

Sonoma has made headlines as a tourist destination and locals say inclusivity, history add to town's charm



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Almost a million tourists can't be wrong.

That's the estimated number of visitors who travel to Sonoma each year, drawn to the picturesque community founded in 1835. With rolling hills, an historic downtown plaza, world-class wineries and family-friendly events and attractions, it's an idyllic destination for day trippers and vacationers alike.

While the city welcomes tourists from around the globe, it's home to nearly 11,000 residents who know there's much to appreciate about the 95476 zip code.

Community spirit is evident at gatherings like the two weekly farmers markets, the numerous celebrations held at the downtown Sonoma Plaza – a National Historic Landmark – and at Sonoma Valley High School's new sports complex, where fans cheer for the hometown dragons.

Magazines like Travel + Leisure have lauded Sonoma as a top travel destination. In 2017, national magazine U.S. News & World Report named Sonoma one of the 25 "best small towns to visit in the USA," noting it "boasts all the charm of a rustic yet refined locale." The recognitions are among Sonoma's many accolades.

The community is known for its numerous downtown festivals. Among them: the Valley of the Moon Vintage Festival, coming up Oct. 7-8 and dating to 1897; the annual Sonoma International Film Festival and its celebrity guests; the Cinco de Mayo fiesta hosted by La Luz Center; and the Plein Air Festival that culminates with an art show benefiting arts education in local public schools. Earlier this month it celebrated its 20th anniversary.

The popular Lighting of the Sonoma Plaza is planned for 5 p.m. Nov. 19, when the square is illuminated for the holiday season with thousands of twinkling lights.

Sonoma's historic charm

Locals, several thousand strong, come together from across Sonoma Valley – Schellville to Kenwood – for the seasonal Tuesday night farmers market. It's a weekly celebration with live music from May through September. The season closes Sept. 27 with the Magic Band.

The market is held in a horseshoe-shape in front of historic city hall, the iconic two-story stone building with its four identical facades. The park, with a duck pond, fountains, picnic tables, two playgrounds, an amphitheater and expanses of lawn and shade trees, is surrounded by history. Many of the restaurants, art galleries, shops and boutique hotels around the Sonoma Plaza are located within historic buildings dating to the town's pueblo days.

"There's something about driving your car or walking up Broadway and seeing city hall," said native Sonoman Mary Bauer, a retired teacher who was born in the town's old hospita" that's now home to Bartholomew Estate Winery. "The park brings such fond memories."

The Sonoma League for Historic Preservation is devoted to protecting the area's historic buildings and cultural heritage. The Sonoma Valley Historical Society runs an archive and research center and operates Depot Park Museum, with exhibitions and permanent displays dedicated to the history of the Valley of the Moon.

Sonoma is regarded as the birthplace of the California wine industry. Two of the state's oldest wineries are located here: Buena Vista Winery was founded in 1857 and family-owned Gundlach Bundschu Winery was established a year later.

Sonoma's place in California history is well documented, too.

"The Bear Flag was raised here. No Sonoma, no California," said Lorrie Baetge Fulton, a native Sonoman and the collections manager at the Sonoma Valley Historical Society's Marcy House archival center, which maintains extensive collections of old-time photographs, artifacts and ephemera. "Sonoma is critical to California history."

The 8-acre Sonoma Plaza – the largest in the state – is home to Sonoma State Historic Park, which maintains six locations on and around the plaza, including Mission San Francisco Solano, the last and northernmost of California's 21 missions. Lachryma Montis, the home of Sonoma's founder, General Mariano Vallejo, is a few blocks away.

A life-size bronze statue of Vallejo sits on a bench on the north side of the Sonoma Plaza, near the Sonoma Barracks that once housed his troops. It's a popular spot for a selfie. The Bear Flag Monument is nearby.

The plaza is a starting point for tours exploring local history, food and wine and even ghosts. Sonoma purportedly is one of the most haunted places in California. Visitors also can book bicycle, Segway tours or take a hot air balloon adventure.

Community members shine

Two organizations near the plaza celebrate Sonoma as a vibrant arts community. The Arts Guild of Sonoma is one of the oldest arts cooperatives in California, while the Sonoma Valley Museum of Art hosts numerous events, programs and exhibitions.

