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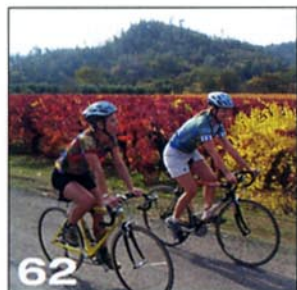
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GREEN GA

HOW NORTH BAY BUSINESSES AND VISITORS ARE FINDING FUN AND OPPORTUNITY IN LOCAL ECO-TOURISM.

By *Patricia Dines*

Amid the long, bright, sunny days of summer, even the most ardent workaholics will longingly glance out the window and feel tugged to go out to play. From this simple urge, we create everything from day trips to weekend getaways to family vacations, with themes as broad as human curiosity.

Standing ready to serve these adventures is the tourism industry, which today remains one of the mainstays of the Bay Area's economy. Not surprisingly, folks in this field are increasingly touting their green features, with North Bay offerings that range from organic wineries to eco-hotels to river kayaking to ziplining through redwood forests. Even locals can enjoy these eco-activities, thus trimming both their travel costs and eco-impacts. No, you don't have to jet to an exotic isle to be an eco-tourist.

GETAWAYS



Sonoma Canopy Tours offers ziplining through the redwoods. [Photo by Emily Blake]

Of course, as with any marketing, it's vital to look beneath green claims to understand their specific benefits to the earth. (For more about this, see "What Is Eco-tourism?" on this page and "True Green," Aug. 2010.) Still, those who provide authentic eco-travel options are doing more than discovering business opportunities and saving money; they're also helping preserve our area's natural beauty, create a healthier world, pioneer green solutions and even protect local tourism's future economic well-being.

The North Bay as eco-destination

Rick Coates, executive director of Cazadero's nonprofit Forest Unlimited, is passionate on this subject. He sees the North Bay as "well positioned to become an eco-tourist mecca," with attractive features that include "oceans, redwoods, Wine Country, estuaries, bays and rivers, parks, a great deal of open space, bicycle trails, tremendous historical and cultural resources, and the SMART train under development that will bring tourists from the Bay Area.

"Basically," he declares, "we have it all."

This vision led Coates to help create EcoRing (www.ecoring.org), a Guerneville-based nonprofit collaboration between businesses and environmental, Native American, health, history, trail, transportation, rail and farm groups, that seeks to "ignite a vibrant eco-tourism community" throughout the North Bay. Coates served as its founding president after its 2006 launch and is now its executive director. One of the organization's goals is to promote its member green businesses, which are listed on the EcoRing website. A paper map and smartphone app are in development to assist ecotourists in planning and



Toni Tacoma is president of EcoRing.
[Photo by Catherine Barry]



Rick Coates, executive director of Cazadero's Forest Unlimited and co-creator of EcoRing in Guerneville, educates children along the Sonoma Coast near Jenner as part of his eco-tourism efforts.
[Photo by Catherine Barry]

enjoying their visits.

EcoRing's current president, Toni Tacoma, also helped create the organization when she was president of the Russian River Chamber of Commerce. She says EcoRing was born from a desire to encourage economic development in this area "without spoiling things by bringing in big hotels and big industry." She adds, "We see this area as one of the most beautiful anywhere, and we wanted people to come here and enjoy it for what it is." Tacoma remembers coming to Sonoma County 15 years ago, after having lived in beautiful but over-developed Caribbean tourist areas,

and being "just blown away by the beauty here and inspired by the fact that environmental organizations had done so much to save this area."

Coates emphasizes that fulfilling this region's eco-tourism potential will require developing additional infrastructure (pedestrian, bicycle and equestrian pathways), creating better "low-carbon" transportation options, to let folks visit Sonoma County without generating greenhouse gases. He advises, "With global warming, it's really a case now of all hands on deck to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Natives and tourists alike have to get serious about this."

WHAT IS ECO-TOURISM?

While people's definitions vary, eco-tourism or green travel usually offers travelers the opportunity to:

- *Connect with nature (and support organizations that protect it);*
- *Minimize the eco-impact of their travel activities (and support companies doing the same); and/or*
- *Learn about and serve larger eco-visions and goals (and support the groups promoting them).*

“This is about planning for the future to make sure we have a vibrant tourist economy 10, 20, even 50 years from now.”

