

an island, set up camp, and I'm the only one there."

The Olympic Peninsula also contains excellent whitewater: the Quilcene and Dosewallips Rivers, and the Grand Canyon of the Elwha, a hallowed and oft-overlooked Class V connoisseur's expedition-style run.

—Mike Kord

GRASS VALLEY/ NEVADA CITY, CA

THE TOWN: These neighboring towns have basically morphed into one conglomeration of best scenarios. They are both small enough to find parking downtown, quirky enough to catch a (way) off-broadway theatre performance of *Urinetown: the Musical*, and close enough to indulge in any of the many fantastic outdoor playgrounds nearby.

Resting barely on the snowline of the Sierras, Grass Valley/Nevada City is centered in the raw beauty of the mountain range and offers the best in mountain sports like skiing, trail running, and mountain biking without all of the driveway shoveling. Its aesthetically pleasing backdrop and proximity to the Bay Area has brought yuppies, hippies—and the Frisco hybrid, huppies—along with their love of culture.

For quality classical, jazz, and varied concerts, you can check out one of the 32 shows in Grass Valley's annual outdoor Music in the Mountains Series that sells more than 12,000 tickets per show. There's even good dancing.

Chris Shackleton, who created and maintains Californian's go-to website for river levels, www.dreamflows.com, speaks excitedly about the area's goldmine of classic kayaking, but doesn't lose much enthusiasm when talking about the dancing in town. "I do a lot of salsa and a little swing, and there's lots of that stuff here," says Shackleton. "There isn't that much [dancing classes] between here and Sacramento."

THE PADDLING: Half a dozen world-class whitewater runs are within a half-hour drive of town.

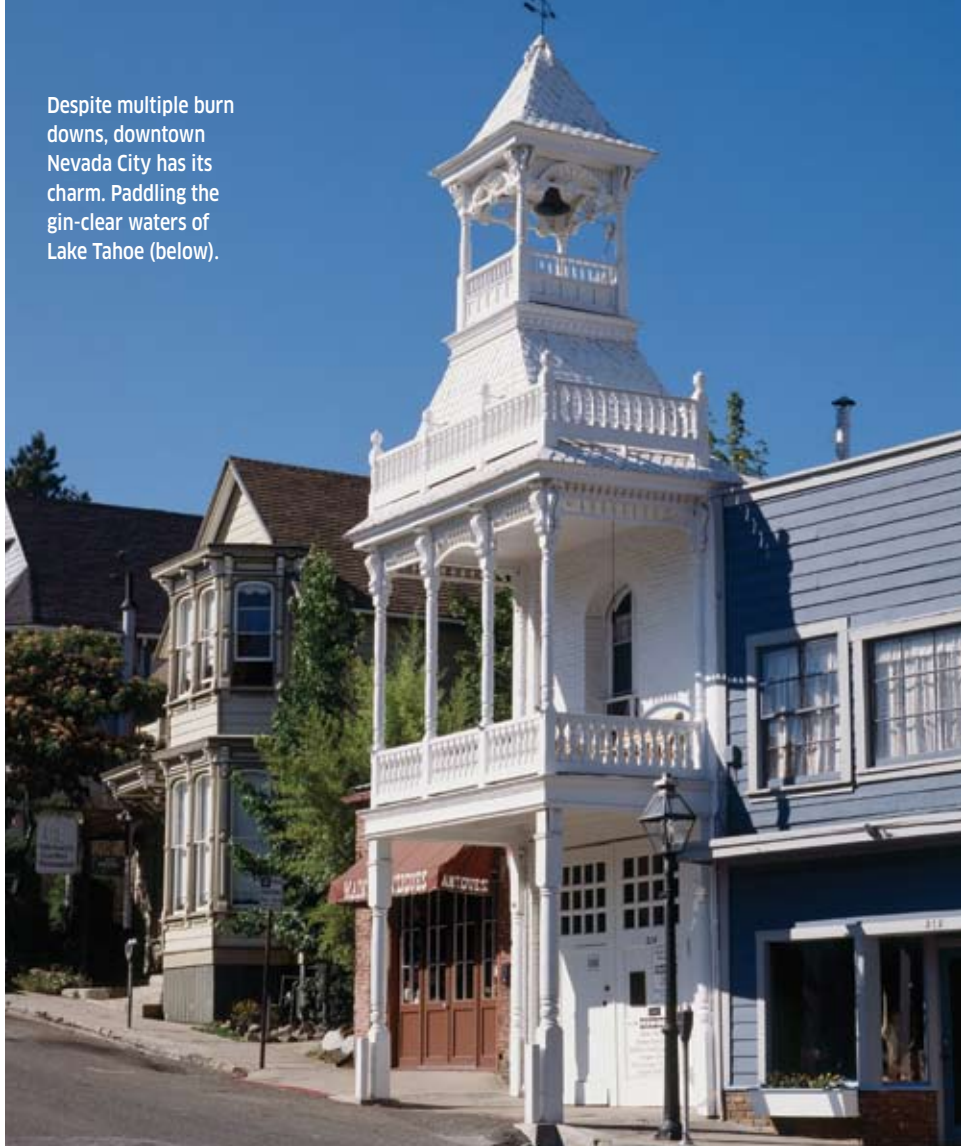
"It's kind of like living on the coast if you are a surfer," says Pete Arpin, a self-proclaimed "everyman's paddler" who puts in river gauges for the army corps of engineers. When Arpin moved to Nevada City five years ago he cut travel mileage on his river rig from 40,000 miles per year to 10,000.

You'd be hard pressed to find a paddler who has run the 49 to Bridgeport section of the Yuba—an after-work spot in May—and doesn't put it in his top 10 favorite stretches. You can also find wide variety of alpine and sub-alpine lakes ranging in elevations from 800 to 9,000 feet close to town.

"People enjoy driving four-wheel-drive vehicles and getting lost on forest service roads and finding remote alpine lakes," says Danny Childs, owner of Wolfcreek Outdoor, Grass Valley's premier paddling and outdoor sports shop. If you're a less-adventurous flatwater enthusiast, the Lake Valley Reservoir is 40 minutes from Grass Valley. It is easy to access, clean, and the only motors you will encounter will be on small fishing boats. The cobalt waters of Lake Tahoe are just 90 minutes away, too.

—Joe Jackson

Despite multiple burn downs, downtown Nevada City has its charm. Paddling the gin-clear waters of Lake Tahoe (below).



TOP PHOTO BY SAL MAIMONE/SUPERSTOCK; LOWER BY UPPERCLUT IMAGES/SUPERSTOCK

Paddler's Rating

After Work: ★★★★★

Weekends: ★★★★★

Vacations

Near Home: ★★★★★

Vitals

Pop: Grass Valley, 12,426/
Nevada City, 3,001 (2006
est.)

Median House Price:
\$323,700 (end of

2007)/\$360,000 (early 2008)

Climate: January: 45/26;
July: 81/48; 30 inches of
Rain

Who: Any type of boater
with disposable income
who wants city culture
surrounded by wilderness.

Who Knew?: Nevada City's
downtown burned almost
completely to the ground
three times between 1851
and 1863 because of gold

miners' gunpowder and
canvas tents.

Dirtbag Quotient: Take
classes at the Pacific Rim
Wine Education Center in
San Francisco to become
a sommelier (restaurant
employee in charge of
wines). It is a pricey
investment but you get to be
a wine snob for a living.
2004 Election results: 53%
Bush, 45% Kerry, 2% Other