Nine days • Seven stages
390 to 500 miles • 40,000' to 50,000'+

Ten years ago—in 1999—the SRCC took its members on the Gold Country Tour, a north-to-south excursion down the length of the western Sierra foothills. Now we are planning to revisit the region with a new tour combining many of the best parts of the prior tour with loads of new roads and new scenery. No other region in the west offers cycle-tourists such a dense, tangled network of bike-friendly back roads, and it is because of this wealth of good roads that we can reinvent this tour, cherry-picking the best bits from the last time around and shuffling them into new configurations with other roads that are as nice as anything we did before. The result is an epic tour, with spectacular scenery, entertaining roads, and something new (or old) around every corner.

One big difference between the prior tour and this one is that, instead of moving from camp to camp every day, we now move between camps only twice all week. We’ll do three loop stages out of Pine Grove, then ride to Columbia, spending one night in that historic village (above) before riding on to Groveland, where we will do two more loop stages from that camp. This means we only have to set up our tents and unload the truck three times all week. All three of our campgrounds are best quality, with showers, swimming pools, laundry facilities, and wi-fi. We have a good plan in place for moving our car pool fleet on those two transfer days.

We are running this tour in mid-May because it becomes oppressively hot in the foothills later in the summer. The tour begins one week after the WCC Workers’ Ride and Party and ends one week before the Bad Little Brother.

Each stage offers a longer and shorter option. But it must be noted that even the shortest routes still add up to about 40,000' of elevation gain for the week, which will make even that “easy” option one of the hilliest tours we’ve ever staged. The longer routes will almost certainly add up to the hilliest one-week tour we’ve ever put together, and much of that elevation gain will be accumulated on steep grades. There are long and often hard climbs near the end of almost every stage.

That means this tour is not for beginners, nor even veteran A or low B riders. You will need to bring a good level of fitness and a good attitude—including a fondness for climbing and descending—to enjoy this challenging adventure.

But if you can manage it, you will be rewarded with some of the best riding and exploring we’ve ever offered on a club tour. The winding, narrow, quiet roads are scaled well for bike travel. The scenery is superb, ranging from high Sierra granite to shady oak forest, from rolling meadows of grasses and wildflowers to wild rivers running through deep, steep canyons. And the region is steeped in the colorful history of California’s Gold Rush. We’ll visit picturesque pioneer boom towns every day, from Fiddletown to Volcano, Columbia to Coulterville.
Getting started...

We will form up in our usual way at the club warehouse to consolidate our car pool fleet. Because the drive to the Gold Country is not too long, we won’t need to do this at the crack of dawn.

Our camp for the first four nights will be the Gold Country Resort, just uphill from the town of Pine Grove, off Hwy 88, in the hills above Jackson. We stayed here on our last tour through the region, although then it was called Pine Acres Resort. Names aside, it’s still the same camp with the same amenities, which include showers and swimming pool and laundry facilities.

Pine Grove is not of those charming, quaint pioneer towns. It’s just a sprawl of commercial clutter along Hwy 88. We have to visit this sprawl on all of our stages here, but manage to do so briefly and without much downside. Fortunately, the camp is up and away from it all, in a pleasant, wooded setting.

Stage 1: Fiddletown-Omo Ranch Loop
70 miles, 7500’ up and down
74 miles, 8000’ up and down

Stage 1 incorporates many of the best roads from the Sacramento Wheelman’s popular Sierra Century. It explores a hilly region to the north and east of our camp hub, traveling well up into the Sierra, into the beginnings of a true mountain landscape and ecology.

We begin by turning right on Tabeau and then left on Hwy 88, downhill through the Pine Grove sprawl. We turn right on Pine Grove-Volcano Road, often called simply Pine Grove Road, for a short, steep descent followed by a longer, more gradual climb. On our left on this climb is Indian Grinding Rock State Historic Park. Unlike all the other historic sites in this region that have to do with the Gold Rush, this one is dedicated to the Miwok Indians who lived here before the invasion of the argonauts. A large limestone slab in the middle of the meadow was used by many generations of Miwoks as a mortar for grinding acorn meal, and an interesting interpretive center has been built nearby to honor and remember the area’s original residents.

Over the top of this short climb, we topple down the mountain on a steep, fast descent: almost 500’ down in almost a mile. At the bottom of this intense free-fall, we roll past the Sutter Creek Road junction and gently uphill into the quaint little village of Volcano. The main street of town runs past the historic St George Hotel (left...worth a visit if you like grand old hotels). The road turns hard right at the end of the block. This is called Consolation Street in town but soon becomes Rams Horn Grade...and soon becomes a big climb.

Rams Horn gains around 950’ in 2.5 miles, and then there are more miles of gradual uphill after that. Altogether, we will have knocked off 1500’ of climb by the time we reach Fiddletown Road just past mile 10...and that includes a lot of descending.

It may seem like a stiff way to start the day, but you’ll forget about the hard work as soon as you turn onto Fiddletown Road. This is a wonderful descent, dropping 1600’ in a little over ten miles, and all of it perfect for a bike: steep enough to pile on a good turn of speed, but not steep enough to require much braking; always flowing back and forth through endless S-bends, all well-banked and well-paved. This is one of the high points of the Sierra Century...a downhill run the participants gleefully rehash afterward.

All this fun and frolic drop us into the picturesque village of Fiddletown at mile 21 (below)). This sleepy little hamlet looks much as it did over 100 years ago: a few stores and houses in the classic, Old West style, including a kooky general store where shoppers can find just about anything, as long as it’s odd.
The route turns right in Fiddletown on Tyler Road, and for the next nine miles wanders through the wooded hills on a succession of narrow, up-and-down lanes serving a thinly settled backcountry (top photo). We’ll gain a little over 1000’ along the way, most of it in the initial climb out of Fiddletown, and the rest in little, lumpy rollers. It’s a perfect venue for cycling: peaceful and pretty and virtually devoid of cars. When I laid this route out in my car, I sort of overlooked this section...thought of it as merely little connector roads to tie together other, more interesting parts of the stage. After I rode it on my bike, I changed my thinking: some of my best memories of the stage are from this section.

At around mile 30, we hit Mt Aukum Road and the town of Mt Aukum. If Mt Aukum has a picturesque old town, I must have missed it. In fact, I don’t recall much of a town at all, except for a few conventional roadside services. We turn right on Mt Aukum and then right again on Omo Ranch Road in just a few tenths...unless you’re opting for the longer route, in which case, you bear left on Mt Aukum Road at the Omo Ranch Road junction.

The posted mileage and elevation numbers for the day don’t really do justice to the difference between the two routes: four miles and a few hundred feet. Hidden behind the numbers is the way in which those few extra miles and feet are acquired...in a word: steeply. But before examining those tough climbs, let’s follow the shorter route to the point where the two routes rejoin. It’s a fairly easy tale to tell: Omo Ranch Road, all the way. For nine miles, the road climbs into the Sierra foothills, gaining 1500’ along the way. The first mile is nearly flat, and then we have to go to work. Most of the rest of this section is uphill, sometimes quite steeply, but never to the level of being a death march...just good honest labor. Usually we’re riding through dense forest, although I can’t promise the road will be all in shade. It’s a little too open for that. The wide spot in the road that the maps label as Omo Ranch has very little there beyond a few buildings and a school where a thirsty rider might find water.

Now for the longer, steeper loop. Mt Aukum Road is busier, faster, and more modern than the dinky back roads that preceded it, and is slightly less enjoyable as a cycling road. But the difference is only minor. It’s still quite pleasant. After turning left on Mt Aukum at mile 30, the long route drops briefly to a pleasant valley (middle photo) and then climbs to a junction with Fairplay Road, just before mile 35. There is a small store at the intersection, known as Melson’s Corner. We go right on Fairplay and almost immediately left onto Perry Creek Road.

Perry Creek is another of those shrimpy little lanes through the middle of nowhere. It drops three or four hundred feet to the creek and then begins climbing. A little over three miles into the uphill, we turn left on Slug Gulch (below). This road is a legend among local riders, with a funky reputation to go with its funky name. In the first three miles, we gain 1000’ in a series of intimidating, switchbacking walls. The climb is so tough that when the Sierra Century goes up it, club members are waiting at the top to present each gasping and wheezing rider with a special medal that says, “I survived Slug Gulch!” But tough as it is, it’s also a very pretty road.
After the steep section, the Slug shows some mercy, with only a couple of hundred more feet of gain in the final two miles to the junction with Omo Ranch, where the routes rejoin.

But don’t congratulate yourself too soon on having beaten this hill: that is far from the end of the work. Omo Ranch continues to climb into the hills to the tune of another 1500’ spread over nearly ten miles of more-or-less easy, rolling grades. We’re really up in the mountains now, and the scenery along this stretch has an almost alpine quality to it, with a tidy understory of fragrant—some might say pungent—bears clover beneath a soaring canopy of firs, pines, and cedars (top). Most of the time we’re closed in among the trees, but occasionally we catch a vista out over the distant ranks of forested ridges.

