



Highways 299 and 36 meander through the lush, rugged landscape of Trinity County, one of the least populated regions in the state.

If you're tired of staring out the window at Northern California's wet winter days, get out and immerse yourself in all of nature's airborne wetness and discover – or remind yourself of – the incredible things all that precipitation does for the natural environment. To do this you must get out of the city and away from large

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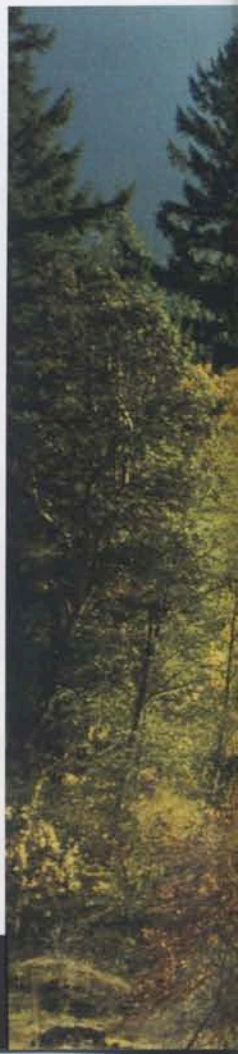
tracts of concrete. Get in your car and take a drive along the Trinity River on California State Highway 299 West.

Don't run away from bad weather. Embrace it – and bring plenty of Gore-Tex.

Traveling along river-flanked mountain roads like 299 during the spring, summer and fall is, arguably, the best time to experience the restorative power of such landscapes. Lots of blooming and leaf-changing colors, long days, warm temperatures and clear skies invite us into the trees, mountains, lakes and rivers to do all kinds of fun things, burn lots of calories, and get in touch with nature in relatively comfortable conditions.

But during the winter, when most of the rain comes down, even fairly obsessive outdoor types either head to the snow or get back in touch with their urban selves (if they're not lucky enough to live outside the city), at least until the

Story and photographs by Robert McMichael



weather mellows a bit. Few people deliberately head into the rain for recreation, which is a good reason to go when the sky – and possibly your spirit – is falling.

Getting away from crowds is just one perk of a trip along 299 during the winter wet months; others include no mosquitoes, lower prices, and the romantic rhythm of raindrops and windshield wipers. The real benefit, though, is that you will become convinced that winter rain in this terrain is not depressing but multipliciously amazing. Seeing the Trinity River corridor in the winter, the region's rainiest season, averaging nine inches of rain a month in December and January (50 to 70 inches annually), explains why it looks so lush all year.

Besides, by paying some quality attention to the much-maligned and neglected season of winter, you'll increase your karmic capital for the other seasons. And if the sun does break through, as it will in the gaps and seams of clouds, the quality of that low-angled winter light on rain-soaked surroundings backed by dark gray skies and myriad shades of deep green should be enough to bring you back next year.

Meandering northeast for about 130 miles from Redding (at I-5) to Arcata (at U.S. 101), 299 West traverses some of California's most diverse, aesthetically pleasing, and unpopulated land. On its way from the Central Valley's oak woodlands, across the southern extension of the Klamath mountain range, to the giant redwood groves of the Coast Range, the newly re-paved, two-lane highway winds through three National Recreation Areas (Whiskeytown, Shasta, and Trinity, administered by the National Park Service); three National Forests (Shasta, Trinity, and Six Rivers); the state's second-largest designated wilderness area (Trinity Alps Wilderness); four "wild and scenic" rivers (north and south forks and mainstem

