

After the gold rush

Mining towns rub shoulders with wellness retreats and swathes of unspoilt forest on the Tuolumne County side of Yosemite National Park. Adam Shaw reports

"There's never a bad time to visit Yosemite," our guide Nate from Echo Adventure Cooperative tells us during a hike to the spectacular Hetch Hetchy Valley.

"In all my time doing [these tours] I've never felt bored – how can you? There's so much variety, there's a reason people keep coming back."

If Hetch Hetchy is anything to go by, I fully agree. Just a few hours from ultra-cool San Francisco, Hetch Hetchy's reservoir, which provides much of the city's drinking water, is surrounded by steep cliff faces and seemingly endless woodland.

Tuolumne County includes a large portion of Yosemite National Park, offering both adventure and opportunities for downtime in equal measure. The attraction of the park itself is clear – jaw-dropping landscapes and biodiversity have drawn climbers, walkers and nature lovers from across the world for decades.

And while Yosemite has been making the news for its height-of-summer wildfires, those living and

working in Tuolumne have stressed that people should not be put off.

Teri Marshall, marketing director at Rush Creek Lodge at Yosemite, explains that the year-round opportunities in the region mean it should still be at the top of people's holiday lists.

"The UK is one of our biggest markets. The UK, and Europe in general, has much more in common with us in California than they think," she says. "They love walking, they love adventure, they love nature, and we have all of that right here. So, hopefully, they'll continue to come over."

A PARK FOR ALL SEASONS

As Lisa Mayo, president and chief executive of Visit Tuolumne County, notes: "It's a great year-round destination for so many reasons. Not only do we have most of Yosemite National Park in our area, but there are a number of things that attract visitors to all corners of the county including our colourful gold rush history." ➤

DESTINATIONS

THE US | CALIFORNIA



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Columbia State Historic Park; the town offers rides in authentic stagecoaches; Iron Door Saloon in Groveland PICTURES: Menka Belgal

Tuolumne's position as a gold rush hub is best seen at Columbia State Historic Park, where visitors can stroll along wooden footpaths past traditional shops and inns. This site is great for families, with a working blacksmith, the chance to ride an authentic stagecoach and the opportunity to pan for gold.

Film – and transportation – buffs should head to Railtown 1897 State Historic Park, which has featured in silver screen classics such as *High Noon* as well as more modern flicks including *Back to the Future III*.

The park's original rolling stock and maintenance facilities are remarkably well maintained, and there are regular train rides that take you into the nearby woods.

Watersports fans will be well catered for at the scenic Pinecrest Lake, high up in Stanislaus National Forest. Visitors can hire kayaks, pedalos and stand-up paddleboards by the hour. Further up the forest is the Dodge Ridge Mountain resort: in the winter months this is a popular ski destination, while in summer you can take a chairlift to the summit before hiking back down.

REST AND RELAXATION

Tuolumne has also recently emerged as a wellness destination, allowing guests to combine active trips to Yosemite with relaxing activities in many of its towns. In Sonora I pay a visit to Amala Detox & Tea Lounge, which offers a range of treatments including massages and infrared sauna sessions, alongside an extensive

menu of herbal drinks. As I sip on an ice-cold fruit tea, owner Laina Vann gives me a relaxing foot soak, placing a small machine inside a foot bath, which is meant to speed up the removal of any toxins from my body.

In nearby Jamestown – an historic gold rush town that has maintained parts of its 19th-century character – we take part in a reiki session at Healings with Jenia. Led into a dimly lit room, we lie down and are told to concentrate on our breathing as Jenia gently massages our pressure points and her assistant plays a small gong. We leave the centre in a far more peaceful state of mind.

GETTING BACK TO NATURE

It's worth checking in for Rush Creek Lodge & Spa's wellness offering too. Its full treatment menu ranges from colour therapy, where a series of coloured lights are applied to the skin to promote relaxation, to more traditional facials and massages. The resort is also an ideal jumping off point for exploring the national park, with impressive facilities, including an outdoor pool and Jacuzzi area. Guests can wander along on-site trails, or try out the ziplines.

With easy access from the Bay Area along Highway 120, it's easy to reach Tuolumne County flying from the UK – whether the aim is to relax and unwind, relish the thrills and spills of adventure sports, brush up on knowledge of the California Dream or take in the breathtaking natural beauty of this sprawling national park. **TW**

TOP 3 TUOLUMNE EXCURSIONS

Miller's Off Road Adventures Jeep Tour

Strap yourself in for a bumpy ride through the stunning Stanislaus National Forest in a classic 4x4. Guests aged 25 and over can drive their own vehicle, following the experienced and friendly Kim and Craig along off-road trails on the edge of Yosemite National Park. millersoffroadadventures.com

Indiginy Reserve

This 160-acre reserve near Sonora is filled with apple orchards as well as several manageable nature trails. After exploring the grounds, visitors can sample ciders and fruity spirits produced on site, before settling down for a bite to eat in the shaded picnic areas. indiginyreserve.com

Groveland Yosemite Gateway Museum

The museum, open Friday-Sunday, is the perfect way to learn about the cultural and natural history of the area. Explore the rest of Groveland, home to the oldest still-operating saloon in California – the Iron Door Saloon. grovelandmuseum.org

BOOK IT

Lusso Travel offers a five-night San Francisco and Yosemite twin-centre trip staying at the Argonaut Hotel and Rush Creek Lodge, flights and car hire from £1,350 per person, based on two sharing. lussotravel.com Return fares with Virgin Atlantic from Heathrow to San Francisco start from £375. virginatlantic.com