

Weekend Escape



Harpist Christian Chalfour plays in downtown Idyllwild, an eclectic collection of shops and restaurants in the San Jacinto Mountains.

Not Too Idle, Not Too Wild in Idyllwild

Two urban cowboys ride high, balancing outdoor adventures with mountain R&R

By ROB DUNTON

I Dyllwild, Calif.—I never feel as though I'm really in the mountains until I can smell them. So my trip to Idyllwild, perched a mile high in the San Jacinto range, didn't feel like vacation until the scent of pine surrounded our convertible somewhere along Highway 74.

My friend Scott, who entered fatherhood less than six months ago, was along for the ride. Last month his benevolent wife granted him a weekend pass for a getaway of hiking, horseback riding and a generous dose of R&R.

All of that is easy to find in this town of about 3,000. The abundance of outdoor adventures is paired with a simple, somewhat artsy mountain town. The annual Jazz in the Pines festival, Aug. 24 and 25 this year, draws thousands. But it's the village's eclectic shops selling woodcarvings, Native American crafts and homemade snacks that help to attract visitors all summer.

The Web sites www.idyllwild.com and www.idyllwildchamber.com give ideas for activities and lodging, including rental cabins. I found a link to Muir's Mountain Vacation Rentals, which offered a place called Crock for \$115 per night. I was taken aback by the \$50 management fee on top of the 10% room tax, but the cabin still seemed a good value. The agent reminded me that we needed to supply linens and soap.

The immaculate shingled cabin turned out to be paneled throughout with warm knotty pine. The entry had a sofa bed and opened onto a kitchen, bathroom, cozy liv-

ing room with dining area, and a lovely back porch overlooking a small ravine—dry now but no doubt a babbling brook in spring. A loft with a queen-size bed functioned as the main bedroom.

The décor was quaint enough in a country-print and artificial-flower-arrangement kind of way—but given the reasonable price, I didn't expect more.

At Café Aroma near the center of town, we snacked on fresh-from-the-oven basil-and-rosemary focaccia until our garlic bisque and exquisite chicken and vegetable soup arrived. For entrees, we ordered the nightly specials: Dijon-encrusted swordfish and a tender veal chop, both accompanied by succulent grilled asparagus and garlic mashed potatoes. Everything was exceptional. We bought groceries, meandered back to the cabin and played dominoes until midnight as a cool breeze carried a forest scent through open windows.

We slept in and ate a light breakfast on the patio. The sky was pastel blue, and the granite boulders on the mountainsides were already shining white, reflecting the brilliant sun. Blue jays winged about the tree canopy, but we had trouble finding the motivation to move.

Around 11 o'clock, having enjoyed plenty of idle but not much wild, we set out for a hike and stopped in town to pick up lunch-to-go at Clover's Honey Shop and Bakery. A few customers sat out front drinking coffee and working on softball-size cinnamon buns.

As Scott and I entered, a counter full of pies caught my eye. So did racks holding huge Rice Krispies



Photos by LUIS SINCO / Los Angeles Times

Visitors to the Hay Dude Ranch take a guided horseback ride through the San Bernardino National Forest.

treats, saucer-sized cookies and brownies as big as my day planner. We dug into a plate of samples. Though not the most succulent treats we've had, the epic proportions were undeniable. Scott chose a slice of Rainbow Pie, prepared with seemingly every kind of fruit. I chose a slab of Rice Krispies treat.

I can't remember ever being intimidated by a sandwich, but my eyes bulged as the clerk loaded handfuls of cold cuts onto freshly baked 12-inch rolls, layered on toppings and handed over the hefty sandwiches. I dubbed mine "The 2-Pounder," picked up some bottled water and headed out.

At the Idyllwild Ranger Station, the ranger explained that there are more than 10,000 acres of designated wilderness in Mt. San Jacinto State Park and more than 80 miles of trails. Options ranged from the Fuller Ridge Trail, a 7½-mile trek with a 3,000-foot elevation gain, to the relaxing Ernie Maxwell Scenic Trail, a 2½-mile path that runs

along the base of the hills above Idyllwild.

We decided on Devil's Slide Trail, a 2½-mile hike with an elevation gain of 1,700 feet. We picked up free permits at the ranger station, parked at the trail head at Humber Park above town and hoofed it.

The path is relatively smooth, its mild incline lined with manzanita and shaded by towering white fir and sugar, Jeffrey and ponderosa pines. Squirrels and lizards skitter over sun-bleached boulders.