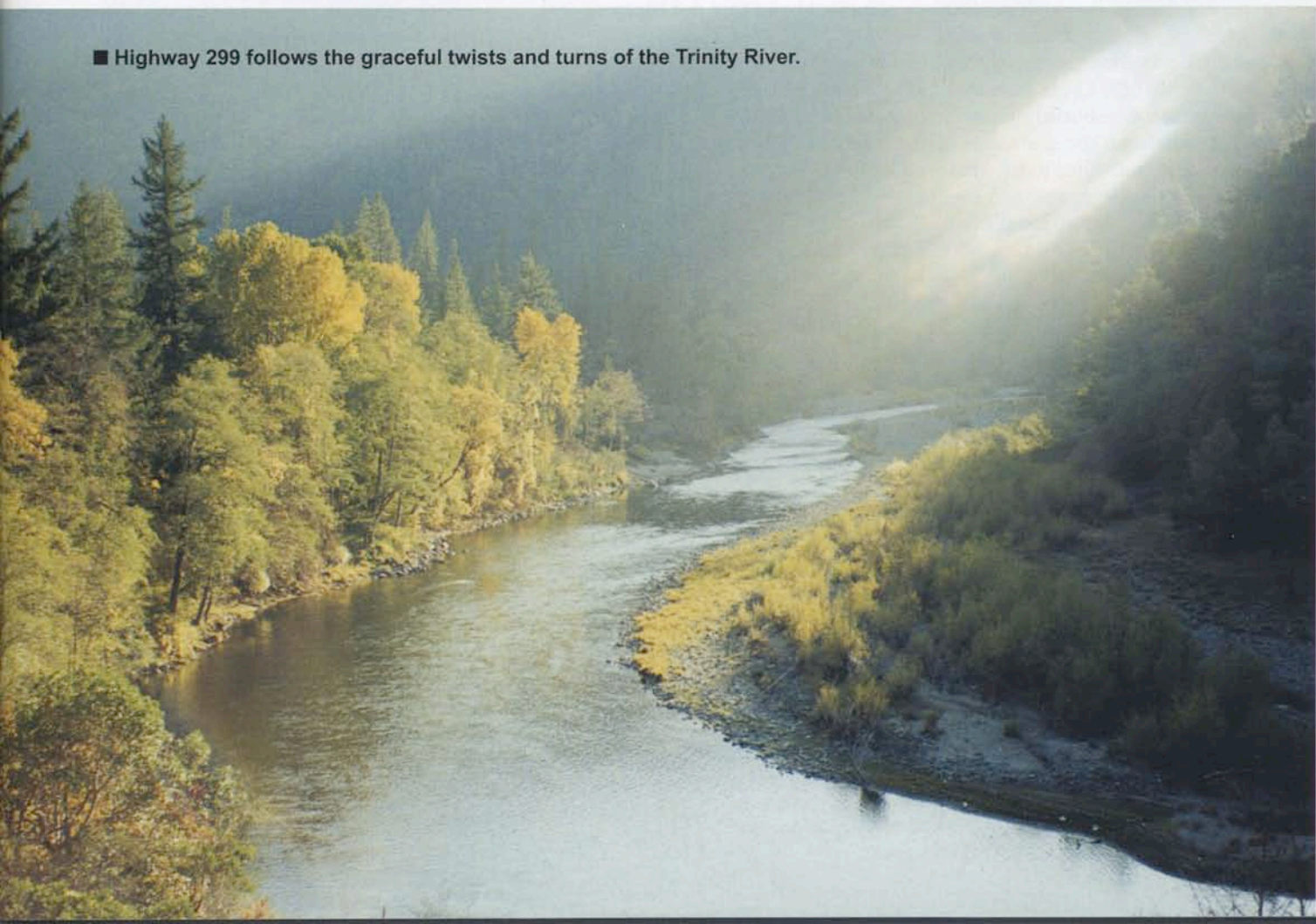
of the Trinity, and New River); and the largest Native American reservation in California (Hoopa, just north of 299 on Highway 96). Along the way it reveals a complex series of intertwined natural and human histories, including a decades-long water politics saga whose permanent resolution may be imminent (more on that later).

Without stopping, the drive on 299 from Redding to Arcata takes about three hours, longer if the road is icy (299 twists and turns like a pretzel in places, so be careful). In any case, it's an easy day trip. But the variety of stuff to look at and experience along the route should encourage you to take it slowly. If you like to walk, have decent rain gear, and don't mind a little mud, you can find some great hikes all along the 299 scenic byway. If you own DeLorme's Northern California Atlas & Gazetteer, an essential companion to outdoor exploration, you'll see established trails all over the place.