Finally, near mile 49—short route miles—we come to the end of the climbing, at least for the time being. There are at least three more uphills on the stage, one of them substantial, but other than that, the final miles are mostly downhill excitement, beginning with a high-speed screamer down Hwy 88. This is a major highway—dropping out of the high Sierra from Carson Pass—with the potential for a lot of traffic. But there is a wide shoulder, and if you want to, you can bomb through these three miles almost as fast as the cars can. It’s wide open and beautifully paved. In spite of its reputation for traffic, when we toured here before, we lucked out and did this very fast, smooth descent absolutely car-free...the whole wide road, all to ourselves. We grabbed the lane, grabbed a tuck, and flew.

We turn off the highway onto another delightful back road: Shake Ridge (middle photo). It has chunky old pavement for the first mile or so—or did when we were here last—but then improves to good quality similar to the paving on Fiddletown Road. In fact, the rest of this descent is much akin to those dream miles. After a brief uphill bump at mile 53, we’ll be zipping downhill constantly, all the way back through Volcano, including descending Rams Horn Grade (below). Unlike Shake Ridge and Fiddletown, Rams Horn is a little too steep and twisty to let it all hang out. But bold descenders will turn this well-paved road into one of the highlights of the day. It’s a curvy, swervy dervish of a downhill, and with the smooth asphalt, it will be about as good as it can be...a rush.

At the bottom of the hill—through Volcano again and past the Sutter Creek Road junction—we come to a fork in the road. To the right is Pine Grove Road. The steep descent we did on the way out is now transformed into a brutally steep climb. You can do that, or you can follow our suggested route and do an end run around the steep pitch by hanging a left on Volcano-Pioneer Road. This will add some miles and we’ll still have to climb as high—maybe even a bit higher—but it goes at it in a more roundabout way...hence, the extra miles and marginally less steep gradient. After climbing 600’ in a little over two miles, this pleasant road tees into Hwy 88. Turn right and head downhill on the highway for about four miles to Tabeau Road and camp. The last half-mile of 88 and Tabeau are both uphill. Hwy 88 is usually busy but always has decent shoulders.

We’ll pass through the Pine Grove and Volcano-Pioneer junction again on Stage 3, so you can do one climb on one stage and the other later.
Stage 2: Pardee-Paloma Loop
49 miles, 5300' up and down
54 miles, 5900' up and down

Today we’re heading in the opposite direction from yesterday’s stage. Now we’re going downhill into the valley at the base of the foothills. This is one of the easier stages on this never-easy tour, being rather short on miles. But don’t overlook the elevation gain, a good chunk of which comes very late in the ride, as we climb from the valley back up into the hills. I looked all over for ways to make the longer option even longer and harder on this day, but nothing realistic suggested itself, except for one, brief bonus loop. It is what it is: relatively easy. But then, I don’t suppose every stage has to be a leg-breaker, even for the hardcore hammers. And if you did the long route yesterday and plan to do the extra-long route tomorrow, maybe a mellow day today is not such a bad idea.

We begin as we did yesterday: right on Tabeau and left on Hwy 88. This time we stay on 88 a little longer, and we’ll be rolling down the mountain at a pretty good clip before our next turn comes up: a right on Climax Road. Once on Climax, the snaky, twisty downhill fun continues. From the beginning of the stage to the town of Jackson at mile 11, we will descend most of the time. There is one flat mile on Ridge Road and a couple of little uphill bumps on New York Ranch Road, but otherwise, it’s a whole lot of low-level flying.

In recent years, a rancheria casino and a tract neighborhood have been built along New York Ranch Road in what used to be deep country. But it’s still a nice road, most of the time. After miles of (mostly) pretty country riding on this meandering lane, we are dumped rather abruptly into downtown, old town Jackson (above). Turn right on Court, left on Water, and head down the hill into the city center.

Jackson was a town even before the discovery of gold, as travelers stopped here because of its location at a source of good water. But it boomed in the Gold Rush too, and in fact gold was still being mined here as late as the 1940’s. Now, perhaps because the town lies at an important junction of Highways 49 and 88, it has outgrown its boomtown-to-ghost town heritage and has surrounded itself with some less than attractive suburbs and commercial strips. Today’s route manages to avoid most of the worst of this modern sprawl by heading right through the center of the old, pioneer downtown. These blocks along Main are home to an impressive collection of stately old structures, most from the latter half of the 19th century. Most of the town’s original buildings burnt down in the early 1860’s, and the more fire-resistant brick and stone buildings now on display were built at that time. Most impressive of all is the grand old National Hotel at the foot of the street (left). Ride up the well-preserved main street, cross Hwy 49, and head out the other side of town.

When we cross 49, grab your climbing gears, because the road out of town—Hoffman Street—starts with a couple of steep blocks that would do San Francisco proud. As we leave the houses of town behind, the grade eases off, and by mile 12, we’ve topped the rise and are ready for another great downhill run. Somewhere—probably at the town line—the road name changes from Hoffman Street to Stony Creek Road. From the top of the grassy knoll at around mile 12, we can look forward to almost eight miles of cycling that is as sweet as it can possibly be: undulating, slinky miles through the rolling hills, almost always pleasantly and sometimes rapidly downhill.

In the last couple of miles of this great downhill, we start catching glimpses of Pardee Reservoir (below), which impounds the waters of the Mokelumne River. At mile 20, we fetch up on the shore of the lake. By the time we bottom out at the lake, we will have descended for around 18 of those first 20 miles, losing almost 1800' along the way. Of course, tossing away all that elevation in such a prodigal manner at the start of the ride is why the end of the ride seems so much harder...but hey, we’ll worry about that later! For now, enjoy the downhills.

As we ride around the reservoir, we cycle along the tops of three different dams (on the short course), the first of which comes just at the bottom of the long downhill. This is the Jackson Creek spillway. Just a mile later, we come to a fork in the road and turn left on Pardee Dam Road (for the short course). This is where the longer route diverges. There aren’t any road signs for either of these forks, but it’s the only left turn one can make in the area.
My notes say a sign pointing down the left fork (short route) says, “Pardee Dam 2, Valley Springs 7.”

For the long-route bonus miles, just keep going straight on Stony Creek for another 8/10ths of a mile, then turn left (south) on Buena Vista Road. Frankly, this longer route doesn’t add much except the miles. There is nothing wrong with it at all, but also nothing fabulous. Still, they’re all good miles, so more is better, right? I haven’t even bothered to provide an elevation profile for these nine miles that are off the basic course. The word “rolling” would pretty well sum it up. You will note that the route rejoins the short route on Campo Seco Road. But you might also notice that the route goes right past Camp Seco out there somewhere before looping back to it. That’s because the first section of it is gravel. The route has to continue to Chile Camp Road to stay on pavement.

Once on Pardee Dam Road (on the short route), we ride down the length of the lake, twice cycling along the tops of dams: first, the main Pardee Dam—blocking the deep gorge of the Mokelumne River—and then a spillway dam a little further along. The run across the main dam is one lane, and a signal regulates traffic (top). There is enough room for bikes to meet oncoming traffic and get by, in case you don’t get through the controlled section in your allotted time window. In any event though, there is almost no traffic out here, so it’s unlikely to be much of an issue. I mention this because you might want to stop halfway across the dam and peer over the downstream side into the deep gorge of the river. It’s quite an impressive canyon and definitely worth a look.

When Pardee Dam Road ends, there are once again no road signs at the intersection, except one rather puzzling sign that says we’ve just been riding on Sandretti Road. I guess the road changes names somewhere out there, without ever going through a junction or posting a sign. Anyway, at the otherwise unmarked end of this road, we turn left on Campo Seco Road—where the long route rejoins—and then, in a little less than a mile, left on Paloma Road. This is all moderately rolling terrain through meadows dotted with stately old oaks.

When we turn left onto Paloma, we start out with a level section (middle photo) and then tackle a substantial climb: 700’ in a little over four miles. Up on the ridge, with lovely views over the surrounding hills and valleys, we hit the little village of Paloma. From at least superficial appearances, Paloma looks to be very poor, with no points of scenic or historic interest, and no services or other attractions for which we might wish to stop. So keep on keeping on: turn left in town and head downhill—sometimes quite steeply—for three miles on Gwin Mine Road.

Gwin Mine used to be unpaved, which made for a perilous descent. But it is paved now. Not too well, but still a huge improvement. What’s more, the bridge over the Mokelumne River at the bottom has been reopened, after having been closed for some time. (Bikes were always able to use the bridge, even when it was closed to cars, but the reopening does indicate some commitment on the part of the local works department to keeping this handy link of roads in good order.)

