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## Weekend getaway: A Gold Rush-inspired jaunt to the Sierra foothills



Jamestown 1897 is a California State Historic Park in the Sierra Foothills that traces the history of the Sierra Railway, complete with its historic roundhouse. (Menka Belgal Photography)



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Visiting Jamestown and the surrounding Sierra foothill towns is like taking a step into the past, into a living snapshot of 19th century California at the height of the mining boom.

There's [Railtown 1897](#), a state historic park that captures the golden age of steam trains and more than a few 20th century pop culture references. There's [Columbia State Historic Park](#), a living history park with the largest collection of Gold Rush-era buildings in California. And there are cideries, wineries, eateries and other modern delights to explore, too.

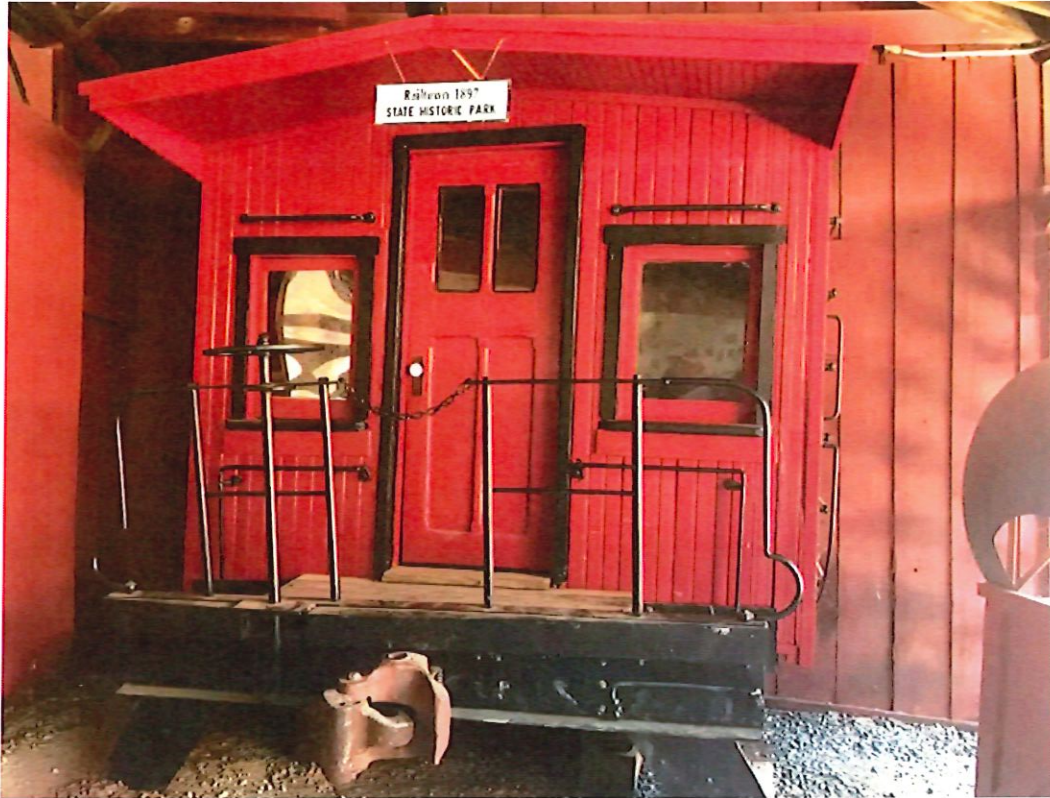
Train enthusiasts and history buffs alike will enjoy a visit to Railtown 1897 State Historic Park, a complex that offers tours of the original roundhouse and turntable, where steam-driven locomotives and train cars were repaired and maintained, and peeks at the blacksmith area and a 19th-century belt-driven machine shop.



Jamestown 1897 State Historic Park captures the lore and history of the Gold Rush and the rise of the railroad in California's Sierra Foothills. (Menka Belgal Photography)

The historic park is a great spot to visit at any time of year, but from April through October, you can ride the rails, too. The six-mile, 45-minute train ride on the Sierra Railway has staff aboard dressed in period clothing, explaining the railway's history, the surrounding geological features and the inner workings of these trains. The Star Spangled Limited runs the rails every Fourth of July, while the Skeleton Starlight and the Polar Express take a turn in October and December, respectively.

If some of the sights here seem strangely familiar — the caboose, for example, and the water tower — you've likely seen them on the big screen. Or the small one. Hollywood directors and location scouts have used Railtown as "The Movie Railroad" since 1919, when they filmed a train robbery scene for "The Red Glove," a silent film serial. Over the decades, more than 200 movies, TV series and ads have been filmed here, from "[High Noon](#)," the 1952 Western starring Gary Cooper; Lloyd Bridges and Grace Kelly, to Clint Eastwood's "[Unforgiven](#)" (1992), as well as the 1960s classic TV comedy, "Petticoat Junction," and 1970s' "Little House on the Prairie."



Many of the sights at Jamestown 1897, a California state historic park, may be familiar. Some 200 films and TV shows have been filmed here. (Jackie Burrell/Bay Area News Group)

Afterward, head to neighboring Columbia, which isn't just a national historic landmark or state historic park — it's a living Gold Rush town with nearly 30 buildings that date back to the California Gold Rush. But it's the dedication to the craft that makes the experience. Everyone from shop owners to docents dress in period clothing and are happy to answer questions as you stroll past the local blacksmith shop and grocer.