At Gray's Falls or Burnt Ranch Falls on the lower river, you can walk to the thunderous waterfalls and possibly catch a glimpse of steelhead laboring up the rapids. A wonderful day hike into the Trinity Alps Wilderness leaves off of Canyon Creek Road at Junction City, about a 12-mile drive north on a fairly rough road, with a state campground near the end. If you don't have a four-wheel-drive vehicle, check on road conditions with the Weaverville Ranger Station, (530) 623-2121.

Three miles up the Canyon Creek trail you'll see the first of a spectacular series of waterfalls. Trinity Alps, established 20 years after the Wilderness Act of 1964, was a late addition to the federal wilderness system because of its timber value. Its 517,000 acres provide habitat for over 400 species of birds, mammals, reptiles and fish, and its elevation range from 1,300 to 9,000 feet makes homes

■ Highway 299 follows the graceful twists and turns of the Trinity River.



for an equally diverse range of coniferous and hardwood forests.

Consult with ranger stations along the route for other hikes and camping opportunities. Some of the campgrounds close for the season in October. Also check out riverside hikes along the Trinity near Big Bar and Hawkins Bar, as well as smaller roads along the river such as Steiner Flat Road at Douglas City and Dredger Camp Road at Junction City. There are a number of state and Forest Service campgrounds along the way at Helena, Big Bar, Del Loma, and Burnt Ranch. If you'd rather sleep indoors, Willow Creek – about 40 miles east of 101 – offers the widest selection of motels and bed and breakfasts on 299, and Arcata and Eureka have even more, as well as Redding at the other end.

Highway 299 also holds one of California's many interesting mining histories. Between about 1850 and 1880, Shasta, located just a few miles west of Redding, was the main supply depot for gold miners in Northern California and Southern Oregon. Weaverville, about 40 miles west of Shasta, was founded in 1850 by miners, and boasts some of the oldest continually used buildings in California. Its Joss House, rebuilt in 1873 after a fire, was a Taoist temple – legacy to the Chinese laborers in California's gold rush – and is now preserved as a State Historic Park. A few miles to the east you'll see the La Grange mine, marked by a huge "monitor" nozzle used to wash away mountainsides in the quest for shiny metal. Huge rock and dirt tailings from this hydraulic mining line the riverbanks for several miles in this area. In 1890, at China Slide, a little more than halfway along 299, several Chinese miners were buried alive in their cabin at Burnt Gorge when the mountain on the south side of the road collapsed on them. The slide is still visible today. Some still mine around here, but mostly by suction dredging, an in-river process managed by the Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service.

Logging replaced mining as the area's major economic activity in the early 20th century. Watch out for huge trucks hauling redwood and Douglas fir westward to mills on the coast. Fortunately, the National Forest Service has altered its clear-cut policy of earlier years, but its legacy remains a visible scar across much of the forests here, as well as around the rest of the Pacific Northwest, and its timber policies still inspire heated debate and controversy. The steep, rocky terrain on the north side of the Trinity, however, has naturally protected much of that land from the visible effects of logging.

Tourism drives the economy along the Trinity Scenic Byway, although the rainy winter weather slows things down a bit, and some places close. Still, lots of off-the-wall, out-of-the-way shops, cafes, and other curiosities await discovery as you head toward the coast.

In Willow Creek, where you can pick up maps and brochures about the area from the Chamber of Commerce, learn about the Oh Mah Bigfoot legend, which dates back over a thousand years to the Native Americans living along the Klamath River near Bluff Creek. An annex to the Willow Creek-China Flat Museum is being built to house the collection of the late Bigfoot researcher Bob Titmus'

collection of prints, films and other "evidence." You decide.