Up from the river, the road name changes to Middle Bar Road (below), as it climbs for three miles to a junction with Hwy 49. Pavement on Middle Bar is generally in crappy shape. But it’s mostly an uphill, and at climbing...
speed you can dodge the holes and cracks without much trouble. My most recent ride up this hill reminded me somewhat forcefully that it isn’t all easy climbing. Most of it is relatively mellow, but there are a couple of pitches that approach double digits. This is all very pretty country for cycle-touring. Both Gwin Mine and Middle Bar are very quiet and remote, visited only occasionally by fishermen heading for the river. No one comes this way as a through-traveler. If they’re in a hurry, they’ll be up on Hwy 49, which is where we’re heading right now.

One nearly level mile heading north along Hwy 49 brings us back to the southern fringe of Jackson and a right turn onto Broadway. If you’ve lost contact with the sags, this is the first shot at water in quite awhile. A short run on Broadway and we turn right on Clinton, heading out of town and up into the hills. We’ll be doing most of Clinton (as a downhill) on Stage 4, but today we’re bypassing most of it by way of Butte Mountain Road.

While the lower section of Clinton goes uphill in a gradual, steady way, Butte Mountain leaps and skips over many little ridges and swoops into a few little valleys as well...all in all, a much more interesting but also more challenging piece of real estate. Most of the time, it feels very out-of-the-way and middle-of-nowhere. Narrow and funky and twisty. In other words, a good cycling road.

We have to return to Clinton briefly, and then we turn off onto another wonderful road: Tabeau (above). Yep, our own campground road. We’ll be on it all the way to the finish. So far, we’ve just seen the little snippet of it heading out to Hwy 88. Now we get the rest of it...the best of it. We did this road as a descent on our previous tour here. It’s a terrific descent. However, so are many other roads around here. But some of the others aren’t as scenic and peaceful as Tabeau, and those are qualities we value even more in a climb, when we’re going more slowly. So I have us speeding downhill on some other nearby roads, but have saved this jewel for our long, last climb. It is often but not always shady. The scenery varies between woods, vineyards, and meadows. The gradient varies between moderately steep, mellow, and occasionally even slightly downhill. Traffic is almost nonexistent. It all adds up to a very nice bike road. If we have to end the stage with a five-mile uphill, this is the kind of uphill we would want it to be.

**Stage 3: Sutter Creek Loops**

58 miles, 6400’ up and down  
67 miles, 6900’ up and down  
77 miles, 7600’ up and down

This loop visits the charming pioneer town of Sutter Creek. We like it so much, we visit it twice. Actually, the route is roughly in the shape of a figure-8, with the town at the crossover point.

We begin with another run down to Volcano, only today, to introduce a little variety, we’re turning right from Tabeau onto Hwy 88. Descend briefly and then turn left on Aqueduct Road (below). This is a pleasant, tranquil, slightly downhill run through deep forest that connects to Pine Grove Road. Turn right on Pine Grove and head up and over the hill and down the steep chute to Volcano, as we did on Stage 1.

Remember on Stage 1 how we turned hard right from Main to Consolation Street in Volcano? Today we’re going to go more-or-less straight ahead at that corner. Straight ahead and straight up. This is Charleston Road, and it offers another way to climb into the mountains north of town. Both Rams Horn Grade and Charleston climb steeply to the top of the ridge. But Charleston is the more extreme of the two. The first pitch gains 400’ in about half a mile. That’s a 15% grade, but a few spots are even steeper. In all, it gains about 1000’ in a little over three miles.

We’re doing this bad boy for three reasons. First, we’ve already done Rams Horn twice—once up and once down—so now we’re doing something different. Second, it’s a neat road. Hard, yes, but also beautiful. Once past the fierce initial pitch, it eases off and even goes downhill here and there, and it opens up some really pretty vistas. Finally, it heads more directly toward where we want to go. However, if all of that doesn’t convince you, and if the prospect of that 15%+ wall gives you the heebie jeebies, then you can do Rams Horn again, or perhaps even the easiest alternative: starting off with the downhill along Sutter Creek.
That's the only one of the five roads out of Volcano that goes downhill. For various reasons, I use that road on the return leg of the trip...uphill from the town of Sutter Creek to Volcano. If you wanted to avoid the climbs on either Rams Horn or Charleston, you could begin the day with the downhill on Sutter Creek and simply retrace that part of the route at the end of the ride. The pavement's a little patchy and bumpy—which is part of the reason I choose to use it only as a climb—but otherwise it would be fine. Take a look at the elevation profile: turn around the long, gradual climb near the end of the profile and substitute it—as a downhill—for the spike representing Charleston at the start. You can see that it now becomes a much easier stage.

On the other hand, you would miss the whole point of why we want to go up Charleston: to do the terrific descent of Shake Ridge Road (above). We did the upper half of this sweet road on Stage 1, and now we have a chance at more of the same good stuff on the lower half, only in this case, it may be even better. This section of Shake Ridge descends for most of 11 miles, with a few small saddles and uphills thrown in to keep riders sane. At a junction with Pine Gulch Road, Shake Ridge bears right, climbs a bit, and then descends for another two miles smack into the center of the town of Sutter Creek. Somewhere on the approach to town, the road name changes from Shake Ridge to Gopher Flat, but you won't notice this name change unless you happen to glance at the street sign when you tee into the main street in town.

Sutter Creek (middle photo) is, in my opinion, one of the most interesting and attractive of the Mother Lode boom towns. Over $40 million in gold was pulled out of the mines here, and when the gold ran out, the town continued to prosper with a lively lumber industry. Also, it has always served as a central supply depot for all services and materials for this region. Through good luck or good planning, the town has preserved the best of its charming downtown core, where second and third floor balconies on the ornate, Victorian storefronts overhang not only the sidewalks, but the narrow main street as well, giving the town an especially quaint, old-world look. Today the town thrives primarily as a tourist attraction, with most of the storefronts housing gift shops and many of the fine old homes operating as bed-&-breakfast inns.

This quaint, narrow main drag through town was, until recently, busy Hwy 49, often choked with traffic. In 2007, CalTrans completed a new highway bypass around the western perimeter of town. Now the main street carries much less through traffic.

On our first pass through town, we cross over the main street directly from Shake Ridge/Gopher Flat to tiny Hayden Alley, which delivers us, in one, brief block, to Spanish Street. This pleasant street runs parallel to the main drag and is lined with many elegant old homes, most in a state of spotless and pristine preservation. This is our route out of town. Spanish climbs a short hill, and then we turn left on Sutter-Ione Road and climb a longer hill up and out of town. We pass scattered residential tracts of more recent vintage than the old town at the foot of the hill, then break out into countryside again (below).
Sutter-Ione Road is a fine cycling road. The pavement is a bit rough as you climb out of town, but once out in the rolling hills, it becomes as good as a road can be. It crosses the new 49 bypass near the crest of the climb out of town, runs along the ridge for a while, and then drops nearly 1000' in a series of sweet little downhills spread over about six miles. There are some uphill bits in there that are too big to dismiss as “just rollers,” but overall, the downs far outweigh the ups.

Out here, on the west side of the Hwy 49, rolling out toward the great Central Valley of California, the land smooths out a bit (compared to the steeper foothills east of the highway, tilting up into the Sierra). The hills have a softer, more rounded and pillowy look, and the dense stands of firs and pines give way to rolling grasslands dotted with majestic old oaks.

Sutter-Ione tees into Hwy 124, a fairly busy local road. We head north on it—very slightly uphill—for one mile to a left turn onto Willow Creek Road (above), where we leave most of whatever traffic there is out here and return to quiet backroad biking. Willow Creek rolls along its gently up-and-down way for most of five miles, dipping down into a couple of creek beds and humping up over the hills in between, before teeing into Hwy 16.

This is another rather busy highway—but with big shoulders—a straight, flat, fast link directly to Sacramento. We follow it for a mile and a half of the closest thing we’ll find on this tour to a flat road. Not very exciting, but soon over. Hwy 16 ends when it runs into Hwy 49. We turn south on 49 and zoom downhill for a little less than a mile before escaping from the busy highways by turning left into the tiny hamlet of Drytown.

A brief digression here: if you feel you’re not getting your money’s worth with this loop being only 58 miles, we do have a couple of add-ons to suggest. They’re very nice, and my only reservation about them is that they require riding on a busy, commercially cluttered stretch of Hwy 49 south of the town of Plymouth. Anyway, here’s what we would do to add the bonus miles...

Instead of turning right from Willow Creek onto Hwy 16, turn left. After one mile heading west on 16, turn right and head north on Latrobe Road (more open, rolling grasslands...middle photo), and then right again in two miles on Old Sacramento Road. This tranquil byway wanders gently uphill along the bank of Little Indian Creek and in five miles enters the town of Plymouth. At this point, you could just head south on 49 back to the Hwy 16 junction and carry on down 49 to Drytown. This would yield a net gain of around nine miles.

Or, for even more miles and smiles, you could cross 49 from Old Sacramento to Shenandoah Road. Bear left on Shenandoah Road at the Fiddletown Road junction and then turn right and head uphill on Shenandoah School Road. This is a beautiful, quiet backroad, ideal for cycling (below). This is the heart of Amador County’s grape growing and wine making region, which has earned itself a respected reputation for full-bodied zins...
and other big reds. There are a number of wineries along this loop...worth a visit.