—Rick Coates

He supports alternative transportation such as the SMART train and increased trails for bikes, horses and hiking. He's also exploring the creation of a single trail along the North Pacific Coast Railroad right-of-way, from Sausalito to the Russian River. He encourages people “to turn ‘getting here’ into part of the vacation, putting the focus on the journey, not just the destination.”

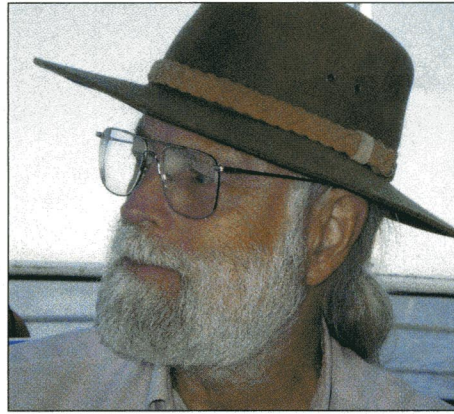
To draw attention to these possibilities, EcoRing is now offering multi-day EcoOdyssey tours in the North Bay. During these journeys, held several times per year, participants travel using various transportation modes, including bikes, kayaks, horseback, ferry, electric cars and bikes, railroad speeder cars, even a zeppelin. Along the way, they visit eco-operations, hear talks by local nonprofits and historians, enjoy scenic vistas, savor local food and wine, relax to local musicians and rest in eco-lodging at day's end. Coates hopes these educational adventures will inspire folks to help strengthen local eco-tourism. Tacoma muses, “I didn't realize, until Rick took me on this journey, the absolutely beautiful places here [that are hidden from our everyday view].”

Coates believes improving local low-carbon transportation infrastructure is also vital not just for survival of our tourism industry, but also for our economy in general. As we go to press, concern is rising over gas prices above \$4 per gallon, but Coates expects these costs to continue trending upward, as instability in the Middle East continues and oil becomes increasingly difficult to extract and demand in emerging markets rises. He says, “I wouldn't be surprised to see \$10 per gallon in the next four to five years. If we remain dependent upon fossil fuels for our tourism, our tourism will disappear. People won't be able to afford to fly to this area, drive here or rent a car. So this is about planning for the future as well, to make sure we have a vibrant tourist economy 10, 20, even 50 years from now.”

Supporting today's eco-tourism

A key way to encourage local eco-travel is by enjoying and supporting today's green offerings. For instance, even mainstream hotels are often giving guests the option to skip daily linen changes, thus saving water and energy (and trimming hotel expenses).

However, some hotels go far beyond that. Take, for instance, Novato's family-



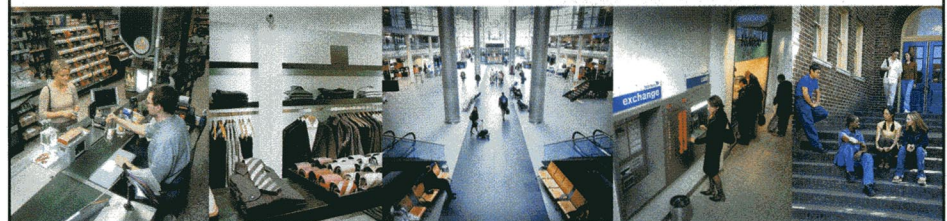
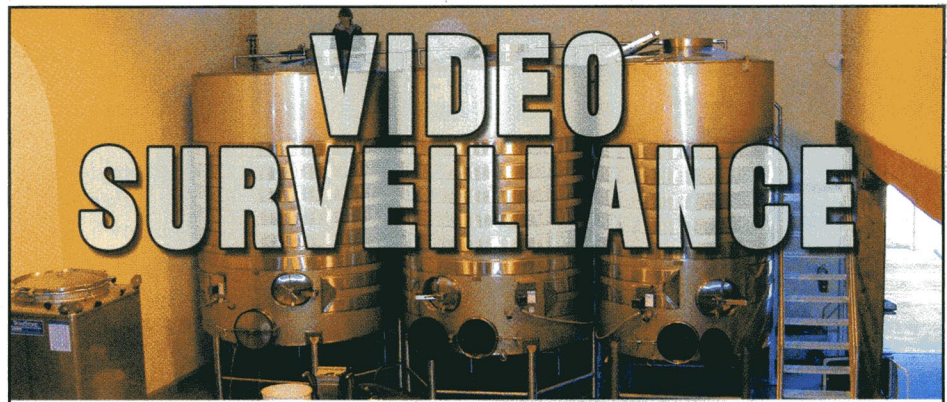
Rick Coates (Photo by Catherine Barry)