For more down-to-earth cultural edification, visit the Hoopa Tribal Museum (530-625-4110) on Highway 96, just a few miles north of 299, if you're interested in the Native American history of the area, including Hoopa Valley, Yurok, and Karuk basketry, ceremonial regalia, and redwood dugout canoes. Also check out the Blue Lake Museum – a former train station – for history of the Arcata area.

Specifically winter recreational activities include dogsled tours and cross-country skiing at the Horse Mountain Winter Sports Area in Six Rivers National Forest (22 miles east of Eureka on 299, then south on Titlow Hill Road). If you really want to escape, take tiny Highway 3 south from 299 at Douglas City and drive about 20 miles toward Hayfork, where you can head into an extensive network of lightly used, unpaved roads in the Indian Valley/Butter Creek area, which provides miles of good cross-country skiing (and hiking and mountain biking in the summer). Information on roads and trails in this area are available from the USDA/USFS map of Shasta-Trinity National Forests; USGS topographical maps of Hayfork, Halfway Ridge, and Hyampom; and from the Shasta-Trinity National Forest, Hayfork Ranger District at (530) 628-5227.

The major outdoor activity in the Trinity corridor, though, no matter the season, is fishing. The Trinity River and its tributaries are home to rainbow trout, resident and sea-run brown trout, a few cutthroats, and dwindling runs of summer and winter steelhead, fall Coho, and spring and fall Chinook salmon.

Originating high in the alpine lakes of the Trinity Alps Wilderness, the Trinity flows southeast until the dam at Trinity Lake. From there it flows as a relatively placid and pooled river for nearly 40 miles before steepening and increasing its pace and volume from additional tributary water beginning near Dutch Creek, slowing again below Big Flat Canyon, thundering down cascades at Burnt Ranch and Gray's Falls, and widening finally as it heads north through the Hoopa Valley, ultimately joining the Klamath at Weitchpec before its water enters the Pacific Ocean.

The salmon, steelhead, and sea-run browns that make the journey up the Trinity travel nearly 120 miles upstream, leaping over many daunting waterfalls on their journey. Catching one of these anadromous fish (species born in fresh water that live most of their lives in the ocean before spawning in their natal streams; salmon make this cycle once, but steelhead and the sea-run browns can repeat spawn) is a life-changing event when you consider the odds they beat to make it to their spawning grounds in the upper Trinity. It's even more incredible that these fish still make the journey at all when you consider the destructive impact of hydroelectric dams and agricultural water diversion on these populations and their habitats.

For fishing reports, guiding, and tackle on the upper reaches of the Trinity, contact the Trinity Fly Shop in historic Lewiston (530-623-6757; <http://www.trinityflyshop.com>). For the lower



■ Bigfoot carvings are among the many curiosities to be found in the eclectic shops that dot Highway 299.



■ Highway 36 is even more remote than 299, but offers numerous recreation opportunities. For example, visitors can camp along the Van Duzen River.

reaches near Willow Creek, check out the reliable report at www.willowcreekchamber.com/fishing.

Return Loop on Highway 36

More gorgeous scenery and thrilling roads await the traveler returning to or from the Central Valley (depending on where you began your trip). Highway 36 is less developed, with far fewer businesses than 299. Make sure you have plenty of gas before embarking – you'll find little or none on this 130-mile road. But it features many exquisite landscapes and recreational opportunities, such as the lush Grizzly Creek Redwoods State Park, with a nice campground along the lovely Van Duzen River.

At the top of South Fork Mountain Summit (4,077 feet), stop and read the excellent interpretive guide for the Lassics Mountain Range, which includes South Fork Mountain, the longest continuous mountain range in the continental U.S. at 46 miles long.

You'll drive along the Mad River for a while, pass by the densely forested hamlet of Forest Glen and wind your way eastward up and down narrow roads until descending again through transitional forest into oak woodland and chaparral as you approach Red Bluff at I-5.

Make sure you check road conditions before setting out on 36, which is not plowed during snow storms. Also watch out for the enormous cones of the gray pine – some nearly a foot long – along both 299 and 36; they'll puncture your tires.