Shenandoah School Road tees back into Shenandoah Road, where we turn left and descend on an easy, non-technical grade back to Plymouth, pick up Hwy 49, and head for Drytown. This loop will add another ten miles. Doing both loops will produce a ride of 77 miles. I would wholeheartedly recommend both of these optional sections, except for the disclaimer about the two miles of crud on 49, south of Plymouth. For what it’s worth, local cyclists tell me they ride this stretch all the time and claim it doesn’t bother them, if you want to consider that an endorsement.

Back to the basic route... Drytown is very small indeed and has few significant services for passing travelers. But it marks the gateway to a clutch of remote roads perfect for cycling. These roads don’t appear on a typical AAA map, and we missed them on our first tour through the region. But my local cycling pals told me I had to come back and explore them, and I am glad I did. You will be too, once you ride them. But these hidden treasures come at a price: we have to claw our way out of Drytown on a series of steep, stairstepping pitches that gain 200’ and 300’ at a time, eventually adding most of another 1000’ of gain to our day’s total, over a stretch of about five miles.

In between the climbs are lovely little valleys...meadows mixed with picture-postcard forest glades and handsome old barns. It’s all very off-the-beaten-path and serene. Most of the time, the roads are little more than one lane wide, and yet most of the time, they sport decent pavement. (This is a common theme in the Gold Country: although we do visit some rather badly paved roads on some of our routes, the vast majority of the roads in this area are superbly paved, even many itty bitty ones—like these—that seem to wander from the middle of nowhere to the back of beyond.)

The only problem with riding this string of little roads is that the turnings are sometimes a bit confusing. While the county public works people have kept the roads in good repair, they haven’t exactly emptied their coffers to pay for street signs. The most confusing turn is the first one we do after leaving Drytown. We have been climbing on New Chicago-Quartz Mountain Road, and after descending steeply from the final summit at about mile 33, we come to a junction with a road heading off to the right (south). This is the direction we want to go. This is Turner Road, although there is not a single sign at the intersection to tell us so. The only way to know it’s the right intersection is that Turner splits and forms a little triangular island at the junction (left).

After several twists and turns and ups and downs, Turner merges into Amador Road (also known as Stringbean Alley). This road climbs one last hill and drops steeply back to the town of Sutter Creek, where, in the interest of keeping us thoroughly confused, the road name changes to Amador City Road and then, as we recross the main drag, to North Amelia Street (all without any turnings). Amelia quickly tees into Spanish Street, where you’re entitled to feel a bit of _deja vu_ all over again. It’s the same Spanish Street we were on 20 or more miles ago, only this time we’re going in the opposite direction. Pass Hayden Alley and follow Spanish all the way to its end, where it squeezes between the tall Victorian storefronts and spills right out into the center of the historic old town.

If you didn’t stop to prowl Sutter Creek on your first pass through town, I urge you to do so now...to get off the bike and browse around in the many shops and galleries, or just park your keester on a sidewalk bench and watch the world go by for a few minutes. If your timing is good, you might arrive here near midday, and you can stop for lunch. There are several eateries in town.

We’re only on the main street for one block before turning left on Church Street and heading up into the hills. This is not a well-marked turn—we’re getting used to that by now—but a sign to Volcano and Daffodil Hill is our cue that we’re on the right track. Church Street becomes Sutter Creek Road as it leaves town (below), and the road climbs steadily but usually very gently for the next 12 miles. We’ll climb about 800’ in those 12 miles, and it will mostly be pleasant work, under the shade of the surrounding broadleaf forest,
and almost always alongside the cascades and pools of beautiful Sutter Creek.

You may think that ending the ride with a 12-mile climb is some kind of sick joke on my part, but trust me: you’re going to enjoy this road. Any loop ride that has as many nice downhills as this one does is eventually going to have a few uphills as well. But when it comes to taking your climbing medicine, this is about as pleasant and sugar-coated as your medicine could be.

If it’s a hot day, you may decide to break the climb off at some point to scramble down to the creek and dunk all or part of your well-toasted body into one of the many deep pools along the way. Our one photo of the creek does a poor job of conveying just how pretty and pleasant this creek is, and how enjoyable it is to ride alongside it...or to stop and dabble your toes in it.

At the top of the hill, we turn right and once again face the choice: Volcano-Pioneer Road (steep uphill) or Pine Grove Road (really steep uphill). The route goes to the left, on the slightly less steep Volcano-Pioneer, but I have a feeling a few of the hardheads in the group will just have to lock horns with that butch wall on Pine Grove. If you do, remember that there is a second steep pitch on this road, between the Aqueduct Road junction and Hwy 88. And then there’s another uphill, from that corner on 88, up to Tabeau. It all adds up to a serious grunt. We did it on our first tour, and that’s why we’re avoiding it this time. Once burned, twice shy!

Stage 4: Pine Grove to Columbia
Through route: 68 miles, 6000' up, 6500' down
Drivers’ loop: 58 miles, 7000' up and down

Finally, four stages into the tour, we have to break camp and move. Time for cross-training: that upper-body workout known as the duffle bag brigade.

Once the truck is loaded and the camp is tidy, we set out along the now-familiar path: right on Tabeau to a left and downhill on Hwy 88. But then we do something new: left on Irishtown Road (above). This turn is almost exactly across from the Pine Grove junction. Two miles later, we bear left onto Clinton Road and continue heading down the hill. After a couple of nearly flat miles at the bottom of Clinton, we turn left on Broadway (on the south side of Jackson) and left again on Hwy 49. Within half a mile of town, we’re bombing downhill again, this time slithering into the bottom of the canyon of the Mokelumne River. By the time we cross the river, we will have descended for around 13 of the first 15 miles of the stage, with a total elevation loss of nearly 1700'. Better than two cups of coffee in the morning!

Now however, we have to begin making a hefty balloon payment on that big loan we just took out from the gravity bank. From the river, we climb steadily for most of four miles on Hwy 49. Watch for the signs for a left turn onto the Historic Hwy 49 bypass. This gets us off the busy highway, cuts the top off the hill, and takes us through the pretty pioneer town of Mokelumne Hill (above). Founded around 1850, “Mok Hill” followed the same meteoric career path of many another Gold Rush boom town: an overnight birth and furious, uncontrolled growth (complete with epidemic violence and frontier justice), a brief heyday of sudden wealth, and, after the local gold was played out, a long slumber as a near-ghost town. Now, its few remaining blocks of Western/Victorian storefronts and homes have a sleepy, quiet charm, and the town survives as an historical artifact and tourist attraction.

We zig and zag through town on neighborhood streets before turning left on Hwy 26...still going uphill. The top of the climb comes at just over 20 miles, and within a fraction of a mile, we turn right on Jesus Maria Road. Don’t miss the turn: this little road doesn’t look much bigger than a driveway at the beginning. A short uphill hump and then we’re off...snaking downhill (again!) on a mile-and-a-half plunge to Jesus Maria Creek. This road is unlike the earlier roads today. Jesus Maria (below) is a tiny, twisty path, which makes the downhill more technical. On the bright side, this descent has recently been repaved and is nice and smooth. Once down to the creek, we roll along beside its pretty pools and riffles for a mile...
down for several miles along the ridge line, losing and
gaining altitude in rugged 100’ to 300’ chunks, eventu-
ally topping out at 2800’. In many ways, these smaller
but steeper hills are as exhausting as the bigger, more
daunting ascents. At mile 32, the old, patchy pavement
gives way to smoother asphalt, and at around mile 34,
we turn left on Railroad Flat Road (below). I think it’s
axiomatic that any road with the word “Flat” in its
name is going to be anything but flat, at least most of
the time. The road name usually commemorates one
little flat spot that is remarkable for being the only flat
place around, amidst many hills. Such is the case here,
although our photo may show at least its one namesake
flat spot. Don’t be deceived!

Up here in the mountains, the Mokelumne River and
its neighbor streams have spread out into a network of
tributaries—like the fingers of a great riparian hand—
with each creek dancing about in its own steeply walled
canyon. As we head north on Railroad Flat and its succes-
sor, Hwy 26 (between miles 45 and 55), the route will cross
six rivers or large streams, and we will drop down into
the canyon—and climb back up the other side—of each one. Like
stinging jabs from a boxer, the little uphill hits keep coming—100’
here, 400’ there—until we start to get a little punchy. At least on
the smoother pavement, we can wring a little momentum out of
the corresponding downhill bits. That might help...a little.

There is a market in the little mountain town of Railroad Flat at mile
39, which will be our first crack at store-bought munchies since
Mok Hill at mile 19. There will be another couple of small stores
in the next ten miles, but that’s about it for civilization.