owned Inn Marin (www.innmarin.com), which in 2009 was the first property certified at the leadership level under California's new Green Hotel Certification program. This 68-room inn offers amenities such as 250-thread count sheets, a five-acre garden, cable TV, Wi-Fi, and more. The staff also cleans rooms with eco-friendly, botanically based products; avoids bleach and trims energy and water use by laundering with botanical extracts; conserves water

with low-flow faucets, toilets and showers; saves energy with CFL bulbs; reduces waste with wall-mounted shampoo dispensers; uses 100 percent recycled paper towels and toilet paper; recycles glass bottles, paper and more; offers recycling bins in rooms and elsewhere onsite; pours organic, shade-grown coffee; and offers water at meetings in ceramic multi-gallon containers rather than individual plastic bottles. It's just opened a charging station to serve guests who drive electric vehicles (EVs) to lower their eco-footprints and gas bills.

Inn proprietor Robert Marshall reflects, “Being a green company isn't just about recycling, it's...always looking for what you can do to be a greener operation and decrease your impact on the environment. It's a conscientious way of thinking and doing business for both the short- and long-term.”

Another local, eco-committed hotel is the DoubleTree Napa Valley Hotel & Spa (www.napavalleyamericancanyon.doubletree.com). Originally called the Gaia Napa Valley Hotel & Spa, it opened in 2006 as the



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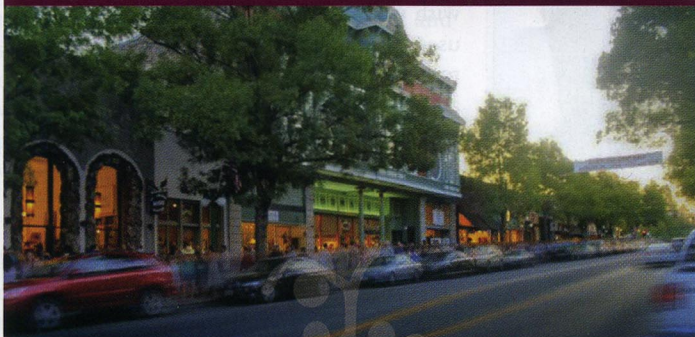
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Forestville's Case Ranch Inn B&B



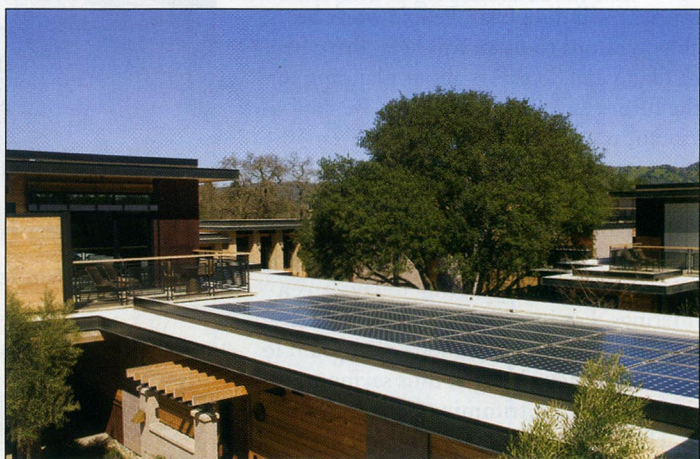
world's first LEED Gold certified hotel because of developer Wen Chang's desire to build in "harmony with nature" (See

"The Butterfly Effect," March 2007). Its buildings were constructed using FSC-certified wood, low-VOC paints and sealants to improve air quality, carpets from post-consumer recycled content, low-flow toilets and showers, Solatube skylights to bring in sunlight and reduce energy use, and a reflective cool roof to trim cooling costs.

