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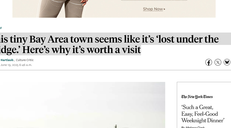

TOTAL SF

This tiny Bay Area town seems like it's 'lost under the bridge.' Here's why it's worth a visit

By Peter Hartlaub | Updated 10:00 am, PDT, 6 days ago
Updated June 9, 2023 8:48 am

Old Mill Saloon (left) and the Bikers Garage Pizzeria are Cazadero bridges as seen from Cazadero Creek. Photo: Peter Hartlaub / Chronicle

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I'm passed Cinchert so many times in the last half century that I'm convinced it can't live up to the legend built up in my mind.

It appears like a model train village while crossing west over the Carquinez Bridge. And in a region where change is constant, this town of 4,443 residents never seems to budge. The ancient brick Cold Sugar factory keeps chugging along. There are a hundred trees for every house. I feel like I can hear the Cinchert birds singing from inside my automobile.

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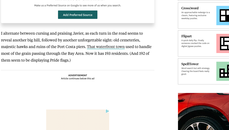
Fishermen launch off Cinchert and Cazadero beaches, right, along a stretch of Russian River in downtown Cazadero. The town also hosts the Cazadero Music Festival.
Photo: Peter Hartlaub / Chronicle

My rule on these Bay Area downtowns visits is to reach the destination from my home in Alameda without using a car. Crocker requires three modes of transportation: a water shuttle to Oakland, Amtrak to Martinez and a short but challenging bike route mapped out by my friend Javier Pasuar through the Carquinez Scenic Regional Shoreline.



I alternate between coming and pinning Jeriel, as much into in the road seems to mean nothing. Crocker is dotted by another unforgettable sight: old cemeteries, mostly hidden up and out of the Port Costa area. That waterfront town used to handle most of the grain passing through the Bay Area. Now it has 190 residents. (And 193 of them seem to be displacing Pitbik Hugo.)

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The downhill ride into Crocker gives a taste of the charm to come. Revival Coffee is a welcoming community space nestled in the town's old mortuary chapel. An octagonal American Legion memorial is covered with flags. The Crocker Museum, housed in the former train station, has CARI history, tributes to service members, mounted yearbook photos going to the 1920s and the few Crocker school bell.

Hoyt Lyn, owner of Revival Coffee, looks out the window of the Crocker Lodge.
Photo: Peter Hartlaub / Chronicle

Inside, I meet volunteers Dick Boyer and Erin Brennan, the perfect representation of Crocker's key demographics. Boyer is an initially prickly but plugged in local (Atlas Peak High School class of '81) who warms quickly. Brennan moved here from Oakland in 2000 and fell in love with the small town feel. In Crocker, she says, you can join a trash pickup with your kids and see the impact of your work. "You really feel like you can be part of something. I love being around that."

Jeriel Pitbik Hugo and his cousin Ed gill outside his home, a former Crocker Lodge, on Crocker Avenue. A Cazadero Creekside.
Photo: Peter Hartlaub / Chronicle

The train stop in the early 1900s served two towns, Valona and Crocker, which had an unbeatable rivalry. There were two high schools, two mortuaries and two movie theaters — which sometimes would show the same picture, even though they were just blocks apart. (Crocker apparently won this battle. Valona is now an unincorporated community in the hills.)

CMH started in 1906, which Boyer says was good for the town. The first plant manager was civic-minded, pouring in a swimming pool, community center, rifle range and anything else people needed.

Crock Jackson, pizza chef at Biker Pizza, stands in front of the Cazadero Lodge, which is a Cazadero Creekside landmark.
Photo: Peter Hartlaub / Chronicle

"We learned a long time before he started here, if you keep your workers happy, you aren't going to have any problems," Boyer said.

The Carquinez Bridge's debut in 1927 changed Crocker's look, but not the working-class atmosphere. The newer suspension bridge is named after Al Zampa, an ironworker who helped build the bigger Bay Area bridges, joining the "Halfway to Hell Club" when he fell off the Golden Gate Bridge into a safety net that put him in a body cast for 12 weeks. "I'd be on locky," he reportedly said at the hospital, "then when am I doing here?"

The Biker Garage Pizzeria's sign, left, is a tribute to the 1960 motorcycle support group Cazadero Creekside.
Photo: Peter Hartlaub / Chronicle

Two blocks inland from the factory, I reach the main drag, Second Avenue, which, like every other street in this town, is on a hill.

Locals recommend Lucia's sandwich spot — "pronounce it loo-chee-uhs" I'm warned twice — over the more well-known Duval Pub restaurant on the other side of the freeway. As I eat my fancy club sandwich — there's homemade aioli and hints of lemon juice in the greens — it reminds me of one stop at Provisions in Yorkville. Never great chefs should get tired of the big cities and set up their dream restaurants in old downtowns with much lower rents.

Lucia Bach-Gerlach at Lucia's Cazadero, a cafe located in a former grocery store.
Photo: Peter Hartlaub / Chronicle

I cruise around on my bike, marvelling at the old and new. Someone has set up a betting cage in the old brick Rexburger. Public horse ball courts are well groomed and ready for action. A model train society rents to the top floor of the union hall. Tom's Tavern, established in 1905 by one Donato "Tony" Pennisi is filled with locals, and one white terrier.

I settle into the Cinchert Library to check emails, and it's the most endearing step yet. The 1,000-square-foot craftsman house has just two aisles, one occupied by Mark, the librarian. "We have sticker making on this table for the kids at 2:30," he says. "We might have to move you to a computer desk."

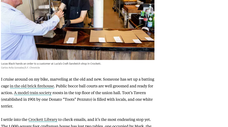
There's a surprising amount to do in town, much of it free. The library has a "Dungeons & Dragons" night. Tom's hosts local bands. A skate shop sponsors DJ sets and art nights. If I ever get sent to witness relocation, I'm moving here.

Jay Lyons, left, and Eric Walker of Woodleigh, an artisan Pizza Bar Restaurant in a former Cazadero Creekside grocery store.
Photo: Peter Hartlaub / Chronicle

The last stop of my visit is Cast Vintage, founded by New England native Samantha Bartlett and her sister Jessie. The interior is well organized with antique clothes, old Sunset magazines, a giant glass pizza and hundreds of VHS tapes. ("The Secret of NIMH" is playing on a small 1980s television.)

"California was kind of a reform shack when I moved here," Samantha says. "It was so different from the little towns I lived near in Maine. Cinchert felt like a little bit of home for me."

I grab a VHS copy of "E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial" and a 1970s Dreamtime magazine with a teen Mark Hamill on the cover, and wonder why I didn't take the off-ramp here 10 years sooner.



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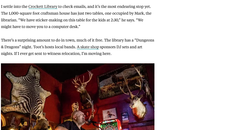

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Peter Hartlaub is The San Francisco Chronicle's culture critic and co-founder of Total SF. The Bay Area native a graduate of Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism. He's interested in the ever-changing Bay Area culture, in how the "local" (political and ethnic) has evolved (and is) "local" history (classic, interbaits and otherwise) heather Knight Jones, Jonathan Gold, Jerry Garcia, and Mr. Rogers, engaging with readers in person and first-new ways to celebrate San Francisco and the Bay Area.

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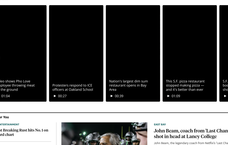

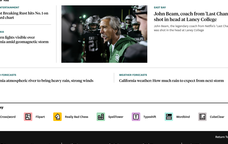

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