There are so many hills in this section, it’s hard to pick out any
single one as being especially noteworthy, but there is one, just a
few miles beyond the town of West Point, that sticks in my mind
as really nasty. We drop steeply to what I believe is the north fork
of the Mokelumne and cross the river above deep, emerald green
pools set amid soaring granite monoliths. I recommend stopping
here to enjoy the scenery. It will also delay the big climb ahead:
almost 1000’ up in 3.5 miles. After all the jabs and body blows of
the past 25 miles, this is the big roundhouse haymaker that finally
buckles the knees.

Once over the top of this fierce climb, riders can recuperate for most
of the remainder of the ride. Just a mile beyond the summit, we
tee into Hwy 88, almost across the street from Volcano-
Pioneer Road...deja vu from previous rides. From this
point, we just follow the same final few miles down 88
to Tabeau and camp.

I’ve been so busy talking about the nasty climbs on this
loop that I’ve neglected to say much about the scenery.
Briefly, it’s a typical Sierra landscape: beautiful mountain
streams, massive granite walls and boulders, forests of
both broadleaf and needle trees in great variety, and every
so often a sweeping, subalpine meadow to open up the
vistas. Aside from a few small towns and scattered rural
homesteads, there are very few marks of man here. It’s
a wild, remote, rugged region.

Okay then...we have the drivers in the cars and heading
for Columbia. Meanwhile, what have the through-route
riders been doing? Let’s find out...
Those doing the through route and bearing away south on Whiskey Slide do not escape the big Jesus Maria ascent, for the turn onto the side road doesn’t come up until near the top of the climb. The right turn onto Whiskey Slide is every bit as obscure as the turn onto Jesus Maria had been and perhaps even more so, as the road is not even paved at its beginning. There is a reasonably passable section of gravel lasting about 3/4 of a mile and then pavement returns.

It’s just as well that the pavement does return, because Whiskey Slide launches off into a steep descent of about three miles. This is followed by a shorter but quite steep climb, and then a few miles of chunky rollers before the road tees into Mountain Ranch Road, where we turn right and then, a half-mile later, left onto Michel Road. Mountain Ranch is a slightly busier highway, but Michel and the roads that follow it are all as quiet and remote and bike-friendly as Jesus Maria and Whiskey Slide. This is back road riding at its best: tiny roads, tight turns, loads of ups and downs, and no traffic, all out in gorgeous countryside.

We will be on Michel for almost three miles, then on Old Gulch Road for another three-and-a-half miles. The turn onto Old Gulch may not be well marked, and in fact, all of the turns on this run from Jesus Maria to Angels Camps are tricky and take some puzzling out. (Stay awake!) Old Gulch tees into Calaveritas Road (top photo). Almost all of these miles will be downhill in the most enjoyable way. Calaveritas leads to Dogtown Road (two lower photos), which continues this wonderful, remote, idyllic run for nearly ten more miles. After the mostly downhill run on Michel, Old Gulch, and Calaveritas, Dogtown has more up than down, but it’s not one long climb; it’s a roller coaster of ups and downs. Dogtown would eventually take us all the way to Hwy 49, were we to run it out to its finish. But we’re not going to do that, not quite. We will be looking for a left turn onto Gardner Lane at around mile 52, just as we enter the suburban fringe of Angels Camp. Turn left on Gardner and in half a mile it will tee into the busier Murphy’s Grade...just a local road, but feeling almost like a busy highway.

On the Gold Country Tour, we were able to turn left on Murphy’s Grade and then right on a nifty little road called Rolleri Bypass, which, true to its name, bypassed busy, downtown Angels Camp (which, in spite of its pretty name and jumping frog heritage, isn’t really all that charming). Unfortunately, as of last year, that bypass is no longer possible. Angels Camp sits at the junction of Hwy 4 and Hwy 49. But now Hwy 4 has been rerouted around the north and east sides of town as a near freeway. It flies over Gardner and Murphy’s Grade on overpasses and then cuts poor little Rolleri Bypass in two on its way up the hill, away from town. Our nifty little shortcut is now a dead-end. So what we are forced to do, much against our will, is turn right on Murphy’s Grade and ride down to Hwy 49, into the center of Angels Camp. We’ll turn left on the main drag and roll south to the junction where we can pick up the old, pre-bypass section of Hwy 4, then take that up and out of town. The one silk purse we can make out of this sow’s ear is that there is a nice city park in Angels Camp at around mile 53—Utica Park—and this will make a good spot for a rest stop.

That old section of Hwy 4 will take us clear of Angels Camp and out into the county again. It’s a moderately busy highway, but
side of town, following Main as it bends around in a long arc and connects to Parrots Ferry Road. This is another road with the potential for heavy tourist traffic, but it has wide shoulders at least part of the time. We turn right on Parrots Ferry at about mile 59, drop swiftly for 200’, climb briefly, and then launch off in a speedy, 2-mile downhill to the long bridge over New Melones Lake (above). This is one of the largest of the Sierra reservoirs. It captures the waters of the Stanislaus River.

Parrotts Ferry Road was once one of the most snake-like routes in California, but that has now changed with the widening and realignment that took place in connection with the building of the New Melones Dam in the 1970’s. The dam flooded the valley below and covered the old bridge that crossed the Stanislaus River at the bottom of the canyon. Those of the rafting and kayaking community were devastated by the loss of a fantastic stretch of white water. Also gone are many of the old watering troughs that could be found at the shady canyon switchbacks, where travelers could water their horse teams, or later, add some water to their steaming radiators. We no longer have to descend all the way to the bottom of the canyon, but we still drop around 600’ in that fast plunge to the bridge. And that brings us to the last, big climb to the finish: a 5-mile, 1000’ ascent...not brutally steep, but at the end of a fairly long and possibly hot day, quite a challenge.

Once we make it to the top of the climb, we’re in the town of Columbia, or more precisely, in Columbia State Historic Park (both photos below). The entire town has been preserved in a state of something resembling its 19th century character, when, for a brief boom in the 1860’s, it was the second largest city in the state. The state parks department has been working to preserve and restore the town since the 1940’s. People do still live here and all the stores are open for business, but everything is a living museum...a sort of Gold Rush Williamsburg. On a weekend in the summer, the tree-lined streets and quaint shops can be teeming with tourists to a point where it resembles Main Street at Disneyland. But if you visit on a weekday in the off-season—as we will be doing—and perhaps near the end of the day, after most visitors have left, you should be able, with a little imagination, to cast yourself backward in time and recapture the flavor of that earlier era.

Today’s destination is the Marble Quarry Resort. It’s just a couple of blocks past town on Yankee Hill Road, which is an extension of Jackson Street, a main avenue through the town. This is a very pleasant camp, which, in spite of its RV orientation, has plenty of room set aside for tents among shady groves of trees. And after that long, hot climb, you’ll be glad to know they have showers and a swimming pool...a tiny one, but enough for a refreshing dip.

There is an easy, shaded walk through the woods and through a fascinating maze of convoluted marble canyons and standing stones to the center of town. So after cooling off and changing into walking attire, we can stroll back down to town in the late afternoon and soak up all the history our little brains can assimilate. It’s a special place, and this should be one of the highlights of the trip.
Stage 5: Columbia to Groveland
Through route: 44 miles, 6000' up, 5300' down
Through route (long): 58 miles, 7100' up, 6400' down
Drivers’ loop: 40 miles, 3500’ up and down

Time to move again. Normally on tour, we do this every day. On this trip, it’s the exception. This is our second and final move day, until we pack up to go home. Today we’re moving (and riding) to Groveland. As noted earlier, the drivers’ loop today is the easier ride and should attract whatever moderate riders we have in the group. Both of the through routes are harder, thanks to a lot of climbing, both early and late.

We begin by turning right out of the Marble Quarry Resort on Yankee Hill Road and heading mildly uphill. After exactly one mile, we jog right on a short, unsigned connector (in fact Saw Mill Flat Road) to a left on aptly named Big Hill Road (above). This is a significant climb: over 1200’ in 3.5 miles, and then another couple of hundred feet in two miles after the pitch eases off. If you can spare a look while working up the hill, there are some great views out over the surrounding countryside. Once over the top, we can recover on three miles of gentle downhill through the ridgetop forest before tackling the next big climb of the day on Middle Camp Road: 1000’ in four miles.

But before tackling Middle Camp, we need to look at the first variation in the drivers’ loop. (There are two: the loop back to Columbia at the end, and a shortcut earlier to shorten the route. This is the shortcut.) Coming off Big Hill Road, the combined routes turn left on Longeway Road. The long route is only on this road for 4/10ths of a mile before bearing left on Middle Camp. Actually, it feels more like going straight ahead because Longeway turns off to the right like a different road at this point. The shortcut on the drivers’ loop takes this right turn on Longeway and stays on this road for over three miles. It follows that up with about four more miles of mostly easy, downhill cruising on three more roads before rejoining the long route (briefly) before diverging again on the loop back to the start to retrieve the cars.

