



## GENERAL ARTICLES

### ▶ HERE THEY COME

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With people closely guarding their money, can North Bay tourism be expected to decline in the coming years? The answer, according to top tourism bureaus, is an emphatic no.

As the arrival of summer ushers in “high season”—time for the annual migration of tourists from across the nation and around the world—the North Bay’s hospitality and tourism industries, face-down in the worst economic climate since the 1930s, are holding their collective breath and asking one simple question: Will they come?

Time to exhale. According to tourism professionals in Napa, Sonoma and Marin counties, no stone has been left unturned during the long, dark winter as outreach campaigns hit a fever pitch to attract visitors from far and wide. And while tourism numbers in 2009 aren’t expected to shatter any records, all indications are that the parking lots at Muir Woods will be full, it will still take forever to make a left turn on Highway 29 through Napa Valley, and those darned cyclists on the Sonoma back roads will again be out in force.

Second only to agriculture, tourism is the economic muscle of the North Bay; it’s a thriving industry with tentacles that reach far and wide. Tourism doesn’t just put “heads in beds” in hotels and bed and breakfast inns. It feeds the restaurant business, drives the golf courses, floats water recreation—and fills the tax coffers. Money spent by tourists stays in the North Bay communities, helping pay for our roads, our services and the many amenities that make the Bay Area lifestyle unique and ever-so-alluring. Which, in turn, attracts more tourists. It’s all part of the cycle.

Three key agencies in the North Bay—the [Napa Valley Destination Council](#), the [Marin County Visitors Bureau](#) and the [Sonoma County Tourism Bureau](#)—direct the marketing programs focused on boosting tourism in the three counties. During the recent economic downturn, each has redoubled its efforts, albeit using very different approaches, to ensure a successful season. Here’s what they have to say about what we can expect this summer.

#### Marin: “Just a Little Out There”

Marin, like Napa and Sonoma, draws heavily from the annual influx of tourists to San Francisco, which consistently ranks in the top 10 tourist destinations in the United States. In 2007, more than 16 million people visited San Francisco, according to the [San Francisco Convention and Visitors Bureau](#)’s most recent tourism impact study. Of those 16 million, it’s estimated that 4 million—or roughly 25 percent of the total—crossed San Francisco Bay to visit Wine Country and other North Bay attractions. For many, if not most, Marin County is not only the gateway to the north, it’s also a destination.

The Marin Convention and Visitors Bureau (MCVB) promotes tourism in all of Marin, with the exception of Sausalito, which has its own tourism outreach program through the [Sausalito Chamber of Commerce](#). Mark Essman, president and CEO of MCVB, says the economic downturn has had an impact in the number of visitors, and he predicts the market will be tight through the end of the year.

“Just like everyone else, we’ve felt the hit,” Essman says. “But we’ve been pretty lucky, because we’re not remote. We’re sandwiched between San Francisco and Wine Country, which gives us great visibility. Nonetheless, we’ve seen a business decrease of between 7 and 15 percent.”

About nine months ago, the bureau, which consists of three employees, including Essman, launched a new campaign to brand Marin, selecting a slogan developed by Marin marketing gurus David Swope and Jason Headley. The catchphrase, “Marin: Just a Little Out There,” is a perfect description of Marin, according to Essman.

“We’re trying to show what Marin really is. I mean, Marin is Marin. We don’t want to be something we’re not or present a false image of Marin. We want to be taken at face value,” Essman explains. In addition to the fact that Marin actually is “just a little out there” when referring to its physical proximity to San Francisco and the Wine Country, the phrase also describes the essence of Marin. “It shows that we’re eclectic and unique—a very non-urban setting in a very urban environment,” Essman explains.

The top five tourist destinations in Marin are [Muir Woods](#), [Point Reyes](#), [Angel Island](#), [Mount Tamalpais](#) and locations throughout West Marin, Essman says. While these are natural magnets, the county is also employing niche marketing to attract targeted groups to visit Marin. Right now, the focus is on two specific groups: weddings and environmental or “green” travelers.

“Weddings aren’t necessarily recession-*proof*, but they keep going on,” Essman says. “Right now, we’re designing a specific target market piece [aka collateral materials] for the bridal market. Marketing to this audience is something new for us, so we’re learning as we go. We’re hitting wedding trade shows, and we’re target marketing event planners.” Essman says primary outreach will be in Mendocino County, San Jose and Sacramento, because people living in those areas visit Marin most often.

