in the nation. Within the museum is a working large-scale model of the Kennedy. The museum is open Wednesday through Sunday from 10am to 4pm; admission is by a contribution of any amount. Tours of the museum cost \$2 and are offered Saturday and Sunday on the hour from 11am to 3pm.

If you would rather see the real thing, head to the **Kennedy Tailing Wheels Park**, site of the Kennedy and Argonaut mines, the deepest in the Mother Lode. The mines have been closed for years, but the tailing wheels and head frames, used to convey debris over the hills to a settling pond, remain. To reach the park, take Main Street to Jackson Gate Road, just north of Jackson (no phone). A few miles south of Jackson on Calif. 49 is one of the most evocative towns of the region: **Mokelumne Hill**. The town consists of one street overlooking a valley with a few old buildings, and somehow its sad, abandoned air has the mark of authenticity. At one time, the hill was dotted with tents and wood-and-tar paper shacks, and the town housed a population of 15,000, including an old French quarter and a Chinatown. But now many of its former residents are memorialized in the town's Protestant, Jewish, and Catholic cemeteries.

A Visit to Volcano

About a dozen miles east of Jackson on Calif. 88 is the enchantingly decrepit town of **Volcano**, one of the most authentic ghost towns in the central Sierra. The town got its name in 1848, after miners mistook the origins of the craggy boulders that lie in the center of town. The dark rock and the blind window frames of a few backless, ivy-covered buildings give the town's main thoroughfare a haunted look. Sprinkled between boarded-up buildings, about 100 residents do business in the same sagging storefronts that a population of 8,000 frequented nearly 150 years ago.

The tiny, now-quiet burg has a rich history: Not only was this boomtown once home to 17 hotels, courts of quick justice, and the state's first lending library and astronomical observatory, but Volcano gold also supported the Union during the Civil War. Residents smuggled a huge cannon to the front lines in a hearse (it was never used). The story goes that had the enthusiastic blues actually fired it, it was so overcharged that "Old Abe" would have exploded. The cannon sits in the town center today, under a rusting weather vane.

Looming over the small buildings is the stately **St. George Hotel** (tel. **209/296-4458**; www.stgeorgehotel.com), a three-story, balconied building that testifies to the \$90 million in gold mined in and around the town. Its ivy-covered brick and shuttered windows will remind you of colonial New England. In 1998 new owners took over the run-down 20-room hotel and have totally turned it around. The restaurant serves brunch on Sunday, and dinner Thursday through Sunday. Even if you're not hungry, stop in for a libation at the classic old bar, the Whiskey Flat Saloon.

In summer the **Volcano Theatre Company** performs at the town's outdoor amphitheater, hidden behind stone facades on Main Street, a block north of the St. George Hotel. It's a wonderful Gold Country experience. For information on performances, call tel. **209/296-2525** or visit www.volcanotheatre.org. And in early spring, people come from all around to picnic amid the nearly half-million daffodils in bloom on **Daffodil Hill**, a 4-acre ranch 3 miles north of Volcano (follow the sign on Ram's Horn Grade).