Other hikers warned us about a rattlesnake about 3 feet long. Clearly in no mood for attention, it slid silently into the brush a safe distance from the trail.

Throughout the day we passed fewer than 20 people on the way to Saddle Junction. Two were rangers who checked our permits, and half were children younger than 10. We talked with a couple of families making their way down from the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway, which carries riders up the other

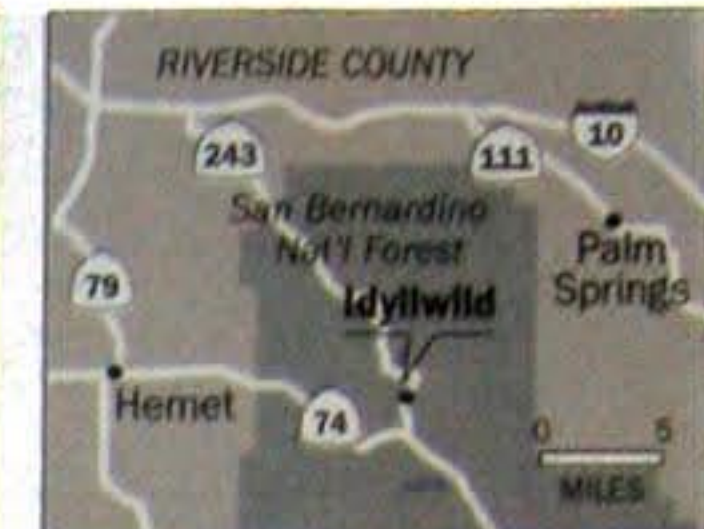
side of the mountains. Somewhere, two devoted dads were driving from Palm Springs to Idyllwild to collect these happy hikers.

At Saddle Junction, signposts marked the Pacific Crest Trail, which runs from Canada to Mexico. That trail took us toward Tahquitz Peak, and after less than a mile we left PCT for boulder-strewn ridges and views of the San Jacinto wilderness and Idyllwild. On the clearest days, Santa Catalina Island is visible, according to the locals.

A refreshing wind blew over the ridge. We clambered up a ledge of rough granite and devoured our "2-Pounders" and desserts.

By twilight we were back at Crock, reading and relaxing on the porch before moseying into town in search of dinner. Live music from the Good Times Pub and Grill caught our attention. The outdoor patio filled as a duo played lively folk music and ballads.

Scott ordered a half-rack of



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Budget for Two

Cabin rental,	
two nights	\$308.00
Dinner, Café Aroma	91.00
Lunch, Clover's	21.79
Dinner, Good Times	31.00
Breakfast,	
Bread Basket	21.00
Horseback ride,	
two hours	120.00
Lunch, Idyllwild Café	15.00
Groceries	13.81
Gas	38.00
FINAL TAB	\$659.60

■ Muir's Mountain Vacation Rentals, P.O. Box 369 (54440 N. Circle Drive), Idyllwild, CA 92549; (877) 270-3285 or (909) 659-4145, www.idyllwildcabins.com.

saucy pork ribs with a side of grilled zucchini. I wrapped my hands around a barbecue pork sandwich with a side of sweet-potato fries. The food was fine, the service small-town friendly, the entertainers genuine and heartfelt.

Scott and I laughed at the who's-on-first possibilities Sunday as we drove to the Hay Dude Ranch. ("Hey, dude. Do you know where I can rent some horses?" "Hay Dude.") Before saddling up, we stopped at the Bread Basket in Idyllwild for French toast Provençal made with apple-nut bread and the Hearty American Breakfast of eggs, sausage, fruit, home fries, breads and muffins.

The ranch is five miles down the mountain, adjacent to McCay Park. A wrangler named Barbie saddled up Mocha and Canada, our rent-a-steeds for the next two hours. (The per-person rate is \$30 per hour or five hours for \$125; no riding experience is necessary.) We kicked up dust as we rode through meadows and forest, up hillsides and across boulder-strewn fields.

Mocha and Canada proved calm and nimble, negotiating sand and rock, gullies and hills with equal aplomb. We rewarded them with carrots at the end of the ride.

Back at the cabin we cleaned up and checked out. We picked up pie for Scott's wife at Clover's, enjoyed French dip sandwiches and curly fries at the Idyllwild Café, then descended Highway 74 as the scent of pine faded away.

Rob Dunton is a freelance writer in San Diego.