The premise with this shortcut is to get the car pool people ahead of the curve on the day’s timing: by shortening their ride, they will finish their car-schlepping chores in time to hit the new camp at about the same time as the through-riders. With everyone riding at different speeds, and with long and short through routes besides, this is only a ballpark premise and may or may not pan out in the real world. In fact, there’s nothing that says a car pool driver couldn’t skip this shortcut and stay on the long route right up to the point where the return loop peels off. This would yield a net gain of about nine miles, or a stage of around 49 miles, with quite a bit more climbing and descending.

This is all rather complicated, no doubt. We’ll do what we can to explain it now, but we will probably need a further discussion of it in our pre-ride briefing on the tour.

For now, let’s go back to the long route. Middle Camp Road (below) can be a bit confusing. We’re carving a ragged arc around the town of Twain Harte, and this road, liberally sprinkled with mountain cabins, is often intersected by rural neighborhood streets. Just take your time at the intersections, follow your map and route slip, and you’ll get there. Google Maps and a couple of different mapping apps all say that the later, uphill end of this road is called Middle Camp-Sugar Pine Road, but my old field notes say it’s simply Middle Camp, all the way.

Whatever it’s called and however it’s signed, eventually it takes us to our right turn onto Confidence Road (sometimes called Confidence-South Fork Road) and soon you’ll understand why we brought you this way. This begins a great run of downhill thrills. While Middle Camp was a two-lane with some pretensions to being a main road, Confidence is—usually—a dinky thing, one lane wide, with no stripes or fancy frills...just a meandering lane through the woods. It picks up a center stripe now and then, but mostly stays primitive, although the pavement is always decent. (This is true for many of our roads today: narrow and twisty and old-fashioned, but still with decent pavement.) After traversing the top of the hill for a mile (through pretty forest), and jogging across Hwy 108, Confidence wiggles down the wooded hillside for three sassy miles before a brief, level jog on Cedar Springs Road ties it into Tuolumne Road North, where the descent resumes.

Whereas Confidence was a narrow, slightly technical twister
through the trees, Tuolumne Road is a fast, smooth flier...but still with lots of turns to keep it interesting. Four-and-a-half more miles of full-tilt, gonzo descending deliver us to the town of Tuolumne, sometimes called Tuolumne City.

While we’ve been busy descending, the scenery around us has been changing. Up around Middle Camp and the top of Confidence, it was mostly solid fir and pine forest...a typical mountain environment. Midway down Confidence, we drop into a zone of mixed broadleaf and needle trees, with more open spaces between. Finally, by the time we leave Tuolumne, we’re into the classic foothills and valley landscape of wide open, rolling meadows, dotted with stands of oak. Moving through this transition at the speed of a fast descent makes it quite dramatic and hard to ignore. (The shortcut segment on the drivers’ loop goes through the same transition, only it does it in fewer miles.)

Tuolumne is not an especially quaint nor historically significant town. Nothing to divert us for long. But it does have a city park at about mile 25 that might make a good spot for a regroup.

We drop out the south side of Tuolumne and continue south and west, now on Yosemite Road. While the general trend here is downhill, and has been ever since Confidence Road, it is by no means constant. About a mile beyond Tuolumne, we bottom out at a crossing of Tuolumne Creek and face a moderately stiff climb of over a mile before our downhill habit resumes. Once over this little summit though, we can say it’s mostly downhill for awhile, and in some cases quite extravagantly so, at least if you’re doing the basic route. From that summit, the route drops 2000’ in a bit over six miles, some of which is moderate and some of which is anything but...more like extremely hairy.

But before getting into that wild ride, let’s deal with some other business that comes up first: the drivers’s loop that bulks up the long route. We can begin talking about them at the same time because both depart the basic route at the same corner.

After cresting that summit on Yosemite Road, we zip downhill on an easy, almost straight run of a mile or so, and at the bottom of that straight run, we come to a tee. Yosemite Road turns 90° left, while Woodham Carne Road enters from the right. Woodham Carne is the last road in the drivers’ shortcut, so this is where the routes rejoin. Now the reunited routes continue south on Yosemite for about four miles, still descending most of the time.

At around mile 21 on the drivers’ route and mile 30 on the basic route, we hit another tee, where we once again turn 90° left. This is a turn onto Wards Ferry Road (left). The basic route will be on Wards Ferry for most of ten miles from here, but both the drivers’ and bonus-miles routes will make a right turn off this road in less than a mile. Warning: this turn—onto Algerine Wards Ferry Road—is going to be tricky, maybe even nasty. It comes up on a fast descent and is way, way more than a 90° turn. It’s almost 180°...a U-turn. There is a small street sign at the junction, but no advance warning (except for this one). The key is this: once we turn onto Wards Ferry, we have to be wide awake for this upcoming turn; we need to be ready to slow right down, and we need to know who in the group is continuing down the hill on Wards Ferry and who is turning. It has “bad accident” written all over it if we are not all paying attention.

For the moment, we’re going to hit “pause” on the basic route and leave those riders frozen in mid-descent while we follow the drivers and the long-route riders on their appointed rounds. They set out together along Algerine Wards Ferry Road for three-and-a-half miles before going their separate ways, with the long route turning right on Lime Kiln Road. The photo below is from Algerine Road, which is the continuation of AWF Road. It’s on the drivers’ route but beyond the point where the long route diverges. However it’s fairly typical of the scenery on both roads, which together add up to almost nine dream-like, nearly perfect miles.
As you can see, if you look at the map, what we’re doing here to bulk the miles on the long route is trace a clockwise loop off the west side of the basic route, curling around and rejoining on Wards Ferry. There are so many nice little roads out here that connect in so many ways, we could have put together any number of loops to do this. But this seemed like a good one. It’s an up-and-down route and, obviously, since it returns to where it began, the ups and downs eventually end up equal. What dictates the ups and downs of the terrain are creeks (down) and ridges (up). (Duh!) Scenery is more of the same mix of oak woods and rolling meadows, with big chunks of granite lying around here and there...Mother Nature’s yard art.

All of the roads on the long-route loop are narrow, winding, quiet, and old. That “old” element is on display in some of the pavement on this loop. It might look right at home in Sonoma County, but it’s substandard for this region. It could be argued that all we’re doing here is adding more miles just for the sake of more miles...quantity over quality. But that would be unfair to these very pleasant roads (funky pavement notwithstanding). If getting there is half the fun, then taking an extra 14 miles to get there has to be that much more fun. That’s my story and I’m sticking to it!

After the long loopers diverge on Lime Kiln, the drivers continue on Algerine Wards Ferry and Algerine (another photo, above), heading toward the town of Jamestown. About a mile before the end of Algerine, as it approaches the town, the road widens out and picks up a full set of stripes—centerline and fog lines—and starts looking like a busier, more conventional road. Then we turn right on Campo Seco Road, just dodging around the edge of Jamestown, and head north toward the small city of Sonora. All of these miles are rolling, but with an uphill bent: Jamestown is at 1400’ and Sonora is at 1800’, three miles further along.

At the far end of Campo Seco, we turn left on a last little snip of Lime Kiln, cross Hwy 108, and roll into Sonora. This pioneer town was known as the Queen of the Southern Mines and was the richest and wildest boomtown in the southern Mother Lode. It was founded in 1848 by miners from that namesake region in Mexico, but they were driven out by Yanks some years later. After the gold played out, the town survived on lumber and other local industry, and it is still a modestly prosperous, bustling town. These days, its historic charms are mixed rather uncomfortably with a lot of modern clutter. Could be worse, but could be a lot better.

We ride right up Washington Street, the main drag of town, then bear off left on Shaws Flat Road. As far as we can determine, there is not one sign at the Shaws Flat intersection to name that street. Our key to the turn: it’s right in front of Sonora High School. Shaws Flat climbs steadily out of Sonora through a rural-residential fringe that just barely dissipates into real rural greenbelt before starting to become congested again as we approach Columbia. The road crosses Hwy 49, then merges into, first, Springfield Road and then our old friend Parrotts Ferry Road, which tells us we’re nearing our destination. Once into the old, historic village, we work our way over to Yankee Hill Road and the Marble Quarry Resort to snag the cars.

Now let’s go back to where we left the basic-route riders on Wards Ferry, where they have now been joined by the long-route riders. We hit “play” and off we go, down the hill on Wards Ferry! And I do mean down: we’re dropping into the deep, deep canyon of the Tuolumne River, all the way down to the water (below). This is really Mr Toad’s Wild Ride. One lane wide, loads of slinky bends and tight hairpins, often blind, and often with nearly sheer drop-offs into the gorge. This is not for the timid, and if you have a fear of heights or danger, you might want to volunteer to be one of the drivers looping back to Columbia. (You don’t have
to drive the cars on this road to get to the finish.) But for riders who crave adventure, there is just one word for a road like Wards Ferry: epic!