Eco-tourism is also big. Marin promotes its certified green businesses and hotels, and the homepage of the bureau’s new website, [www.visitmarin.org](http://www.visitmarin.org), embraces the lifestyle, touting Marin as “The home of holistic artists and goat cheese artisans. The birthplace of mountain biking and Obi Wan Kenobi. The natural habitat of those grateful for nature and of the Grateful Dead.” Essman points out that, for more than 20 years, one of Marin’s biggest annual events has been the annual [Bioneers](#) convention, which attracts more than 3,000 environmental strategists to San Rafael each October (this year’s event will be October 16-18).

In addition to targeting the “greenies,” Essman and the Marin bureau have their eyes on another emerging market, which Essman describes as “silver.”

“The retiree market is expected to increase three- to five-fold in the next few years, except with things the way they’ve been recently [economically], it looks like that might be delayed, because everyone will be working until they’re in their nineties,” he laughs.

One niche tourism market that doesn’t need much in the way of promotion for Marin is the bicyclists. “The mountain bike was invented in Marin,” Essman explains, and the county is home to hundreds of biking trails, from easy rides to challenging off-road treks. But the biggest draw for cyclists is Sausalito. According to a [March 22 report in the San Francisco Chronicle](#), a number of new bike rental outfits have set up shop around San Francisco’s Fisherman’s Wharf, and business is booming. Upwards of 1,500 bikes are being rented daily, and most of the cyclists pedal across the Golden Gate Bridge, take the scenic route through Sausalito (much to the chagrin of locals trying to negotiate traffic and some shop owners, who’ve complained about the clutter when the riders park their bikes to shop or dine), then catch the ferry back to San Francisco.

Annual events are also a big draw for tourists—the [Italian Street Painting Festival](#) in San Rafael, the [Sausalito Art Festival](#), the [Mill Valley Film Festival](#), the [Tiburon International Film Festival](#) plus events at [Infineon Raceway](#), which is located in Sonoma County, but draws heavy (sometimes *really heavy!*) traffic through the heart of Marin.

Despite the current downturn, Essman is optimistic. “Other than the economy, our biggest challenge is to continue to build a quality branding identity to put Marin more firmly on the [tourist] map,” he says. “In the past, Marin had no image, because there were no efforts to collectively market our small towns as a group. But now there are.”

## [Sonoma County](#)

While Marin pursues niche markets, its neighbor to the north is also engaging in highly targeted marketing, but with a dramatically different approach. It’s selling a whole *country!*

Nearly four years old, the Sonoma County Tourism Bureau (SCTB), headed by President/CEO Ken Fischang, has the most aggressive, hands-on tourism promotional plan of all three North Bay counties. SCTB’s staff of 18 employees (the Bureau also has contracts with various support agencies), attends 102 trade shows annually, putting them on the road all but six days of the year. SCTB ([www.sonomacounty.com](http://www.sonomacounty.com)) works with the 13 visitors’ centers throughout the county, has satellite offices in Houston, Sacramento and Chicago, and plans to open additional offices in Los Angeles and a yet-to-be-determined East Coast city in the near future.

SCTB, which is funded by a voluntary 2 percent assessment on hotel guests’ rooms on properties within the Business Improvement Assessment (BIA), promotes the entire county with the exception of Sonoma and Healdsburg, both of which have so far opted not to participate.

The City of Sonoma, according to City Manager Linda Kelly, feels it’s well-served by the robust tourism promotional program it now has through an ongoing partnership with the Sonoma Valley Visitors Bureau.

“For Sonoma to join the Sonoma County Tourism Bureau, our big hotels would need to agree to become part of the BIA by a 2 percent self-assessment. The City Council would also need to endorse and agree that the City of Sonoma collect and pass the

assessment to the county for the SCTB,” she explains. “Every year since the inception of the BIA, the hoteliers here have considered the option and, to date, have decided not to join. We continue to reassess this each year and are responsive to the hoteliers’ preferences in this regard. Should they wish at some point to pursue SCTB membership, the City would work with our hotels to that end.”

