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FRESNO

CENTRAL VALLEY SURPRISE

Glass blowers, Art Deco masterpieces, lazy rivers, and silky summer evenings toasted with a local Zinfandel—check out **17 reasons** to pull over in Fresno and stay awhile



The neon-bright Tower District buzzes after dark, with cafes, clubs, brew pubs, and theaters.

MOST FOLKS ZOOM by Fresno on their way to Yosemite or Sequoia–Kings Canyon National Parks. But turn off State 99 and you'll uncover a Central Valley gem, a surprisingly stylish, eclectic, ethnically diverse, and innovative city that hasn't forgotten the value of small-town charm.

CATCH THE TOWER DISTRICT VIBE This hip neighborhood bustles with vintage clothing shops, clubs, cafes, and boutiques. The namesake 1939 Tower Theatre has been restored to Art Deco glory. Hungry? Grandmarie's Chicken Pie Shop, a 1946 original, still serves up irresistibly flaky pies. At Veni Vidi Vici, order a Stockholm (Fresno's signature cocktail), with Champagne, vodka, triple sec, sour mix, and lemon.

SHOP, DINE, AND CHILL OUT AT FIG GARDEN VILLAGE Sample local olive oils, browse boutiques, try on sparkly baubles, take a wine-tasting class, or relax on the patio with live music at The Elbow Room Restaurant, then eat exotic sushi combos at Wassabi Off the Hook.

TRY STUDENT-MADE ICE CREAM Boasting a booming, 950-acre farm that produces \$5 million in food products, the bustling California State University, Fresno, campus has the Rue and Gwen Gibson Farm Market, where you can sample and buy products—all made or grown by students. Load up on ice cream, award-winning wine, olive oil, nuts, honey, organic produce, and sausage and other meats.

TAP INTO THE SIZZLING ART SCENE Explore the warehouse-lined streets and narrow alleys of Fresno's Cultural Arts District. Open a door and you might find glass blowers in action, or perhaps a gallery straight out of Soho. Many sites stay open for Art Hop, held the first and third Thursdays of each month, with evening hours at studios, galleries, and museums all over town.

VISIT FRIENDLY WINERIES Sure, the region has been home to big wine and grape producers for years (ever heard of Gallo?). But a growing number of intimate, family-run wineries have sprung up around

INFO For details on these ideas and more things to do in and around Fresno, contact the Fresno Convention & Visitors Bureau, playfresno.org

ALEX FARNUM



CLOCKWISE Get a taste of fresh at local fruit stands; shop and dine at Fig Garden Village; find a leafy retreat in Woodward Park.



town. Closest to Fresno, visit the six stops along the Twin Rivers Vintners Wine Trail. In the surrounding area, follow the Madera and Blossom Trail wine routes.

EXPLORE LEAFY WOODWARD PARK Relax in the peaceful retreat of the Shinzen Japanese Garden, watch top BMX bike racers tackle the park's challenging course, or walk and bike along multiuse paths in this 300-acre green jewel.

WALK UNDER BOWERS OF FLOWERS Sprawling orchards erupt in ethereal clouds of pink and white flowers every spring. Follow the self-guided Fresno County Blossom Trail by car or bike; peak bloom is usually

the first week of March (and come back in fall for colorful foliage).

BECOME A FRESNO LOCAVORE Bite into just-picked peaches, sample homemade preserves and pies, and snack on crunchy almonds as you follow a self-guided driving or cycling tour of farm stands along the Fresno County Fruit Trail. Don't miss extraordinary Simonian Farms, open since 1901 and growing over 120 varieties of fruits and vegetables.

VISIT EYE-POPPING WARNORS CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS From its spectacularly filigree and gold-leaf ceiling to its 2,100 red-velvet-covered seats, this 1928



architectural masterpiece is truly breathtaking. Each month, shows light up the stage (which sits atop a still-working 1,035-pipe Robert Morton organ). Check for events; this site is not to be missed.

GET YOUR OLLIE ON If you've got kids who love skateboarding (or maybe you're a skater dude yourself), check out Fresno's amazing variety of skate parks, with bowls, rails, and, at The Ark on W. Jensen Ave., the only public vert ramp in the Central Valley.