Other words might occur to the riders once they get down to the bridge in the bottom of the gorge. That's because we now have to dig our way out of this deep hole, to the tune of 2200' up in a bit over seven miles. That's a 6% average, but it isn't a constant grade. The first three miles in the canyon gain around 1100' (7%). The next two miles gain about 450' (4%). And then over the next mile-and-a-half, we go up another 375' (5%). There are a few rollers in there as well. It's a big climb, any way you slice it. It's also as pretty as anything else we've seen today, which is to say: very. Also very narrow and very remote and very quiet.

Midway up the climb, we turn left off Wards Ferry onto Deer Flat Road, which runs out to Hwy 120 near the town of Groveland. We turn left on 120, roll through the town, and then turn right onto Old Hwy 120, whose name is fairly self-explanatory. A little over a mile on that old road brings us to Yosemite Pines Resort, another of our all-purpose RV resorts that also has nice spaces for camping, plus all those other mod cons we like: the pool, the showers, the laundry...

Stage 6: Mather-Hetch Hetchy Figure 8

Basic route: 62 miles, 6000' up and down
Bonus miles (short): 8 miles, 700' up and down
Bonus miles (long): 18 miles, 2000' up and down

Today we’re off to the real high Sierra. Okay, nothing 10,000’ high, but it feels like the real rock-ribbed mountains and also deep, pristine wilderness. It feels like Yosemite National Park. Wait...it is Yosemite National Park! Everybody’s been to Yosemite, right? But how many have been to this upstairs, back-door entrance to the park? We’re talking about the road into Hetch Hetchy Reservoir.

Okay, before I get too excited about this, I have to point out that the visit to the park is only on the optional bonus-miles out-&-back. If you do only the basic route, you’ll see the park off in the distance, but won’t actually ride into it. More about that later. We have quite few miles to do before we get to that point.

We begin by retracing yesterday’s last mile along Old Hwy 120, back into Groveland. Turn left on the new Hwy 120, then, in less than a mile, right on Feretti Road (above). This very nice road cuts a clockwise loop around Pine Mountain Lake and the scattered community of homes that surrounds the lake. The road is a little over ten miles long and is just a little too hilly to be described as rolling, most of the time anyway. The low point on the road is at about 2400’ and the high point is around 3200’. The low point is reached early on, after a mile-long descent, and then the road climbs in lumpy little stairsteps to the high point, near its end, where it tees back into Hwy 120 (left).

We turn left on the highway and head east, toward Yosemite National Park. This is one of the main gateways to the park, so the highway carries a lot of traffic. But it’s built for it and has wide shoulders for bikes. It’s not our favorite road, but it’s okay. We’re on 120 for six miles before turning left on Cherry Lake Road (also known as Cherry Oil Road and NF-1N07 and then, further on, NF-N3801). Whatever it’s called, it’s a nice road.

It climbs about 1300’ over the course of its five-plus miles, with the steepest part being in the first couple of miles. This is also the least scenic section, as it was leveled in a forest fire not too many years ago and is still in that scrubby, brushy, regrowth stage. But the upper part of the road is delightful (below), as it winds through dense forest of fir and pine and cedar.
We’re going to turn right off Cherry Lake onto Mather Road (NF-1S02). We’re heading for the settlement of Mather, or Camp Mather, as it is also known. You do not want to miss this corner. If you continue on Cherry Lake, you will descend a huge, steep wall, down into the canyon of the Tuolumne...a wall you will then have to turn around and climb. (We have done it...it’s fierce.) Mather is about 600’ higher than the Cherry Lake junction, so we’re going to be doing some more climbing over the seven-plus miles in between. It isn’t all uphill, but it does more of that than anything else. All of it is in shady forest, with occasional peeks through the trees down into the river canyon on the left.

When we reach Mather, it’s decision time: do you want to do any of the bonus-miles out-&-back?

What we’re talking about is the nine-mile long road leading to O’Shaughnessy Dam, at the head of Hetch Hetchy Reservoir (right). Hetch Hetchy is the centerpiece of the Grand Canyon of the Tuolumne River. John Muir felt it was almost as magnificent as Yosemite Valley, and he fought the City of San Francisco over their plan to dam the river and flood the valley. He lost that battle. The valley is flooded. I try to think of the flooding as a blessing in disguise: had this valley remained as pristine as Yosemite Valley, it would have been a huge tourist draw, and it probably would have been as intensively developed as that other, more famous valley. As it is, Hetch Hetchy is a well-kept secret, tucked away over on the far side of the mountains, infrequently visited, largely unknown.

This has a special bearing on the access roads, which remain narrow and meandering, low on traffic, and consequently bike-friendly. As with any out-&-back, you can do as much of it as you like and then turn around. But in this case, how much of the out-&-back is enough? We are proposing two options. The road climbs from Mather for about 600’ over three-plus miles to a 5100’ summit (top photo), which happens to be the high point of this tour. Just a little distance beyond the summit and about 100’ down, there is a vista point, where it’s possible to see the canyon and lake laid out below in a spectacular panorama. Going this far will bulk the ride out to about 70 miles.

For the really ambitious, we offer the option of continuing all the way down to the dam. That’s 1300’ down, and then back up. With the 600’ of climb from Mather to the summit, it adds almost 2000’ to the day’s total. It also adds 18 miles, plumping the stage up to 80 miles. That’s not brutal, but don’t forget tomorrow’s stage: 85 miles and at least 9000’ on the long route. It’s a punishing two-day total at the end of an already tough tour.

But then, look what it gets you; look where it gets you (right): right down into this magnificent cathedral.

We plan to have a group pass to enter the park. (There is a ranger kiosk just uphill from Mather.) The rangers will expect us to jump through some hoops spun from red tape while we’re here, but we can work with that. When we visited here on the Gold Country Tour, the booth was empty when we rolled up. We rode into the park and back out without ever encountering a park official.
Whether you do some or all or none of the bonus miles, there is still more of the basic route to come: about half of it. From Mather, we head south on Evergreen Road (above), and as on Mather Road, there are several ups and downs, but nothing really severe. We don’t expect to find snow along the road, as in our photo, but we do expect to find a great many of the evergreens the road’s name suggests. This very nice bike road is almost always meandering through dense, shady forest. There are some camps and cabins and lodges along the road, but mostly it’s trees, trees, and more trees.

Seven miles later, Evergreen tees into Hwy 120. Turn right on the highway and quickly left off of it onto Hardin Flat Road. (Another “Flat” road that isn’t...not even close to flat.) This tiny, quiet lane bypasses the highway for over six miles and is a fantastic little road (right), including a riotous downhill and then a short but stiff climb at the far end. This photo is the only one we have of this excellent road. It shows it on a damp day, with wet paving. We hope it won’t be that way for us, and we don’t expect it to be, but it may as well serve as our reminder that these are the mountains, and the weather gods have a way of getting up on their hind legs and lashing out in the high country. We hope for nothing but blue skies, but we still bring all of our rain gear, just in case. If we don’t bring it, it will rain for sure!

Finally, after that stiff little climb at the end of Hardin Flat, we return to 120 and cruise west. Four miles beyond the Hardin Flat junction, there is a vista point on the right overlooking the canyon of the Tuolumne, which, in addition to having the great view, has restrooms, the first we will have seen for awhile. That makes this a smart spot for a regroup. There are two long, gradual climbs on 120 and at least one mild downhill through the small town of Buck Meadows.

Although Hwy 120 is tolerable for riding, we don’t really want to spend any more time on it than we have to, so we’re taking advantage of a series of little roads that run parallel to it on the way back to camp. After ten miles on 120, we leave it via a left onto Smith Station Road. Almost immediately, we leave Smith Station for Sutton, then Elmore, then Sprague Road East (left). These are all strung together, end to end, and you probably won’t notice the name changes unless you’re looking for them carefully.

All of these roads are pleasant and some are fun and scenic. But their primary virtue is that they are not Hwy 120. When Sprague Road East ends, we have to turn left (west) on Hwy 120 briefly, just long enough to cross over to Sprague Road West, on the north side of the highway. This buys us a little more back road bypass time, but finally, we have to return to 120 again. Altogether, this necklace of little side roads nets us about 4.5 miles off the highway.

We’re on 120 for one more mile before turning left onto Old Hwy 120, the road to our resort, which comes up in a bit over half a mile. Time for a dip in the pool, a beer, and some munchies.
Stage 7: 49er Loops

Basic route: 50 miles, 6000’ up and down
Long route: 85 miles, 9000’ up and down

One more stage, and it’s a good one. It’s not any easier than any of the previous ones, and the long route is probably the hardest stage of all. Have you got any legs left?

Yesterday, we headed up into the high hills. Today, we’re going in the opposite direction, down into the valley, down out of the tall forest into the rolling meadows of grass and wildflowers. Our sub-head at the top says 6000’ or 9000’ “up and down,” but a more accurate wording might be “down and up”...not just today, but on almost all of our stages. We start from camps in the high country, but we often explore regions much lower and then have to claw our way back up to camp at the end of each stage.

