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I've Traveled the Golden State for 20+ Years—This Is the Best State Park in Northern California

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There tends to be a major misconception around Napa Valley—namely, that it's stuffy and only for those of a certain tax bracket to enjoy. Before I moved to California and started visiting Napa, I thought much the same; after all, the region is world-famous for its wineries, estate vineyards, and Michelin-recognized restaurants. When you actually visit the area, though, you'll quickly learn what so many other people and I have: Whether or not you imbibe in the pinot noirs and chardonnays for which Napa is best known, the valley is far more down-to-earth and just plain fun than popular culture would have you believe. And in my opinion, one of the best places to experience the real spirit of Napa is at Bothe-Napa Valley State Park.

One of the area's many hidden gems, the park is tucked away in a redwood grove in the valley's northwest corner between Calistoga, California, and St. Helena, California, providing both a welcome alternative and a complementary counterpart to the region's more extravagant attractions. Visitors can bike, hike, swim in the park's seasonal pool, and get to know some of the fascinating local history, all across about three square miles.

"It's a great way to get into nature—you can go from the vineyards straight into a forested area and see redwoods and beautiful creeks," says Gerardo Capiel. He's the owner and chief cycling guide at Vine Trail Adventures, an outfitter that operates cycling tours out of nearby Calistoga. "Once in the park, you can go for a hike, or you can even go mountain biking." Here's how to make the most of a trip to Bothe-Napa Valley State Park.

Much of the park encompasses a flourishing redwood forest, so a hike through the trees is a must. "The park is huge, so you can hike for quite a while if you want," says Capiel. One of the more popular hikes is the Ritchey Canyon Trail to Coyote Peak. You'll start by walking beneath the redwood canopy along Ritchey Creek, then climb up to Coyote Peak, a 1,155-foot-tall summit with panoramic views of the upper Napa Valley and Mount Saint Helena. As you hike, watch both the trail at your feet and the giant trees around you—below, you could spot banana slugs, and above, woodpeckers and spotted owls frequent the redwoods.

While you're out hiking, you're likely to come across the park's Native American Garden, a living collection of plants used by the native Wappo people, and the Pioneer Cemetery, where the graves date back to the 1860s and 1870s. Bale Grist Mill State Historic Park is also a short walk away. "That's just south of Bothe-Napa Park," says Capiel. "It's one of two functioning mills for flour west of the Mississippi that's water-powered. They run it on the weekend, so people can go and visit, and you can even go and buy flour."

After a hike or two, those looking to explore Bothe-Napa Valley on two wheels are in luck. The Napa Valley Vine Trail currently runs for 33 miles from Calistoga to Vallejo, California, with plans for 14 additional miles underway, passing through vineyards, charming small towns, and, of course, Bothe-Napa Valley State Park along the way. Capiel says, "The Napa Valley Vine Trail goes through there, so it's nice because you can actually ride through the park on a protected, car-free trail." Capiel and his team at Vine Trail Adventures also lead rides along Ritchey Creek within Bothe-Napa Valley State Park.

If you're planning a longer visit to the park, you can spend your nights beneath the redwoods. The campground here holds the distinction of being the only state park campground in Napa Valley and has 56 tent and RV sites, plus 10 rentable yurts. Campers can also take advantage of the campground's $1 shuttle service to downtown Calistoga and surrounding vineyards. On that note, you'll have an embarrassment of riches when it comes to wine tasting experiences. To name just a few, wine estates like Castello di Amorosa, **Larkmead Vineyards**, and Benessere Vineyards are within either walking or cycling distance. Just make sure to plan your tasting experiences responsibly, and know you can call Uber or Lyft if needed.