

California Travel

Where the Sierras Meet the Cascades

by Greg Niemann

Across the lake, Lassen Peak's eastern flank shimmered with a saffron embrace from the rising sun. We sped over the surface of Lake Almanor where ospreys, grebes, ducks and geese bobbed like watermelon seeds out on a watery veneer of rosy pink. Communing with nature is easy here but our guide Doug Neal headed straight for his favorite fishing spot. He anchored on a sand bar in a widening outlet called Hamilton Branch. The spot looked familiar to me, with reason.

I had been in that area the previous day. I arrived in Northern California and our outdoor writer's conference (OWAC) early, in fact early enough to pull a beautiful 16-inch rainbow trout out of the stream just up from our sand bar.

But on this brisk September morning, my partner Tom Stienstra of the San Francisco Chronicle and I began casting toward shore into the outlet from both sides

of the sand bar. After I caught the first fish and got a sincere high five from Tom, I realized I was fishing with a legend www.tomstienstra.com. I'd known him for years but this was our first time sharing a boat.

Along with his very popular S.F. Chronicle Outdoors column twice a week, he hosts a radio show on KCBS on Saturdays, and a Sunday TV show called "The Great Outdoors with Tom Stienstra." He's authored over a dozen outdoors books, topped by California Camping, which have set sales records and won all sorts of awards.

Tom grinned through his broad beard when shortly I pulled in my second fish. Nonplussed, he looks at fishing as fun rather than competition. He soon got two fish himself, all the while regaling us with wonderful outdoor yarns. We could have caught more fish but prior commitments shortened our day. As we started to head



Tom Stienstra of the San Francisco Chronicle and Greg Niemann.

back, several shore fishermen recognized my partner and enthusiastically waved their "HiToms." I realized then he really is a legend.

Lake Almanor is up in sparsely-populated Plumas County where the dominant

Sierra Nevada massif yields to the Cascade Range whose volcanic peaks continue their seismic march all the way into Canada.

The southernmost Cascade mountain, Lassen Peak, was the last major U.S. erup-

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tion (1916) before Mt. St. Helens blew its top in 1980. Awarded national park status back that early cataclysmic year, today Lassen Volcanic National Park features one of the world's largest plug dome volcanoes in the world. It can be seen in the distance from Redding, some 40 miles west.

The park's Chief Interpreter Karen Haner gave several of us a comprehensive tour that began at the spanking new Visitors Center at the southwest entrance and the beginning of a 30-mile scenic drive through the park. The park also has over 150 miles of hiking trails, eight developed campgrounds, dozens of mountain lakes, and a vast backcountry wilderness.

What surprised me was the amount of hydrothermal activity that I always thought belonged exclusively to Yellowstone National Park. While not as large, Lassen's is the most comprehensive west of the Rockies.

A place called the Sulphur Works was our introduction, right off the highway. Smoking vents atop colorful mounds that looked like vanilla and strawberry ice cream served as a quick reminder of our still-active earth. In

fact, Karen showed us where the seismic activity claimed some of the sidewalk.

There are over a half dozen of these hydrothermal areas to see at Lassen, and we decided upon a three-mile round trip hike into the park's largest, called Bumpass Hell. Our hike was rewarded by an enchanting 16-acre area of bubbling mud pots, steaming fumaroles and boiling water pools. Wooden walkways, that shift and move through the years, are laid out over the delicate and possibly dangerous crust. Hiking back was a little more uphill than going in, but easily doable, and well worth it.



Interpretor Karen Haner at Lassen Peak.

Bumpass Hell was actually named after a cowboy, Kendall Vanhook Bumpass, who in the 1860s stumbled across the area and severely burned his leg when it broke through a thin crust above a mud pot. He described the area as "hell."

All four types of volcanoes are extant at Lassen, and the remnants, most notably Lassen Peak (10,457 feet) is the largest example of a plug dome volcano. Brokeoff Mountain (9,235) and others are remnants of the larger Mt. Tehama that grew to a large conical volcano before exploding some 600,000 to 400,000 years ago.

By comparison, this past century's series of blasts from 1914 to 1916 were small. Still, in May, 1915, one explosive eruption devastated nearby areas with avalanches, mud flows and hot ash and gas. Volcanic ash fell as far away as 200 miles to the east.

I also visited Drakesbad Guest Ranch, a rustic concession-run series of cabins, hot pools, horses, and relaxation on the eastern slopes, right where the Pacific Crest Trail crosses the park. Hiking and horse trails take adventurous visitors to other thermal locations, like Devils Kitchen and Boiling Springs Lake.

The Lassen-Chester-Lake Almanor area is a charmer, and I saw it as an enchanting hideaway, tucked away off the beaten path. With only nine people per square mile, Plumas County boasts four season recreation (They get a lot of snow), over

100 lakes, 1,000 miles of rivers and streams, and over a million acres of national forest. It's so remote, I even fished in the heart of Chester, the county's largest town, where the Feather River glides and ripples past the library parking lot. Animals abound in the area, and to avoid hitting deer on the highway I had to hit the brakes several times.

It was hard to believe that I was in California, the country's most populous state, one whose big numbers and superlatives in everything, from people to produce, to automobiles to economies, dwarf most countries. But there it is a gem of a backwoods region nestled away in the remote northeast corner of the state.

Along with Drakesbad (www.drakesbad.com) there are several nice places to stay. On the Almanor Peninsula, Bailey Creek www.baileycreek.com also offers golf, and the Knotty Pine Resort is a cozy lakeside retreat. The Dorado Inn www.doradoinn.com on the east shore offers a rewarding warm sunset over the lake.

There's plenty to do in the area and if you decide to go fishing, look closely at the other anglers. You too might recognize a fishing legend ☺

Greg Niemann, a long-time San Clemente Journal contributor, is the author of Baja Fever, Baja Legends, Palm Springs Legends, and Big Brown: The Untold Story of UPS. Visit www.gregniemann.com

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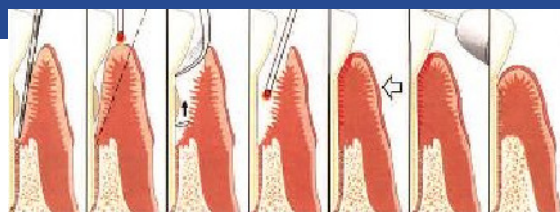
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