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WESTERN TRAVEL

On shore leave at Clear Lake

Wineries and other signs of the good life are popping up all around Clear Lake. The buzz? It's like Napa, without all the attitude.

By Evan Halper
Times Staff Writer

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THE luxury speedboat pulled up to the dock of a sun-dappled hacienda, and a bikini-clad blond dug around the bow searching for something. When she found it, she slipped the slinky, black cocktail dress over her swimsuit and sashayed down a footpath — through a field of lavender and around the occasional fig tree — to a swank wine-tasting room.

You'd expect that at the waterfront playground of Nice.

Just not this Nice. This is California's Nice, a place that has never quite managed to attract the jet-setters that flock to its namesake on the French Riviera. No, this Nice has long catered to travelers who wouldn't think of vacationing without their Winnebago.

The RVers still rule many of the towns that dot the shoreline of Clear Lake, in the shadow of the Mayacama Mountains. But they are being joined by a steadily growing group that, until recently, thought of Lake County only as a place to buy gas before heading to nearby Sonoma, Napa or Mendocino.

My wife, Erin, and I recently discovered plenty of reasons to stay awhile.

We ventured back to the area despite a dreadful first trip here a couple of years ago. Drawn that time by websites that showcased the lake, we decided to stop for lunch on our way to the Mendocino Coast. But we found little more than trailer parks, greasy spoons and biker bars, so we kept driving.

A blizzard of promotional material from the county's economic development office promising a breathtaking makeover lured us back. Beneath the unvarnished veneer is an area that is beginning to resemble Napa and Sonoma, minus the attitude.

We strolled through gorgeous foothills, dined at outdoor cafes and lounged in a fabulous boutique hotel. And drank lots of wine.

Blessed by a rich, volcanic soil, the county now has 14 wineries, more than triple the number five years ago, and they're producing some fine Cabernet Sauvignons, Petit Syrahs and Sauvignon Blancs.

Their attractive tasting rooms proved an agreeable place to while away the hours. Among our favorites were Ceago Del Lago Winery, the Mediterranean-style lakeside compound where the blond who arrived by speedboat hoisted her glass of the winery's Sauvignon Blanc.

Winemaker Jim Fetzer opened his 220-acre property to the public less than a year ago, and it has quickly generated a buzz. Guests get the run of the property. The staff encourages strolling through the organic gardens and picnicking on the patio, from which there are jaw-dropping lake views.

But there is an even better reason to head to Clear Lake: the Tallman Hotel, a few miles north of Ceago del Lago, in Upper Lake. This 17-room boutique inn may be the ideal place to enjoy a Northern California weekend.

Our generous sized Eastlake-style room was warmly decorated with eclectic flourishes — patterned pastel wallpaper, an impressive country French headboard and armoire.

The silky hand-stitched quilts on the beds with their regal floral patterns somehow melded seamlessly with the pinstriped carpet, wide-striped pillows, brightly painted tables and Asian-style lamps. French doors separated the bedroom from the mosaic-tiled bathroom.

Another set of doors led to a private outdoor patio with a large Japanese *ofuro* soaking tub, carved from teak. It sat next to an outdoor shower whose huge, old-fashioned showerhead sent forth a cascade of water.

The tub was a treat after our long morning runs down country roads that cut through seemingly endless orchards of pears. It helped soothe nerves frayed by near dust-ups with barking dogs and cowboys whizzing by in pickups, although any excuse for a soak in the deep tub was a good one. By my count, we slid into it half a dozen times during our stay.

In Tallman's high-ceilinged breakfast room, we feasted on warm, flaky croissants while admiring the work of local artisans who had etched wildlife scenes onto the wall and built a giant white mantel tastefully inlaid with tiles.

Outside the lobby, gravel paths meander through gardens full of rosemary, squash, tiny pumpkins, purple trumpet vines and sunflowers.

The Tallman was built in the 1890s as a hotel and stagecoach stop but fell into disrepair decades ago. The current owners took it over in 2003 and began transforming it into a luxury destination.

The hotel also owns the neighboring Blue Wing Saloon, a high-end pub serving tri-tip, ribs and grilled fish. It's the best restaurant for miles, so getting a seat on the saloon's porch, where the crowd spills out onto the hotel's peaceful gardens, can take some jockeying.

Make sure you have a car on your weekend escape. Upper Lake has a dusty old main street with a few bedraggled secondhand stores, and the adjacent town of Blue Lakes isn't much more exciting. Farther down the road, a battered sign at the entrance to Lucerne, complete with a rotting flower box, promises "The Switzerland of America." We found no evidence of this.

A Lake County visit is incomplete without a trip to its more bohemian southern side. Getting there from the Tallman involved a drive winding through redwoods on California 175.