This "comfortable contemporary lodging" also provides bulk soap and shower dispensers to avoid packaging waste; uses only recycled paper products and eco-friendly cleaning materials; offers recycling bins in rooms and elsewhere; landscapes without toxic chemicals; and educates guests about the resulting savings in water, electricity, CO₂ emissions and more. The hotel recently joined the DoubleTree chain, where it'll serve as a model for the greening being done across that organization.

Also leading in local green lodging is Yountville's Bardessono Hotel (www.bardessono.com), which in 2010 became LEED Platinum certified, one of only three such hotels in the world (See "Hometown Luxury," March 2009). At this site, more than 93 percent of construction waste was recycled, all visible wood was milled from salvaged trees, low-flow fixtures and LEDs reduce resource use, solar and geothermal sources help provide power, and all kitchen and garden waste is composted.

Developer Phil Sherburne says, "I believe it's critical for the development community to be a leader in the effort to preserve a



The Bardessono Hotel in Yountville became LEED Platinum certified in 2010.

healthy planet. We can't just continue to talk about environmental problems; we have to act."

Another prime example is the h2hotel in Healdsburg (www.h2hotel.com), which was recently voted Best Hotel for Business Guests in the *NorthBay biz* Best Of the North Bay 2011 readers poll.

Even small hotels can join in reducing tourism's eco-impacts. Forestville's family-owned Case Ranch Inn B&B (www.caseranchinn.com) offers guests "a peaceful respite to relax" in a historic 1894 landmark Victorian farmhouse that features a wraparound sitting porch, registered National Wildlife Federation Backyard Wildlife Habitat, lush gardens and Wi-Fi.

It's also the first and only B&B certified by Sonoma County's Green Business Program. According to the Business Environmental Alliance's November 2010 newsletter, this greening process reduced water, waste and energy costs for owners Diana Van Ry and Allan Tilton, while adding value to their marketing and operations. The site's solar system generates 40 percent of energy needs, guests savor meals featuring organic vegetables and fruits grown onsite, all food waste is composted for the gardens, cleaning supplies and laundry soaps are eco-friendly, water is served in re-



Santa Rosa's Getaway Adventures offers bike and kayak trips.

usable glasses instead of disposable bottles, rooms feature recycling bins with signs encouraging participation, and there's even an onsite EV charging station.

Eco-hotels such as these are showing both the industry and customers what

greener travel can mean. (Also see "Local Eco-play Ideas," page 69.)

A call to adventure

Travelers seeking eco-adventure can find that here also, for instance, by spending a

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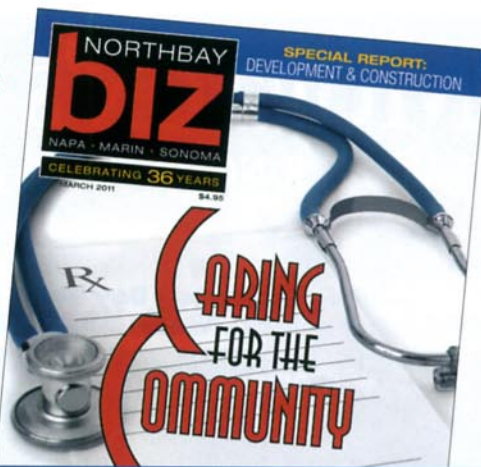
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day ziplining high in Occidental's redwood forests with Alliance Redwoods' Sonoma Canopy Tours (SCT; www.sonomacanopytours.com). This activity was launched in 2010 after business manager Bruce Wohlert and his wife visited Puerto Vallarta and couldn't get a spot on its tropical rainforest canopy tours. Seeing their popularity, Wohlert thought, "Wouldn't it be awesome to bring canopy tours to the coastal redwood forest?" By taking advantage of decades of experience teaching environmental education and operating zip lines at Alliance Redwoods, he says, SCT's tours offer both an adrenaline rush and time to rest and enjoy nature amidst panoramic views. Along the way, guides educate guests about the uniqueness of the coastal redwood ecosystem.

