

PHOTO: VIRGINIA CITY VISITOR'S CENTER

Gold Dust and Wild Mustangs

By PAMELA BIERY

Running along the spine of California's Eastern Sierra Nevada, Highway 395 offers the Sierra's most breathtaking views. There is a reason Ansel Adams dedicated years of his career to photographing this region: From Big Pine to Bridgeport and the majestic Mono Lake, jagged peaks, chalk bluffs and high desert meadows rest below a sky full of movement and drama—even blue skies here may offer up a rare lenticular cloud. Sprinkled with Alpine lakes, natural hot springs and exceptional fishing streams, the Eastern Sierra remains abundantly wild and is a less traveled North-South route than California's coast.

Besides all this, with just a few turns, Highway 395 heads out into Nevada's high desert onto roads with blowing tumbleweed, wild mustangs and more than a few historical mining sites. Step back in time and visit Virginia City, only 23 miles from Reno, 15 miles from Carson City and 40 miles from Lake Tahoe—making it a short day trip from a number of fine stopping points.

Virginia City sits high above the Washoe Valley at 6,220 feet above sea level. While it's well worth the view to tow up, it's also worth considering setting up a base camp along Highway 395 or Highway 80 to allow for a stress-free climb to this historically significant hub. For perspective, the Ferrari Club of America hosts an annual hill climb that runs from Carson City to Virginia City via Highway 341 (a truck route). Before the truck route was constructed, cars would run up Highway 342 (Geiger Grade), past the Gold Hill Hotel and other landmarks. Highway 342 is now the return route for cars that have completed their runs up Highway 341. The original hill climb to Virginia City via Geiger Grade covers 5.2 miles (8.4 km), climbing 1,260 feet (380 m) and passing through 21 corners. While there are many turnouts, only the strong of heart should consider this route while towing a trailer—even a small Airstream. Expect gusty winds and extreme drop-offs by the road's shoulder.

There are excellent camping options along Highway 395, including the Comstock Country RV Resort, located at the intersection of Highway 50 West and Highway 395, just south of Carson City. Or set up camp where the action is, near Sparks and John Ascuaga's Nugget Rib Cook-off, at River's Edge Campground along the Truckee River.

If you want to get away from the crowds and into nature, choose Dayton State Park, off Highway 50, just outside of the historic town



PHOTO: PAMELA BIERY



PHOTO: SILVER STATE NEWS SERVICE

TOP: Downtown Virginia City is lined with original Gold Rush buildings. **MIDDLE:** Running along California's Eastern Sierra, Highway 395 provides some of California's most spectacular scenery. **BOTTOM:** Wild mustangs romp on the range.



PHOTO: VIRGINIA CITY VISITOR'S CENTER

Docents and actors, like these gunslingers, can be found ambling down C Street in high season.

of Dayton. Dayton State Park is located on U.S. 50, 12 miles east of Carson City. Trailers up to 34' are accommodated. The Carson River flows right through the park and offers fishing and bird watching. Plus, it is the site of the Rock Point Mill, built in 1861, which processed rich Virginia City silver ore. Outside of Dayton, Adolph Sutro's mining tunnel exits from under the earth below Virginia City.

Want a fab photo of your rig in Virginia City? Then take your time and follow signs up the Hwy 341 truck route as an easier option to Geiger Grade. The Virginia City RV Park awaits you and your silver bird at 335 F Street, Virginia City.

A route which mixes history, wild horses and Western adventure begins at the intersection of Highways 395 and 50. Leave your Airstream here and proceed trailer-less on Highway 341 into Virginia City. Explore to your heart's content, then head down scenic Geiger Grade, enjoying fantastic unobstructed views across the Washoe Valley. Continue on to Highway 80 and Sparks, Nevada. You'll find lots of people, casinos and entertainment in this outpost a few short miles from Reno.

Ready to see some open road? Head out to Highways 95 and 50 and circle back to Dayton State Park. Depending on the pace you like to travel, this outing could easily be divided into several days adventure. Consider allowing for a full day in Virginia City and another day to drive some back roads. The total loop as shown on the map is 126-miles.

It's just 16 miles between Virginia and Carson City, so it's worth considering exploring

both these Western treasure troves. In Carson City you can see where John Wayne's last movie, "The Shootist," was filmed at the Krebs-Petersen House at 500 North Mountain Street or check out where Orion Clemens,

Mark Twain's brother, lived at 502 North Division Street. There are abundant hiking, fishing and kayaking opportunities within easy distance of Highway 395 as well.

Walking the streets of Virginia City, expect the unexpected. Be forewarned: history lives here. Whether you happen upon a staged street brawl or wandering minstrel or choose to ride a steam train along the original V&T Line, it will not be a dry affair. At the end of the day, the Eastern Sierra's vast horizons and red sunsets fill the minds eye.

Virginia City History Primer

Virginia City National Landmark is one of the nation's largest historic districts. In 2009, the National Trust for Historic Preservation selected it as one of the "Dozen Distinctive Destinations." Generations of Americans think of Virginia City as the home to 1960s NBC's Bonanza series. Virginia City is an incredibly vital example of living history and a chance to rub elbows with the rugged West.

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Home to the famous Comstock Lode, the West's first industrial city began in the late 1850's with the discovery of gold at the head of Six-Mile Canyon in 1859 by miners Pat McLaughlin and Peter O'Reilly. Henry Comstock, a fellow miner who stumbled later upon their find, claimed it was on his property—all this reflects accurately on the spirit of the Wild West (they called it wild for a reason).

