

Napa Valley isn't just about wine – it's good for camping

By Kathryn Reed

CALISTOGA – Camping at Bothe-Napa Valley State Park almost had us forgetting about all the nearby vineyards.

This 2,000-acre park is quiet despite its proximity to Highway 29, the main artery through the Wine Country. Tucked into the hills, the vegetation – and tents – reminds us why we are here. It's our annual girls camping weekend.

We barely got a campsite last June. Such are the hazards of being in snow country; you can forget June is the heart of summer for most of California and that recreation sites fill up. In fact, campsites can be booked up to seven months in advance.

(We learned from last year and already have reservations for this year.)



Pam Valentine relaxes during the annual girls camping trip.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

But I'm not much of a camper – that's why I picked this particular park. I would prefer wine tasting and spa treatments as a girls' get-away. A little wine tasting with our camping made it my kind of roughing it.

Still, the park is magnificent with redwoods sprouting near Ritchey Creek. Douglas fir, tanoak and madrone make up most of the flora.

Although 10 miles of trail exist in the park, we didn't just stretch our legs there. We drove through the town of Calistoga, along the windy section of Highway 20 to Robert Louis Stevenson State Park.

The author used his diary from his days of honeymooning at the site to create "Silverado Squatters."

Parking is on both sides of the highway. The trail leads to the top of Mount St. Helena. Much of it is wide because it becomes a fire road. (Bikes are allowed on this section.)

It is one of those hikes to do early in the day because of the heat of the sun is baking. Shade is scarce.

Once at the top we realize it's really two peaks. We stop at the south peak – elevation 4,003 feet and 4.1 miles from the truck. The north peak – elevation 4,343 feet – is another 1.7 miles up the road.

From our perch we look down into the verdant Napa Valley. On clear days Mt. Diablo and Mt. Tamalpais are visible.

Back at the park we spend part of a day walking along the 1.2-mile History Trail that starts in the picnic area and ends at the historic Bale Grist Mill.

Along the dry, hot trail (bring water) is the site of the first church built in Napa County in 1853. Tombstones fill a cemetery. Oh, the stories that must be associated with them.

At the mill we are treated to a tour of what is still an actual working grist mill. It was built in 1846. Grain is ground into flour just like it was 150 years ago.

The end product is for sale. But the packages say “not for human consumption” because the site doesn’t meet 21st century health codes. Nonetheless, there are women buying up the various mixtures – saying this is their annual trip to do so.

We leave with pastry flour and a recipe for Bale Mill Pancakes. Bisquick could take some pointers from this mill.

The history of the area is worth a side trip next time you are in the Napa Valley – and certainly worth a camping trip away from the Sierra. This state park is on Highway 89 between St. Helena and Calistoga on west side.

More information about California State Parks is on the agency’s website. The camping page is [here](#).

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