Northern California weekend

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Day trip Ukiah

Why go now: Autumn in this throwback burg explodes with foliage that rivals Vermont's.

Think small: Ukiah—population 16,000—may be the largest city in Mendocino County (and in neighboring Lake County, for that matter), but the place is as small-town as it gets. What it has: 19th-century architecture, charming tree-lined neighborhoods, and a laid-back vibe. What it doesn't have: The bustling feel of its wine country neighbors.

Change is afoot: This month, the 10,500-square-foot epicurean marketplace Branches (1180 Airport Park Blvd.; branchesrestaurant.com) hits town, with a bakery, pub, steakhouse, and butcher shop. Why here? Owner Munther Massarweh calls Ukiah "a diamond in the rough." Bumper crops: Bartlett pears and (unofficially) marijuana. Drink a pint: At Ukiah Brewing Company (3; 102 S. State St.; 707/468-5898), the nation's first certified organic brewpub, where cowboys and farmers clink glasses with lawyers and police officers.

Best way to bone up before your visit: "Ukiah," a song on the Doobie Brothers' 1973 album, The Captain and Me.

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1. Hike a hidden redwood grove

Montgomery Woods State Natural Reserve's 2,700 acres are virtually unknown to nonlocals. But this is one of the best places around to take in the quiet of a coastal redwood forest. A 3-mile round-trip trail follows Montgomery Creek to groves that have never been logged. On Orr Springs Rd., 15 miles northwest of Ukiah; parks.ca.gov or 707/937-5804.

BY MATT VILLANO
PHOTOGRAPHS BY THOMAS J. STORY
Naturally carbonated 90° water as effervescent as Champagne bubbles up into the indoor and outdoor mineral baths at Vichy Springs Resort. If it's chilly, sink into the 104° hot pool; on a warm afternoon, splash in the vast 80° swimming pool (pictured). Like the views of the wooded hillside? So did Mark Twain and Jack London, who used to soak here. Memo to nudists: All public areas are swimsuit-only. From $30; vichysprings.com or 707/462-9575.

3. Sip, shop, shovel
In a tiny refurbished shoe-repair shop, Tierra is part tasting room, part gallery, part garden store. The owners sell artwork and jewelry from local artists, and pour wines from Mendocino County wineries. Out back, a courtyard overflows with plants and trinkets for the yard. $5 tasting; 312 N. School St.; artgardenwine.com or 707/468-7936.

4. Pound the pavement
Downtown is best explored on foot, especially now, when fall color shows up in spectacular splashes. Don't miss the boutiques on School Street or the piles of squash at the Saturday morning farmers' market. School and E. Clay Streets; mccfarm.org/ukiahs.html.)

Getting to Ukiah
It's 115 miles north of San Francisco (46 miles north of Healdsburg) and 145 miles northwest of Sacramento.

Make it a weekend
Just outside town, the 500-acre Long Valley Ranch is a private retreat of only two rentals. A cottage called DogTrot sits on a ridge and has a big master suite with an outdoor Japanese soaking tub for two. The larger Glass House has an open kitchen and a long glass wall overlooking a lake. Both welcome dogs. From $300; 3-night weekend minimum; sheepdung.com

3 more reasons to make the drive

LUNCH WITH THE MONKS
The City of Ten Thousand Buddhas is a sanatorium turned Buddhist community, complete with a temple. Locals come for the lush gardens and an Asian-style vegan lunch at Jyun Kang Vegetarian Restaurant. 11; 11:30–3; 4351 Bodhi Way, Talmage (3 miles east of Ukiah, across U.S. 101); cttusa.org

A SIP OF FINE BRANDY
Fans swear the Pinot Noir-based elixirs from Germain-Robin outdo brandies from more famous places like Cognac and Armagnac. At an unlikely warehouse in an office park south of Ukiah, get free tastings of everything---including the $350-per-bottle Anno Domini. Call 800/782-8145 for an appointment.

A CIVILIZED DINNER
Special-night spot Patrona works with nearby farmers to load the dishes on its bistro menu with super-fresh produce. Case in point: duck breast with a fig and brandy sauce, served with McFadden Farm wild rice and local carrots and zucchini. $35; closed Sun; 130 W. Standley St.; 707/462-9181.