This region is also becoming a destination for bicycling events. One of special eco-interest is the annual Tour d'Organics in August (www.tourdorganics.organicathlete.org), an organized bike ride winding through west Sonoma County's countryside with rest stops at local organic farms and a post-ride vegan meal. Unlike other such rides, all the food is fresh, local and vegan, to show that these choices support a healthy athletic lifestyle.

Folks can also connect with Santa Rosa's Getaway Adventures (www.getawayadven-

LOCAL ECO-PLAY IDEAS

Folks wanting to enjoy local tourism with a green twist have a variety of options; for instance, you can:

Tour organic and biodynamic wineries to have a fun adventure, discover wines you like and support local eco-farmers. Some local options are Glen Ellen's Benziger Family Winery (www.benziger.com) and Coturri Winery (www.coturriwinery.com); Healdsburg's Quivira Vineyards & Winery (www.quivirawine.com); Rutherford's Grgich Hills Estate (www.grgich.com) and Frog's Leap Winery (www.frogslap.com), which is also solar-powered; St. Helena's Ehlers Estate (www.ehlersestate.com) and Napa's Robert Sinskey Vineyards (www.robertsinskey.com), which is 75 percent solar-powered. Travelers can find more winery options by typing "organic wines Napa Sonoma" into a search engine.

Savor local, organic foods to avoid harmful toxics and reduce the eco-impacts of food transportation. You can choose restaurants with a strong organic commitment, pick up snacks at natural foods stores, explore farmers' markets and visit organic farms.

Enjoy eco-educational tours. Take an organic farm tour, for instance, with Marin Organic, which works to preserve local earth-friendly farming (see www.marinorganic.org/p_tours.php). Also, Petaluma's Daily Acts (www.dailyacts.org) offers a wide range of educational tours and workshops.

Visit local parks and natural areas to get exercise, drink in nature's beauty and wisdom, and nurture that passion in your children. You can find local park information online. Also support parks through groups such as Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods (www.stewardsofthecoastandredwoods.org).

Explore specialty eco-activities to match your interests. For instance, children can play at Sausalito's Bay Area Discovery Museum (www.baykidsmuseum.org). Or retreat to the Green Gulch Zen Buddhist Center (www.sfzc.org/ggf) near Muir Beach, with its certified organic farm, public trails, meditation sessions and guest lodging for overnight stays. You can even save money on eco-friendly products and services with the Green Zebra Marin coupon book (www.thegreenzebra.org/marin).

Wherever you go, choose less-polluting transportation. Look for opportunities to walk, ride a bike, take a ferry or let the bus drive you and your clan to the city or the beach. You can rent bikes from various vendors, including Napa's Change of Greenery Electric Bicycle Rentals (www.changeofgreenery.com). If you're renting a car, consider a hybrid or electric option, which lets you to save gas, impress friends and explore future purchase options. You can rent a Toyota Prius from dealers (www.toyota.com/rental), and some car rental agencies offer eco-car options, usually from major airports such as San Francisco and with advance reservations (see www.healthyworld.org/EcoTourismLinks.html).



Left and above: Venture high in the trees with Sonoma Canopy Tours. (Photos by Emily Blake)

tures.com), which offers bike and kayak trips to Napa and Sonoma County wineries, farms and natural areas. Owner Randy Johnson started the business 20 years ago after a visiting uncle wanted a winery tour and suggested they go by bike, Johnson's preferred recreation. As other folks heard about their day and asked to do something similar, this unexpected business emerged.

Johnson sees Getaway Adventures as beneficial to the earth because it "gets people into an alternative form of transportation besides the car, interacting with nature and wildlife, and treading lightly" on the planet. He feels that more and more businesspeople are seeking to be "enlightened capitalists," moving beyond the standard model where "everybody's just out to get for themselves" to one where everybody gets something out of the deal.

He feels the question we face is, "How do we actually become better citizens of the planet, both on the environmental and the social side? Because ultimately, that's what true sustainability is, to have a long-term vision and positive relationships with people and the earth." ■

Patricia Dines is the author of a wide variety of helpful books, newsletters and articles on environmental and community topics, including her Ask EcoGirl column. For more information, see www.patriciadines.info.



Randy Johnson is owner of Getaway Adventures.

Please email comments to editor@northbaybiz.com