Trinity River Water Politics

Anyone even slightly familiar with California can probably tell you that water in the Golden State is about a lot more than H₂O. The Trinity River weaves yet another tale of bitter struggle over the natural resource that serves as California's life-blood. Designated a "wild and scenic" river by Congress in 1981, the Trinity enjoys a well-deserved reputation as one of the nation's most beautiful aquatic arteries. But in 1963, the Bureau of Reclamation dammed the Trinity, immediately diverting about 90 percent of the river's flow into the Central Valley, primarily for subsidized agricultural irrigation there and in the San Joaquin Valley.

The dam and diversion permanently cut off anadromous salmon and steelhead from the Trinity above what became Clair Engle Lake, named after the congressman who put together the deal to divert water from the river, violating the 1955 Trinity River Act and federal trust obligations to the Hoopa and Yurok tribes. The Trinity and Lewiston (just downstream of Trinity) dams drastically reduced the water flow, increased sediment deposits from land use activities

above the dams, and elevated water temperatures in the remaining 120 miles of mainstem water, severely damaging crucial spawning and holding habitat for all of the river's fish.

Trout and salmon populations in the river declined immediately after dam construction, some by 90 percent. Trinity Coho salmon now are listed under the Environmental Protection Act as "threatened," and steelhead and fall Chinook salmon are candidates for listing because of continually shrinking numbers. Advocates for the river, which include scientists, local merchants, sport and commercial fishers, the Hoopa Valley, Yurok, Klamath, and Karuk tribes, and other concerned citizens from around the nation, have pressured and lobbied congress to restore the flow out of Trinity dam to levels that will improve the habitat and increase the populations of resident and anadromous fish. To date, these efforts have been only marginally successful.

As if this fish story weren't enough, the diverted Trinity water, amounting to over a million acre-feet per year to the San Joaquin and Central Valleys, is the source of other sad stories. One concerns the ill-fated Kesterson National Wildlife Refuge near Los Banos, which was supposed to be a sanctuary for migrating birds in the Pacific Flyway. From the early 1970s until 1986, toxic drainage from irrigated fields soaked the refuge with saline, selenium, and other contaminants that killed many of the migratory waterfowl, which turned the original Kesterson refuge site into a reservoir requiring extensive and expensive environmental clean-up. Another unaffected section of the area is now called the Kesterson Unit of the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge.

Farther west, ponds on private lands are still being used to store contaminated water from irrigated runoff, some of which enters the San Joaquin River, and then moves into the San Francisco Bay Delta via the San Joaquin Drain, contaminating the water supply of one-third of California's population and mangling migrating anadromous fish and other species in its giant pumps. As summarized in Trinity County's testimony to the State Water Resources Control Board for the Bay-Delta Water Rights Hearing on July 13, 1998, "Damming the Trinity River and permitting the diversion of the majority of the Trinity River's flows ... created two major environmental catastrophes – impairment of the Trinity River's health and anadromous fishery, and degradation of water quality and fisheries in the Sacramento-San Joaquin rivers and Delta ecosystem in order to deliver CVP (Central Valley Project) water to farms on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley." And all of this mess comes from taxpayer subsidized, incredibly cheap water for inefficient and sloppy commercial agriculture. Unfortunately, this Trinity tale is far from unique.

Fortunately, there are enough concerned groups of people working to rectify this situation and increase flows in the Trinity, as well as retire the toxic holding ponds and contaminated fields, which would also aid in cleaning up and protecting the Sacramento Delta and the San Francisco Bay. After 13 years of data collection and analysis, final drafts of an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), as well as a Trinity River Flow Evaluation Report, are now undergoing the required 60-day review by the public and will soon be examined by Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, who will read the reports and public comments on the issue and decide whether to increase the river flow.

To review the EIS/EIR and flow report, you can access them online through the Friends of the Trinity River Web site at www.fotr.org. This site provides an extensive history of the Trinity River and its water politics.



■ Salmon and steelhead make annual runs up the Trinity River, although the effects of dam construction in the 1950s has drastically reduced their numbers.