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## After the fires, the road back to Napa and Sonoma counties

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**I** was driving California Highway 12 through the Napa-Sonoma wine country in mid-December when a low, dark cloud drifted into my peripheral vision. It was over a vineyard and seemed to be billowing — a scary sight after the October wildfires that killed at least 43 people and burned more than 245,000 acres in Northern California.

But as I turned to look at this cloud, it gained altitude, then exploded into a thousand winged pieces. They were starlings — a murmuration of starlings, if you go in for fancy animal plural words. The vineyard was fine.

If you've been putting off travel to this wine country, think again.

Among about 900 wineries in Napa and Sonoma counties, industry officials say fewer than 20 suffered significant damage in October, and most of those have been repaired and reopened. The story is similar for restaurants and lodgings.

If you look for scars on the landscape, you will find them eventually. But I saw a lot of untroubled territory in a pair of trips in November and December tracing some of Napa and Sonoma counties' most popular tourist routes.

The area is so beautiful that it may startle anyone who saw the live coverage of those fires.

You see acre upon acre of splendor, especially if you keep your eyes on the lowlands where most of the cities, towns, restaurants, lodgings and tasting rooms are. If you check the horizon, some ridges are darker than others. That's scorched earth — barely distinguishable from shadow from miles away. Meanwhile green shoots are multiplying.

Nearly every business is open in the town plazas, and you see "thank you, first responders"

signs on facades and shop windows. Many businesses invite customers to contribute to a local charity.

Napa and Sonoma are not, however, awash in “fire sale” price-cutting. Although some hoteliers say they have deepened their usual winter-season discounts, many hotel rooms and homes that might have been occupied by travelers are instead housing locals whose residences were damaged or destroyed.

Surveys by lodging consultants STR show that from Dec. 1 through Dec. 30, the average daily rate at Napa County’s hotels was \$233.15, down 3.2% from the previous year. But the occupancy rate was 56.5%, up from 54.3% the year before, said Clay Gregory, president and chief executive of [Visit Napa Valley](#).

About two-thirds of visitors to the area, however, are day-trippers and not overnight guests. Several entrepreneurs told me they hope their numbers will return to normal in the spring, but nobody is sure.

If you’re a Californian — or even if you’re not — this might be a fine time to pop in, spend a few dollars and remind our northern neighbors that we’re in this together.

Here’s a closer look at what a Napa/Sonoma traveler can expect:

For more glimpses of the area’s beauty, vulnerability and resilience, drive to the low hills east of the city of Sonoma. At [Buena Vista Winery](#), charring from a preventive backfire stopped less than 50 feet from the old stone building that holds the two-story tasting room.