Some 30 buildings at Columbia State Historic Park date back to the Gold Rush. (Aric Crabb/Bay Area News Group) Aric Crabb/Bay Area News Group

The [Columbia Mercantile 1855](#) sells everything from baked goods and nostalgic sweets to local wines, craft beer and sarsaparilla from its old-school, brick-walled grocery store. [Parrott's Blacksmith](#) offers monogrammed horseshoes, railway spikes and kitchen wares molded from wrought iron. There's even a candle dipping stand down one of the alleyways.

Kids of all ages (and adults too) can pan for gold to take home — just make sure you roll up those sleeves, or you'll be dripping water all day. Don't leave without taking a ride on a horse-drawn carriage through the middle of town.

When you're done panning for gold and doing the sarsaparilla thing, you'll find burgers and classic all-American fare at The Columbia House on Main Street, and pizzas of all sorts at the [St. Charles Saloon](#). The Western-style saloon serves up signature pies that range from a veggie Hippy to a Motherlode (salami, pepperoni, sausage, mushrooms and olives) and a Caliente, which ups the spice factor of what might have been a simple pepperoni-mushroom pizza with Sriracha garlic ranch sauce and jalapeno.

Nearby Sonora shares a similar history with Jamestown. Established during the Gold Rush, the current Tuolumne County seat once was home to gold-seeking miners. Today, it offers plenty of fresh charm as well as an old-fashioned Main Street lined with turn-of-the-previous-century buildings, antique stores, cafes and restaurants. And there's more to capture your interest on the town outskirts, too.

You'll find [Standard Pour](#) — and its tempting burgers, loaded fries and craft beer list — in the 1920s-era Pickering Lumber building east of town.



The building that houses Standard Pour, a casual restaurant in east Sonora, was once a lumber building office. (Menka Belgal Photography)

And in the rolling hills to the north, [Indigeny Reserve](#) is home to organic apple orchards, a cidery and a distillery that makes brandy and liqueurs. Taste your way through the cider lineup, which typically includes rotating seasonal sips as well as its extra-crisp apple and blackberry flagship ciders. When the place gets busy — during the spring or harvest festival or other family-friendly events — it can be the most exciting place in Sonora, with food trucks, shopping vendors, cotton candy carts, live music and more.



Brandies, liqueurs and hard cider are made at Indigeny Reserve, a cider distillery with acres of apple orchards, a tasting room and beautiful views just outside Sonora. (Dan Honda/Bay Area News Group)

On your way back to town, stop off at Cover's Apple Ranch. This family-owned farm is a peak destination in the fall, when it offers a pumpkin patch and small corn maze. But a mini train circles the property year round. There are farm animals to feed and pet, a treehouse-style playhouse for climbing, and a restaurant that serves homestyle food and natural apple cider.

Spending the night? Sonora has several hotels and inns. You'll find two 19th-century country inns in Columbia, the [Fallon](#) and the [City Hotel](#). Another lodging option is the Black Oak Casino Resort complex. The resort lies 10 minutes outside Sonora and includes a four-star hotel, half a dozen restaurants and several family-friendly activities, including bowling lanes and an arcade. Its newest attraction is [Elevate](#), an indoor playground with trampoline floors, high-flying basketball games, an indoor golf simulator and outdoor batting cages.

The adults-only Chicken Ranch Casino Resort opened in July next to the original casino. Perched on a hill in Jamestown overlooking the Sierra Railway, the red-trimmed building is hard to miss. Inside, there are plenty of dining options — seven restaurants including a rooftop option — and a floor of casino games.

## If You Go

**Railtown 1897:** This state historic park (\$3-\$5) is open from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. daily November through March, and from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. daily April through October at 10501 Reservoir Road in Jamestown; [www.parks.ca.gov](http://www.parks.ca.gov). Train rides (\$18-\$28) run on weekends from April through October and on Wednesdays from June through mid-August; [www.railtown1897.org](http://www.railtown1897.org).

**Columbia State Historic Park:** Park exhibits (free) are open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily (until 5:30 p.m. June-August); [www.parks.ca.gov/](http://www.parks.ca.gov/).

**Columbia Mercantile:** Open daily from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. at the corner of Main and Jackson Streets in Columbia; <https://columbiamercantile1855.com/>.

**St. Charles Saloon:** Open from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily, until 9 p.m. Friday-Saturday at 22801 Main St. in Columbia; <https://stcharlessaloon.com>.

**Standard Pour:** Open from 11 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday and until 9 p.m. Friday-Saturday at 19040 Standard Road in Sonora; [www.standard-pour.com/](http://www.standard-pour.com/).

**Indigeny Reserve:** Open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily at 14679 Summers Lane in Sonora; [www.indigenyreserve.com/](http://www.indigenyreserve.com/).

**Cover's Apple Ranch:** Open from 6 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday at 19211 Cherokee Road in Tuolumne; [www.coversappleranch.com](http://www.coversappleranch.com).

**Black Oak Casino Resort:** Rooms start at \$139. 19400 Tuolumne Road, Tuolumne; [www.blackoakcasino.com/](http://www.blackoakcasino.com/).

**Chicken Ranch Casino Resort:** Rooms start at \$155 per night. 9100 People of the Mountain Road in Jamestown; <https://chickenranchcasinoresort.com>.

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