



GUARDIAN PHOTO BY JOSH WILSON

**Holiday road:** A trip up to Ferndale gives you a chance to check out northern California's geography.

San Francisco Bay Guardian ■ March 19, 1997

# The wild shore

*Ferndale is the starting point for explorations into California's north coast.* **By Josh Wilson**

**I**F YOU RARELY venture past Wine Country and Point Reyes, here's a clue: Get yourself up to that stretch of geography between the outflow of the Mattole River and Humboldt Bay. On a map it's just a tiny smidge of terrain, but up close whole worlds await.

Take Highway 1 up the coast for a long, slow tour amid epic panoramas. The alternate route, up 101, takes no more than four or five hours and reveals how the landscape evolves north of San Francisco: low coastal mountains give way to broad, flat valleys and rolling hills dotted with grapevines, before the topography bunches up again into amazingly convoluted ridges, gorges, and miniature alpine ranges. It's a transitional climate zone; the low shrubbery and dry grasses of the semiarid interior and mild Bay Area share space with big, burly evergreens native to the cold, foggy, rainier north coast—the first hints of the wild, woolly Pacific Northwest

particular note is the Gingerbread Mansion (400 Berding, 707-786-4000), an ornate orange-and-oven-brown B&B. The central strip, Main Street, is full of local kids tooling around on banana-seat bikes and goofing off. It's a user-friendly avenue: none of the cars or pickups top 25 miles per hour; old-timers move with measured steps and lounge on sidewalk benches. Many wind up at Becker's Pool and Cafe (409 Main), a roomy joint with a long bar and not much smoke. Right next door is Ferndale Books, a high-ceilinged barn of a storefront, with books lining tall shelves, stacked on tables, and piled up in the back. Titles include much regional literature and plenty of the necessary eclectic.

Main Street features five blocks of galleries, jewelry stores, stained-glass vendors, a few old-timey ice cream and candy parlors, and lots of arts and crafts boutiques. Of these, may we bring to your attention Gep-

homemade human-powered vehicles. All are quite preposterous (a giant high-heeled shoe with big Mick Jagger lips, for instance). Each Memorial Day, enthusiasts race from Arcata to Ferndale, where the sport was invented in 1969.

Head west on Main and take a left at Ocean to check out the cool, kinda creepy cemetery that runs up a grassy slope to the edge of a forest. It's all big headstones and mausoleums, including what appear to be Key West-style above-ground single-occupant coffin-size crypts. Weird, fun, photogenic.

You can also take an affordable boat tour of the Eel River delta and the otherwise inaccessible river channels and salt marshes (Camp Weott Guide Service, 707-786-4187). Watch for 150 bird species, as well as river otters, bobcats, and porcupines. If that ain't enough, the Humboldt Bay National Wildlife Refuge, maybe a dozen miles north, has two nature trails through 2,200 acres of seasonal wetlands, salt

rainier north coast—the first hints of the wild, woolly Pacific Northwest.

About 20 miles south of Eureka the mountains drop off into the broad, flat country of the Eel River delta. Hang a left off 101 into the tidy burg of Ferndale, population 1,400. Lying square in the center of miles of green pasture, the town was once the center of a thriving dairy industry. There are still cows about, but now most of Ferndale's revenue comes from weekender caravans on the highway. All of the structures—many of them Victorians—have been nicely restored. Of

arts and crafts boutiques. Of these, may we bring to your attention Gepetto's (452 Main), a toy store overflowing with odd-brand products—Price-Stern-Sloan books, those little whistly things Bob Dylan used on *Highway 61 Revisited*, Groucho glasses, embroidery equipment, kites, dollhouse accessories, educational gadgets and games, obscure card decks, puzzles, playground stuff—the whole nine yards.

S.F. Illegal Soapbox Society fans will note the Kinetic Sculpture Museum (580 Main), a warehouse for

north, has two nature trails through 2,200 acres of seasonal wetlands, salt marshes, and open grassland.

