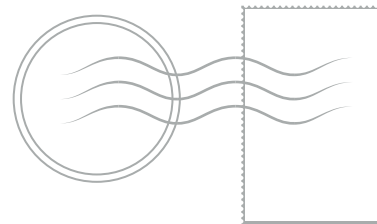


POSTCARD

Placerville



This Gold Rush gem provides a window into the past that gets to the heart of California's history, writes **Paul McLaughlin**

As we walk into the lobby of the Historic Cary House Hotel, there is a distinctly eerie atmosphere. We're advised to look at, but not touch, the strategically placed exhibits, which include a roped-off grand piano, a chess set abandoned mid-match and a replica bellhop uniform that sparks a discussion about Stan, the ghostly night watchman who some believe still walks the stairs.

The idea of a haunted hotel might sound unbelievable, but in a Gold Rush settlement formerly known as Old Hangtown, where Main Street is full of historic buildings that look more like a period movie set than a modern-day city, anything is possible.

Despite this spooky start, Placerville is, in fact, a charming town seated within El Dorado County in the Sierra Nevada foothills. It's an easy stop on a road trip from the slopes of Lake Tahoe en route to Sacramento or San Francisco. The downtown area has an intriguing array of shops, antique stores, art galleries and restaurants, including Placerville Hardware, the oldest hardware store west of the Mississippi, which looks very much like it did in the 1800s.

Born from the gold boom, the town was originally called Dry Diggins after the mining techniques then used – which saw it grow to the state's third-largest settlement by 1854 – but lawlessness prompted a change of name to Old Hangtown. The 'placer' gold deposits later gave rise to a much friendlier moniker, but reminders of its dark history are plentiful, particularly at The Hangman's Tree public house, which is adorned with a noosed mannequin to mark the notorious spot.

These days, Placerville has many more wholesome attractions, including the Gold Bug Park and Mine, where you can learn how miners extracted and processed the precious metal. A 15-minute drive away is Wakamatsu Farm, the original site of the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Farm Colony, the first Japanese settlement in North America.

Placerville also has its fair share of California's wineries and the Boeger Winery, one of the oldest in the region, offers a tasting for the bargain fee of \$15 per person. It's a golden opportunity to get an insight into California's less-familiar history – without a ghostly spectre in sight. **TW**



BOOK IT

American Affair's 15-night Northern California Highlights by Motorhome trip starts in San Francisco, visiting Sonoma, Eureka, Yosemite National Park and including the journey from Lake Tahoe to Sacramento, via Placerville. Prices start at £1,568 with economy-class flights, two nights' accommodation and 14 nights' motorhome hire, departing September 8. americanaffair.com



TOP: Main Street, Placerville

ABOVE: The Hangman's Tree public house

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