Healdsburg City Manager Marjie Pettus similarly explains that Healdsburg established its own lodging coalition in cooperation with the [Healdsburg Chamber of Commerce](#). “It’s been in place for several years, and they’ve been pleased with the success of their individual efforts,” she says. “However, I understand the new CEO, Craig Schmidt, is looking at the county’s plan to reassess whether or not to join.”

According to Schmidt, everything is open for review, but the tourism-related businesses in Healdsburg remain divided as to whether or not to join the SCTB effort. “The county has done a great job promoting Sonoma nationally and internationally,” Schmidt says. “I’ve had great discussions and really respect what they’re doing. Our members just need to assess what we would get in return—and at what price.” Meanwhile, the Healdsburg Chamber is pursuing its own branding effort and is currently reorganizing to bring all tourism-related entities under a single umbrella.

Fischang and his team have a multi-pronged program with handsome collateral materials and an aggressive social marketing effort via [YouTube](#), [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), among others. They also operate a cash incentive program directed at convention and meeting planners to attract mid-week and value season (November through May 1) events, whereby groups can earn up to \$4,000 per convention/meeting, with the check made out to the host hotel’s master account, allowing for upgrades in food, VIP gifts, spa treatments and so forth. “This helps the group planning the meeting or convention and the host hotel—plus it keeps the money in the market,” he explains.

Last year, the bureau issued \$51,000 through the program. It’s also started a “Hometown Hero” program for local residents who provide leads for potential meetings that could be held in Sonoma County. If the lead results in a confirmed meeting, the Hometown Hero receives prizes ranging from restaurant gift certificates to weekend getaways.

The “Sonoma Country” marketing concept was born from the fact that the county offers an abundance of diverse opportunities for tourists. The tagline for the marketing program is “America’s Premier Wine, Spa and Coastal Destination.”

“Our goal is to bill ourselves as ‘sophisticated country,’” Fischang says. “We have multiple activities visitors can pursue—several wine appellations, horseback riding, hot air ballooning, two coastlines [Carneros and the Pacific Ocean], three rivers, mountains, geysers, redwood forests, spas. You name it, we have it.” One recent accolade was the Kenwood Inn and Spa being recognized as one of the top three resort spas in the United States by [Condé Nast Traveler’s](#) readers’ choice survey.

All of SCTB’s efforts are directed at “putting heads in the beds,” Fischang says. The core target groups are individual travelers on business or leisure trips (58 percent of marketing is directed at this group), meetings and conventions (33 percent) and group tour and travel (8 percent). The bureau also has niche marketing programs to reach specific tourist profiles: wine and wineries, agricultural tourism, eco tourism and volunteer vacations, restaurants and culinary program travelers, cultural arts, spas, golf, cycling, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender tourists), small inns/bed and breakfasts, family travel and even a film task force that works to promote the area as a desirable filming location. Its key feeder markets are travelers from California, New York, Texas, Illinois and Florida, in that order.

During the economic downturn, the SCTB has expanded its focus on three key groups: international travelers, the “staycation” crowd and visitors to San Francisco.

“The international market is attractive right now due to the weak dollar,” Fischang says. To respond, SCTB is developing websites in seven languages, including German, French and Italian. “Europeans get five weeks’ vacation each year,” Fischang explains. “When they come, they spend a longer time here—and they love wine.” The top countries from which Sonoma County draws tourists are Germany, France and the United Kingdom.

Last summer’s soaring gas prices led to the “staycation” concept, which has found continued life as the economy has soured. This particular market consists of travelers who want to get away, but who don’t want to go much farther than a 250-mile radius from home. “It’s the ‘tank of gas’ crowd,” Fischang says, “and in a bad economy, it’s worth going after.” To reach this market, the SCTB has started regional advertising with a heavy emphasis on presence in the Bay Area’s BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) stations.

The BART marketing effort can pay double dividends, because it also addresses another key target, namely, visitors to San Francisco. “We’re especially interested in those people who are attending events at [Moscone Center](#), which had a record-

breaking year in 2008,” Fischang says. “Moscone Center is projected to be 123 percent over pace in its bookings through 2015. And meetings that are held by associations (such as [AARP](#) and the [American Medical Association](#), for example) are pretty much recession-proof. They might have fewer attendees, but they have to have the meetings, because that’s how they [the associations] make their money.”