Our destination was the Langtry Estate & Vineyards. This 22,000-acre property straddling Lake and Napa counties was once the home of British actress Lillie Langtry, who bought it sight unseen in 1888.

The tasting room is perched on a hill that offers great views of the vineyards and the old Langtry mansion. Off to the other side, you can look for blue heron and the occasional bald eagle on Guenoc Lake. A few families were enjoying the scenery as they lunched at picnic tables under a pergola outside the tasting room.

Another great way to soak in some of the county's impressive vistas is a hike through the foothills that straddle the Yolo County line. Erin and I took a short walk on some Bureau of Land Management property in the Wilson Valley, just past the northern fork of Cache Creek.

The trail, with lush leather oaks sprouting from hillsides full of parched native grass, was as impressive as any we'd been on in Napa and Sonoma parks. And best of all, it was free and practically empty.

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Palate pleasers

FINDING good views is easy in Lake County. Finding a place to eat is another matter. By lunchtime, we were far from the Tallman. A little asking around led us to Kelseyville, where we found a charming Main Street with a couple of wine tasting rooms and a pair of eateries that catered to urban palates.

Once inside Studabakers, Kelseyville's hip coffee shop and deli, we were delighted to find a menu that included roast pork and grilled artichoke sandwiches. We ordered a couple, grabbed some iced barley tea from the drink case and settled in at a window table where we could eavesdrop on the local gossip.

We quickly grew bored with the talk of local keggers and who had a crush on whom, but we are still thinking about the sandwiches, as close to perfect as we've had.

There was still plenty left to do. Water-skiing on the lake. A guided hike on Mt. Konocti, a dormant volcano. A visit to Ridgewood Ranch, just over the Mendocino County line, where the famous Seabiscuit lived. But we would save all that for another trip.

We were knocked out from a day of wine tasting and had something else in mind. That big Japanese soaking tub was calling our name.

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(INFOBOX BELOW)

A taste of Lake County

GETTING THERE:

From LAX, Southwest and United have nonstop flights to Sacramento. Restricted round-trip fares begin at \$98.

Nice is about a two-hour drive from Sacramento.

WHERE TO STAY:

The Tallman Hotel, 9550 Main St., Upper Lake; (707) 275-2244, <http://www.tallmanhotel.com> . A lovely boutique hotel with 17 beautifully decorated rooms and suites; some have private patios with deep Japanese soaking tubs and outdoor showers. Doubles from \$129.

The Lakeport English Inn, 675 N. Main St., Lakeport; (707) 263-4317, <http://www.lakeportenglishinn.com> , is a British-type bed-and-breakfast in downtown Lakeport. It has five Victorian-style doubles, a tearoom, a game room and an English garden. Doubles from \$185, including full English breakfast.

WHERE TO EAT:

The Blue Wing Saloon and Café, 9550 Main St., Upper Lake; (707) 275-2233, <http://www.bluewingsaloon.com> . An ideal place for high-end comfort food. Grab a table on the porch, which overlooks the peaceful gardens of the Tallman Hotel. Entrees \$11-\$18.

Studabakers Coffee and Deli, 3928 Main St., Kelseyville; (707) 279-8809. Has fantastic gourmet sandwiches in a hip coffee shop setting. Pick up provisions for a picnic at one of the area's wineries. Open for lunch. Sandwiches \$5.50 to \$8.

TNT on the Lake, 1 First St., Lakeport; (707) 263-4868, serves Mexican standards on a porch right on the lake. Open for lunch and dinner. Entrees \$5-\$12.

WHAT TO DO:

Taste wines: Start with the Fetzer family's Ceago Del Lago, where the tasting room is in an impressive Mediterranean-style lakeside hacienda; 5115 E. Highway 20, Nice, (707) 274-1462, <http://www.ceago.com> . Tasting fee: \$5. Then head to the Langtry Estate & Vineyards (formerly Guenoc), on a gorgeous 22,000-acre property that once belonged to theater actress Lillie Langtry; 21000 Butts Canyon Road, Middletown, (707) 987-2385, <http://www.langtryestate.com> . Tasting free (\$4 for reserve tasting). A little less scenic, but offering fine reds and whites nonetheless is Steele Wines; 4350 Thomas Drive, Kelseyville, (707) 279-9475, <http://www.steelewines.com> . Tastings \$5 each.

Go hiking: Bureau of Land Management trails off California Highway 20 offer fine hikes. Look for the trail parking area where the highway crosses the northern fork of Cache Creek. A great source of information on area hikes is <http://www.yolohiker.org> .

Take a guided tour of Mt. Konocti volcano with Top of Konocti Trails; (707) 245-7322, <http://www.topofkonocti.com> . \$20 per person.

TO LEARN MORE:

Lake County Visitor Information Center, 6110 E. Highway 20, Lucerne, CA 95458; (800) 525-3743, <http://www.lakecounty.com> .

— Evan Halper

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