Banking the Lode

While miners labored arduously, real wealth was quickly accumulated by some of California's most notable citizens who were banking, building railroads and providing mercantile trade. Ralston and Crocker, founders of the Bank of California, made their money in Virginia City. Leland Stanford, George Hearst, John Mackay, William Flood and many others made significant fortunes in Comstock mining from 1860-1880. The mines of the Comstock Lode yielded more than \$400 million in gold and silver during its boon. These great riches funded the building of San Francisco, which is scattered with historic references and place names from Virginia City.

Opera, Brothels & Bucket of Blood Saloon

During its peak, Virginia City was a rowdy town with some 30,000 residents. Active mines ran 24 hours a day, as did the Red-Light District brothels and saloons. No stranger to the arts, Virginia City provided urbane entertainment, with both opera and playhouses.

One of the largest schools in the West, the Fourth Ward school, has been restored

and now houses an important museum. Many historic buildings still stand and in some instances retain their original function, such as the Bucket of Blood Saloon and Piper's Opera House.

Twain's Name a VC Legacy

Virginia City's somewhat isolated location has held development at bay, preserving a historic heyday in Nevada's high desert terrain. Some of its past bustle and boom are gone, but today it offers a glimpse backward, complete with creaky wooden floors, the dust of gold mines and a treasure trove of notable buildings within an easy stroll.

Walk through town, play a hand of cards, belly up for a cold beer or leaf through historic texts at the Mark Twain Bookstore. Yes, another of Virginia City's claims to fame is as the birthplace of the nom de plume Mark Twain. He came to Nevada and Virginia City in 1861 as Samuel Clemens, and left Virginia City in 1864 as Mark Twain. The building housing the Mark Twain Bookstore is one of the oldest buildings in Virginia City and houses one of the largest collections of Western historical texts and photographs.

Beyond the books, just look out to the street for living history in Virginia City. On a recent summer visit, women of the night strolled the street in costume, while rugged miners staged a street fight outside a bar. Self-guided walking tours highlight details on the Chollar Mine, The Fourth Ward School

and Museum, The Mackay Mansion, Marshall Mint Museum. Learn more while enjoying the high mountain air, restored buildings and friendly local characters that make this place their home.

Virginia & Truckee Railroad Still Steaming

The most famous of all American short line railroads is the Virginia and Truckee. As many as 45 trains a day arrived and departed Virginia City during the nineteenth century. Following the line's completion in 1869, trains hauled millions of dollars of gold and silver ore from the Virginia City's mines. Journey over the original Virginia & Truckee Railroad from Virginia City, through tunnel 4 to Gold Hill, Nevada on a 35-minute railroad jaunt. This trip includes a narrated history of the Comstock and spectacular high desert mountain scenery, while the train chuffs past the famous Comstock Bonanza mine ruins. ●●●

CALENDAR HIGHLIGHTS

Virginia City Fourth of July Spectacular July 4, 2010

Virginia City is a great place to be on the Fourth of July. Traditional and patriotic parade begins at noon. Boardwalks are filled with face painters, historical figures, clowns and free give-a-ways for the kids. The day ends at dusk with a spectacular fireworks display.

Comstock Music Festival at The Tahoe House Hotel, August 8, 2010

Musical concert at The Tahoe House Hotel, 162 South C Street. For more info call 775-847-5264.

Railfest • August 14-15, 2010

A train lover's extravaganza. Train Depot, F Street. For more info call 775-847-4386.

Virginia City Civil War Days September 4-6, 2010

The entire town comes alive with multiple Civil War Re-Enactments, living history, guests in costume, cannon and mining

demonstrations. Contact Virginia City Tourism at 775-847-4386.

Carson City (about 15 miles from Virginia City), Carson City Rendezvous June 11 - 13, 2010

Living history weekend. A salute to the Pony Express. Mountain man encampment, Native American dancing and crafts. Civil War Volunteers with skirmishes, stagecoach rides, Nevada Gunfighters show with the Reenactment Guild of America, arts and crafts, food court. Free western music on the star stage all weekend. Encampments open at noon. For details call 775-687-7410.

Reno/Sparks (about 30 miles from Virginia City), Best in the West Nugget Rib Cook-Off • September 1-6, 2010

The 22nd annual Best in the West Nugget Rib Cook-off will be in Victorian Square, downtown Sparks. See www.nuggettribcookoff.com

PHOTOS FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: The historic Gold Mill in Virginia City includes two original restored stamp mills from the 1850's Comstock Lode. • Dating back the Comstock, Virginia City's World Championship Outhouse Races pit teams of costumed outhouse racers against each other, as one person rides and the remaining team members manage to push, pull or drag the outhouse quickly down the track. • Take a historic ride along the V&T Railroad line. The Silver Line Express City Pass includes a 35 minute roundtrip train ride, 20 minute narrated trolley tour and different museums and national historical preservation buildings of note. • Each year hundreds of grill chefs face-off at John Ascuaga's Nugget Rib Cook-off during Labor Day holiday at Victorian Square in downtown Sparks. • Mono Lake Tufa State Nature Reserve. Spectacular "tufa towers," calcium-carbonate spires and knobs formed by interaction of freshwater springs and alkaline lake water rise out of eerie blue water.

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