Fischang believes Sonoma “Country” has a distinct leg up when it comes to weathering the economic storm. “We’re a diverse destination, and we’re well-positioned for a quicker recovery. We’re not like Hawaii with all its resorts and expensive places. We have a complete repertoire of accommodations, from full-service hotels to those with more limited offerings, plus inns, bed and breakfasts, vacation home rentals and even campgrounds.”

### [The Napa Valley. Legendary.](#)

It’s inarguable that Napa Valley—the icon of the American wine industry—is a brand unto itself. But up until a few months ago, when the Napa Valley Destination Council ([www.legendarynapavalley.com](http://www.legendarynapavalley.com)) completed its tourism strategy, the icon had no signature tagline. It does now: “The Napa Valley. Legendary.”

“Napa County is very different from its sisters [Sonoma and Marin counties],” explains David Turgeon, chief operating officer of the Napa Valley Destination Council (NVDC), which employs a staff of four and relies heavily on a cadre of more than 80 volunteers (a new CEO will be named to the organization soon). “First and foremost, we’re a small agricultural community, and any managed tourism plan we develop has to be underpinned by the understanding that tourism needs to be managed in a way that doesn’t negatively impact our ability to produce premium grapes and wine.”

In developing its program, the NVDC sought and received input from the entire community, a direct reflection of Napa Valley’s culture.

“We have a history of being a strong community; one reason our wine industry has been so successful is because Napa Valley’s founding vintners worked together,” Turgeon says. “This tradition naturally extends into how we’re charting the course for tourism. The process took almost two years, but we really understood that, to be sustainable for 20 to 25 years, we needed to involve everyone in the conversation about managing tourism and the development of the plan.”

At the heart of the new plan is the “commitment to support the delivery of a legendary experience for guests, while working to ensure tourism enhances the standard of living for Napa County residents and lets us continue to be the agricultural community we are,” Turgeon says.

“We only produce 4 percent of the wine in California, yet we’re synonymous with the production of fine California wines. We’re recognized around the world as America’s Grape Wine Capital ([www.GreatWineCapitals.com](http://www.GreatWineCapitals.com)), and it’s important for us to be able to communicate what that means to our guests. We want them to experience the authentic Napa Valley—the Napa Valley that keeps them coming back time and time again. What you usually hear is that we’re the Disneyland of wine, and that’s not the case,” Turgeon laments. “Each of our towns and cities is different and unique, from the more industrialized American Canyon and the very exciting renaissance of the city of Napa in the south, to the wide range of culinary experiences in Yountville, the restaurants, spas and shopping in St. Helena, all the way up to Calistoga, with its rustic appeal, mud baths, natural hot springs and great restaurants. Our overall plan is to make sure each town and city is supported in communicating its unique experience, all under the Napa Valley umbrella (check out [calistogavisitor.com](http://calistogavisitor.com) as an example).

Unlike Sonoma and Marin, each of which has communities that don’t buy into the master county plan, the Napa council is a fully inclusive organization. “If you’re in the hospitality business in Napa County, you’re automatically a member,” says Turgeon. “Our goal is strategic: Our towns and cities are fully free to develop their own tourism experiences, and it’s our responsibility to partner with them to communicate those experiences with the rest of the world.”

According to Turgeon, 4.5 million people visit the Napa Valley each year, and the economic impact of tourism is well over \$1.3 billion annually. And although the bad economy has led to a “slight retrenchment,” things are looking up.

“The numbers are encouraging, and the trends look good for this season. Our visitor center numbers are showing healthy increases over prior months and things seems to be bouncing back quite nicely,” Turgeon says.

Napa draws half of its tourists from within California. “Guests who visit us come from California, San Francisco other parts of the country or internationally, in that order. Recent national studies show the Napa Valley is consistently one of the top 10 destinations that travelers are interested in visiting—we’re very fortunate to have that top of mind presence. We offer Wine Country living at its best: a beautiful, natural setting, legendary wines, amazing culinary experiences, top-notch spas and a

unique collection of lodging options, from bed and breakfasts to boutique inns, hotels and resorts.”

But there are also two other groups of tourists that Turgeon and the NVDC take note of, especially in these challenging financial times. They are the “immediate travelers,” people who decide to make the trip at most maybe two or three days out, and those who don’t own cars.