Back in town, chow down at Ivanhoe Roman's Restaurant (315 Main)—a family-style house with American and Mexican food—or Curley's Bar & Grill (460 Main). What, you wanted dim sum? Wrong town, kid. There are a number of other eateries around, all homegrown and dependable-looking. After munching, check the Ferndale Repertory Theater (for information call 707-725-2378) or head five

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# TRAVEL



Good vintage: Ferndale is full of well-preserved Victorian buildings.

## FERNDALE from page 3

miles north on Ocean to the shore.

The road takes you between soggy green fields and the foothills of the coast mountains, winding around little curves and knolls before coming out in front of the nine-mile Center-ville Beach. Rough breakers fall against the sand, and the isolation is splendid. Keep following the narrow, winding road up into the bluffs, past an abandoned navy facility, and park by the aged, spreading tree at the top of the cliff. The rather amazing panorama of the big Pacific makes for unparalleled sundowning and is ideal for watching gray whales migrate in winter and spring.

Nearby, witness the ferocious instability of this geologically young coastline. An abandoned bit of pavement, blocked for safety reasons by a large earth mound, is abruptly shorn off, gouged out by a gigantic several-hundred-foot-wide landslide. The remains, a city-block-size chunk of soil and rock, lie far below. Vegetation lurches off the edge, the distant waves crash, the wind blows, the twin white stripes run down the road to end at a perilous brink. Just like a movie, only real.

As you're headed back to town you have the option to take a tour of the spectacularly crinkled King Mountain Range. As you drive east on Ocean, make a sharp right turn onto Wildcat Road just before Main Street. But be aware: if you follow this route you will see no gas stations for at least three hours.

whole lanes sometimes swallowed by landslides. On a wet winter night you may even see some slush and snow. Take it slow. You'll find yourself negotiating absurd hairpin turns that seem like near-vertical grades at times.

"A monstrous place to bring a bicycle," I thought to myself. Sure enough, the annual Tour of the Unknown Coast leaves Ferndale May 11, and does Wildcat in spades. If you're not up for the century (which will kick the ass of anyone in less-than-Olympic shape) try the 10-, 20-, or 50-mile ride. Call (707) 725-0204 for details.

The road eventually drops into Humboldt Redwoods State Park, with massive grandma and grandpa trees crowding right up against the thin asphalt. Camp, hike, or break out your mountain bike. There's no bike trail in the park itself, but there are about 60 miles of rough fire-road that take riders through open hills, redwoods, madronas, and Douglas firs. Star attraction: the Grasshopper Peak dirt road, which climbs from 200 to 3300 feet in seven miles. Most excellent.

Keep driving, and bang, you're back on 101. A few miles north is Scotia, home of Pacific Lumber, which was bought out in the 1980s by corporate raider Charles Hurwitz. The conflicts between Hurwitz and environmentalists over logging in PL's vast old-growth redwood holdings (including Headwaters Forest) are the stuff of legend. See for yourself: take a free, self-guided tour of the Pacific Lumber mill (call 707-764-2222), then get on down the road to nearby Gar-

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you will see no gas stations for at least three hours.

The way is crazy-beautiful and a little hair-raising. Forested mountains slope down into long, steep, grassy ridges that plummet madly to the Pacific. All points offer hugely expansive views of Cape Mendocino—the westernmost point in the continental United States and practically mythological in scale. The road, already narrow, is at times blocked by oblivious cattle, with sheer drops at either side and

Lumber mill (call 707-764-2222), then get on down the road to nearby Garberville, where the Environmental Protection Information Center coordinates antilogging efforts (call 707-923-2931).

An early morning drive back to the Bay Area passes through mist and chill. The highway is quiet in the pre-tourist season: for local flavor, tune to the low end of the FM dial, where warm-voiced granola types play twangy acoustic and world music. ■