MEET FRIENDLY NEIGHBORS Take a scenic drive out of Fresno to visit towns like Clovis, with a charming main street lined with antique shops and cafes. Cool off with vanilla-scented lemonade at quaint Victoria Rose Cottage. And keep your eyes peeled for Clovis's favorite son, Chris Colfer, breakout star of the hit series *Glee*.

CHEER THE BOYS OF SUMMER Get tickets to watch the Fresno Grizzlies (minor-league affiliate of the championship San Francisco Giants), who play at impressive Chukchansi Park. Or get your peanuts and Cracker Jack at Fresno State to root for the Bulldogs.

PADDLE THE SAN JOAQUIN RIVER Join naturalist-led canoe trips to look for wildlife and learn about this important riparian ecosystem. Also enjoy bird walks, or explore a nature trail on your own. Check out exhibits in the handsome River

ABOVE Stroll the pretty streets of nearby Clovis. **RIGHT** Fresno State student at the school's farm store.



Center, a restored 1890s ranch house filled with hands-on exhibits.

TRY KOFTA Try *peda* bread, cheese *berag* (decadent triangles of filo pastry filled with cheese, butter, and parsley), *kofia* (juicy lamb meatballs), walnut-filled *kata*—Fresno's historic Armenian population means incredible restaurants, bakeries, and delis for everyone. George's (two locations) is a favorite Armenian eatery.

SIP A MICROBREW Pull up a stool inside Full Circle Brewing Company and try the Cluster Fuggle, named for the hops that give it distinctive flavor; it's the flagship beer of this historic downtown brew pub. At Sequoia Brewing Company, the award-winning beers include Half Dome, a refreshing hybrid cross between Hefeweizen and classic pale ale.

GO DOWN UNDER Just a few blocks east of State 99, some 20 feet underground, snakes an astounding subterranean network

5 more Central Valley surprises

LODI Swirl and sip a wide range of local vintages at the Lodi Wine and Visitor Center (be sure to try local Zinfandels). Take a self-guided walking tour of downtown murals. Rent a boat to explore peaceful Lodi Lake.

STOCKTON This California Delta town, which began as a shipping hub after the Gold Rush, has morphed into a dynamic and diverse destination. The waterfront and marina still bustle with commercial activity, but also feature an inviting pedestrian promenade, restaurants, and entertainment venues.

MODESTO Sample nuts at the Blue Diamond Almond plant, with up to 140 million pounds of nuts stored here for processing and shipping. Visit 1883 McHenry Mansion, with ornately furnished rooms hinting at bygone elegance. Taste fresh cheddar at nearby Hilmar Cheese Company, largest single-site producer of cheese in the world.

VISALIA This vibrant agricultural community tucked between Modesto and Bakersfield is framed by the longest stretch of mountains in the contiguous U.S. Tour a local farm on your way to Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, or catch a performance of the Tulare County Symphony at the restored 1930 Fox Theatre.

BAKERSFIELD Watch dragsters and funny cars vroom around the track at Auto Club Famoso Raceway. Check out the distinctive "Bakersfield sound," a crisp mix of steel and string guitars, drums, and fiddle, at Buck Owens' Crystal Palace. Dig into a feast at Benji's and other traditional Basque restaurants. —H.M.

known as Forestiere Gardens. This twisting series of rooms, gardens, and even a chapel, all dug by hand by Italian immigrant Baldasare Forestiere, makes a cool retreat from the Fresno summer sun. Open Wed–Sun.

HAVE SWEET DREAMS With so much to do in Fresno, why not spend the night? Choose from traditional lodgings, or book a stay at the newly renovated San Joaquin Hotel in the leafy Fig Garden district. The all-suite hotel is definitely an upgrade from the usual roadside fare, with gardens, an inviting pool, and stylish artwork everywhere. And it's pet friendly.

—HARRIOT MANLEY

ALEX FARNUM



More Central Valley ideas—visitcalifornia.com/central-valley