The city celebrates local citizens with special honors each year: the Treasure Artist, Honorary Alcalde and Student Creative Artist Award recognize the talents and contributions of community members. The Celebrate Sonoma program honors community members who make up the fabric of Sonoma. Roger Rhoten, longtime manager of the historic Sebastiani Theatre, is the latest resident with a day designated in his honor by the city council. Roger and Diana Rhoten, for decades affiliated with the historic Sebastiani Theatre, are the latest residents with a day designated in their honor by the City Council.

Residents also encourage citizen-to-citizen diplomacy through the Sonoma Sister Cities Association. The community has sister cities in France, Italy, Egypt, Hungary, China, Ukraine and Mexico – more than any other city in the county.

"We don't have a place, we don't have an office," said Diana Short, association president and chair of its Greve in Chianti (in Italy) committee. "We're one of the best-kept secrets in Sonoma. But when something happens, we are there to help our sister cities."

Just two days after Russia invaded Ukraine, the association sprang to action collecting donations for its sister city of Kaniv. To date, through donations, a movie screening and a dinner, the association has raised \$90,000 for Kaniv. The monies have gone to humanitarian efforts, body armor and the construction of bomb shelters at three elementary schools.

"Our community is so gracious," Short said, noting the fundraising dinner sold out both seatings before it was advertised.

Inclusivity is a town priority

First-generation immigrant Jack Ding serves as Sonoma's mayor and he was the first Chinese-American on the city council. He is a member of the Penglai sister city committee that is working to build a Chinese pavilion, or ting, in a local park to honor the Chinese laborers who played a significant role in establishing the region's wine industry in the mid-19th century.

While the city's population isn't particularly diverse – the majority of residents are White, with about 18% Latino/Hispanic – the community has “lots of cultural experiences” and welcomes people from throughout the world, Short said. “When you go down to the (Sonoma) plaza, you hear all different languages being spoken.”

Sonoma Community Center Executive Director Charlotte Hajer said in an email that the town “really cares about being welcoming to minorities, including BIPOC and LGBTQ+ folks.”

The center does outreach with the Latino community and others who traditionally haven't interacted with the center. The organization has hired bilingual staff and now offers a sliding scale fee system for classes to encourage inclusivity. It also runs programs specifically intended for LGBTQ+ teens and allies.

Local nonprofits, Hajer noted, are working hard to address systemic inequities like the high cost of housing in Sonoma Valley and general wealth inequality.

The community center, located in an historic former schoolhouse a few blocks from the Sonoma Plaza, offers a wide range of classes, workshops, programs and cultural events to foster community engagement. The center's Andrews Hall is home to Sonoma Arts Live stage productions and other special events.

Activities, groups to join

Although local teens reportedly long ago dubbed the town “Slow-noma,” there are plenty of things to see and do in this small town encompassing 2.74 square miles. The pace is just laid back.

Sebastiani Theatre on the plaza hosts live music and theatrical performances and screens new releases and vintage films. The beloved movie house, with its grand neon marquee, has been a cultural gem since it opened in 1934.

Sonoma has two community newspapers, a radio station and a public-access television station. Longtime musical organizations include Sonoma Valley Chorale, Sonoma Valley Jazz Society and the Sonoma Hometown Band, the oldest local band in the county. Readers' Books, a small independent bookstore, hosts book launches and author events. The Sonoma Speaker Series brings politicians, newsmakers and inspirational speakers for civic engagement and community education.

During the summer, locals head to Arnold Field for Sonoma Stompers collegiate league baseball games. A new, long-anticipated public swimming complex opens in early October at the local high school. There are city bike paths, Montini Open Space Preserve, the Sonoma Overlook Trail and several parks to explore, including 375-acre Bartholomew Park, a protected space with vineyards, gardens and hiking trails.

Those who enjoy the Sonoma Plaza can thank, in part, the founders of the Sonoma Valley Woman's Club, who long ago raised money and rallied for plaza improvements. When the club was founded in 1901, the downtown square was considered unsightly.

Many locals can't imagine living elsewhere.

Bauer, the retired teacher, has deep roots in the community. Her relatives operated the historic Union Hotel, now gone, and the venerable Steiners Tavern, which first was located within the hotel. Her father's cousin, Mathew Andrieux, was one of several local World War II soldiers lost in combat for whom residential streets were named many decades ago.

"It's a little bit slower pace than being down in the Bay Area," Bauer said of her hometown. But whenever she leaves, she's always happy to return. "There's something about Sonoma that draws me back," she said. "It's a good place."