“In the past, most folks would make their plans to visit us three to six months ahead of time. Now it’s often just two or three days—and sometimes guests will make the decision to visit us the same afternoon they arrive,” he says. “We’ve learned to be nimble for those deciding to come on the fly. Local businesses are starting a ‘car-free Napa Valley’ initiative, in conjunction with the [Napa Valley Wine Train](#) and the city of Napa, for guests from San Francisco who may want to experience the Napa Valley but don’t have easy access to a car.”

With a minimum one-day advance reservation and for an additional \$15 per person, the Wine Train will send a shuttle to the Vallejo ferry terminal to transport passengers to the Wine Train Station in Napa. The Wine Train was one of the most controversial tourist attractions ever to come to Napa Valley, but with its newly converted engines running on compressed natural gas and a business community working together in innovative ways, “It’s now viewed as a unique asset running up and down the valley,” says Turgeon. In fact, merchants in St. Helena have requested the train let passengers disembark and visit the town.

Only time will tell if the efforts of the travel pros will pay off in tourist dollars this summer, but one thing you can’t quibble about is their dedication, not only to their jobs, but also to their constituencies. And while each county has approached the challenging economy with distinctly different *modus operandi*, there’s one concept that gets a mutual nod from all of them: There’s no such thing as an “accidental tourist.”

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## EXPERIENCE THE DIFFERENCE

*By Matt Solis*

The carpet is down, the paint is dry, the furnishings are in place—even the jackhammering on the adjacent 101 has abated. After 13 months of renovation, Santa Rosa’s [Hyatt Vineyard Creek Hotel and Spa](#) has officially unveiled its sleek new look, and the numerous changes are poised to attract vacationers of every ilk during the upcoming summer travel season. From the transformation of its main entrance to the makeover of adjoining restaurant [Brasserie](#), Hyatt Vineyard Creek has based every facet of its renovation on *experience*, that indefinable wild card of the tourism industry. “Everything we’ve done here impacts the guest experience,” affirms Gary Collins, director of sales and marketing. “From the beginning, our goal was to focus on visual impact and the personal feelings of our guests. If we meet and exceed their expectations, we can count on them having a great experience and spreading the word.”

The [AAA Four Diamond](#) award-winning hotel’s renovated entrance frames the remainder of this massive project—a cedar-lined driveway and center-island flowerbed lead guests to the new stone port cache, which is lit delicately at night to create a welcoming atmosphere. The lobby has new furnishings, paint and lighting, and a full-scale bar and seating area entices guests with the prospect of fine wine and appetizers...before they even get to their rooms. The lobby’s courtyard has perhaps the most exhilarating addition—teak wood furnishings surround a 10-foot circular fire pit filled with red crystals, setting the stage for a relaxing night under the stars. “The lobby bar extends outside,” says Collins, “and every Friday, local wineries come in and host free tastings. We do paired appetizers, and guests can convene in small groups around the fire pit and enjoy the night.”

If appetizers don’t sate a guest’s appetite, Brasserie Restaurant and its newly renovated lounge are right next door. Chef Richard Whipple has overhauled the menu to highlight fresh, seasonal, local products, and the interior features new furnishings, paint, lighting and an open chef’s kitchen with seating for 10. Collins says the restaurant itself is promoted as a destination, and after partaking in Whipple’s array of lunch offerings, I wholeheartedly approve of said marketing decision. Brasserie’s lounge has a brand-new patio (which, just a year ago, was a parking lot) with a stone fireplace and overhead sun filter screen, flat screen TVs and seating for up to 40 people. “Again, it’s all about experience,” says Collins. “It’s about eliminating guest sacrifice. We have a great restaurant and lounge just steps away from the hotel—and even if they don’t dine at Brasserie, guests are within a short walk of downtown Santa Rosa, where there’s plenty of dining and shopping options.”

Changes to Vineyard Creek’s spa (a manicure/pedicure room, a duet-massage room, new furnishings), meeting/banquet space (a more modern look, wireless Internet access) and guest rooms (37-inch high-definition TVs in every room, new carpet, paint and furnishings) round out the renovation. The hotel also offers an online concierge program for those who want to visit the

region's numerous wineries—before leaving for vacation, guests can acquire tasting room passes, winery maps and transportation. “Every part of our renovation is connected,” says Collins, “from the moment you arrive to the moment you leave. We look at it as the total package.”

[www.vineyardcreek.hyatt.com](http://www.vineyardcreek.hyatt.com)

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