We begin today’s stage the same way we began yesterday’s: west to Hwy 120 and left. This time, we’re staying on 120 and going down the hill, all the way. See the photo above: the road on the right is Old Priest Grade; the one etched across the hill in back and in the left foreground is New Priest Grade (Hwy 120). The two roads diverge a few miles below Groveland, then come back together at the bottom of the long descent to the valley. Old Priest Grade is steeper, tighter, twistier, and much more of a gnarly proposition. It also carries less traffic. Normally, all that would recommend it to us as a great bike road. But after considerable discussion, we decided to give it a miss this time. You might say it’s just too much of a good thing: all that steeper and tighter adds up in this case to too much risk. And although there’s less traffic, what traffic there is tends to be aggressive (local boys in their pick-ups, hammering away). If you really have a desire to live on the edge, you can try it.

We decided to leave the route on the highway, which offers a dandy descent that most of us will do at the speed of the auto traffic.

If we rolled out 120 at the bottom of the hill, we would soon intersect Hwy 49. But we’re going to pick up a little shortcut before that. Just at the bottom of the hill, and just where Old Priest Grade tees back into 120, we are going to turn left on Old Priest Grade. No, we are not going to ride back up the hill. There is another little road in this same intersection, just to the right of OPG: Moccasin Switchback Road. We turn left on OPG and then instantly veer off to the right, downhill on MSR, which in just a few yards drops us into the midst of Moccasin, the little community built to support the small hydro power plant at Moccasin Reservoir. We bend around through the namesake switchback and find ourselves riding across the top of the reservoir’s dam. At the far end of the dam, we turn left on Hwy 49 and head south.

We’re only on Hwy 49 for about half a mile before bearing off right on Marshes Flat Road (also known as Kelly Grade). We climb about 900’ in about two miles—that’s the grade in Kelly Grade—and then descend for most of five miles and climb for another two to the small settlement of Blanchard, between Lakes Don Pedro and McClure, by which point our road name has changed to Blanchard.

When Blanchard hits the crossroads of Granite Springs Road, the short route turns eastward and follows Granite Springs and then Penon Blanco Road (below) back to Highway 49 and historic Coulterville (bottom). The run east on Granite Springs and Penon...
Blanco is mostly uphill, gaining almost 900' over five miles. It’s a gentle grade at first, but quite steep at the far end. Penon Blanco may have the worst pavement of the tour. It’s downhill and rollers on Hwy 49 before turning left into Coluterville. This was another Gold Rush boom town, with a population of 5000 at the height of the boom. Now it’s just a sleepy wide spot in the road with a nice collection of old buildings. It’s named after George Coulter, who owned the general store.

We’ll continue to follow the short route for now, beginning with the big climb on Greeley Hill (top photo). This is a substantial climb, gaining 1400' in around five miles. Then a few miles of medium-sized ups and downs lead to a junction where Greeley Hill Road veers off to the right and our route veers left on Smith Station Road (middle photo). A short, not-too-hard climb on Smith Station brings the route to the same corner where we picked up the Hwy 120 bypass yesterday: that string of little side roads that took us almost all the way home: Sutton, Elmore, and Sprague Roads East and West. Repeat that route and head for the barn. Or....

At the Smith Station junction, we pass the short-route bonus-miles option, offering a short detour eastward, remaining on Greeley Hill Road (also called Briceburg Road,...one of the original roads to Yosemite Valley). The destination is a bridge over the North Fork of the Merced River and a half-mile hike to Diana Falls, with swimming a possibility, or just lounging in a shady spot. Also close by is Bower Cave, a series of natural caverns that includes a subterranean lake. Unfortunately, the cave is currently closed to the public.

Now then, where did we leave those long-route riders? Ah yes, back at the corner of Blanchard and Granite Springs. For the long route, we go the other way, west and then south on Granite Springs Road to a right on Hwy 132. This is a modern, wide open highway, but we’re only on it for a mile-and-a-half before turning left onto the more inviting Merced Falls Road, an excellent bike road. Most of the traffic stays on 132, so this winding byway is quiet and car-free. At the outset the road climbs, gaining 300' in its first five miles in a series of rolling hummocks. Then, over the next eight miles, it loses 700' in a similar series of rolling drops...most enjoyable, and all of it on smooth, well-maintained pavement. The surrounding landscape is lovely: rolling hills and meadows of waving grasses, with small stands of oak here and there. The grassy fields are filled with millions of ragged, jagged granite slabs, many of which have fractured into huge, flat shards (below). These stand on end in sprawling profusion, looking somewhat like a vast cemetery of ancient, weathered tombstones.

After almost 13 miles on this narrow-gauge time warp of a country road, we turn 90° left onto Hornitos Road and then 90° right—still on the same road—to cross over the Merced River, just downstream from little Lake
McSwain and just upstream from the dot on the map that used to be the town of Merced Falls.

Merced Falls was a company-owned mill town that was once a bustling community. Back in its heyday, logs were floated down the Merced River to the mill from Yosemite. But the mill closed in 1941 and within a year or so, every last one of the town’s former buildings was sold off and hauled away.

Once the bridge on Hornitos Road, we enter an unusual stretch of rather barren terrain that is marked by intermittent vernal pools and curious, flat-topped rock outcroppings that look like miniature volcanoes (above). It’s an empty place that only the occasional dove or lizard seems to enjoy. Next up is the historic town of Hornitos (middle photo), followed by a pleasantly strenuous climb (or two) up to another Gold Rush-era town called Bear Valley at the Highway 49 junction. Both towns barely cling to life in the 21st Century, but in the later 1800’s, they were rollicking hell-camps fueled by gold dust and whatever easy money could buy. Hornitos in particular was a wild boom town. It once boasted a population of 15,000 that supported four hotels, six stores, numerous saloons and dance halls, and a Wells Fargo office that shipped out $40,000 in gold every day. Hard to imagine it all when you see the sleepy little village now.

It’s eight miles from the Merced Falls junction to the town of Hornitos and another ten miles to the town of Bear Valley. Almost all of that is uphill. That bridge over the Merced River represents the lowest point on the tour—around 360’—and by the time we’re a mile or so from Bear Valley, we’re a bit over 2400’. There is one small downhill near Hornitos, but the rest is up. As we climb, we leave the austere landscape around Hornitos and return to the woods...oaks and other broadleafs providing at least a little shade and color on the long climb. The last mile-plus on Bear Valley Road is a descent to the town, dropping about 400’.

When one looks up and beyond the wheel of the rider immediately in front, Highway 49 north from Bear Valley might resemble the view from a seat on a roller coaster called the Big Dipper. This will be a down-and-up monster on the way north to Coulterville. So twisted is this stretch of 49 (below) that it’s known as the Little Dragon, because of all the bends in its tail, and—from a cyclist’s point of view—because we’ll be lucky to sneak past its lair without getting badly toasted. At one point, we will dip down to cross one of the outer reaches of Lake McClure at a place once called Bagby, only to immediately climb back up the other side of the canyon on a formidable grade. When the nearby Exchequer Dam was raised (I think in the 1960’s), little Bagby suffered an Atlantis-like fate now only admired by the fishes.

It’s 15 miles from Bear Valley to Coulterville, and ten of those miles are taken up with that dramatic "big dipper" canyon with Bagby at the bottom: about four miles and 1300’ down and about six miles and 1400’ up. Coulterville...
is about 300' lower than Bear Valley and maybe 700' lower than that higher summit on Bear Valley Road (before the town), so in spite of all the butch climbing, there is actually more descending through this section. Much of that net loss of elevation comes in the final five miles before Coulterville, where 49 drops about 500' in a mellow downhill cruise. Mileage at Coulterville is around 68, which, with 27 to go, makes it a good spot for a regroup. Lots of work still to do, so take a break, check out the quaint old town (above), drink up, and rest up.

We turn uphill on Greeley Hill after Coulterville, just as the short-route riders did, but we don’t stay on that course for long. Two miles up the road, we turn left on Priest-Coulterville Road (right).

An aside: the shortest route of all today would be to combine the beginning of the short ride—as far as this point on Greeley Hill—and then switch over to the finish of the long route, which would be this left on Priest-Coulterville, etc. It’s such an obvious option that we provided a route slip for doing it. The total would be around 46 miles instead of 50 for the basic short course.

Priest-Coulterville is a very quiet back road. Hardly any traffic and hardly any homes or other evidence of civilization that might generate any traffic. It’s exactly eight miles long and reconnects to Hwy 120 at the top, very near the spot were Old Priest Grade and New Priest Grade diverged, early in the ride. Given that we’ll be much higher at the top of this road than we were at the bottom, one might assume that it’s all up. It’s not. We climb for about two miles (after the two miles of climbing on Greeley Hill), then descend for most of three miles, and finally climb for another three or so miles to the junction with 120.

That’s not the end of the up though. We climb a bit more on 120, then peel off on another 120 bypass. This is Black Road-Harper Road-Merrill Road. Total detour off the highway: 2.7 miles, all of it meandering and quiet and wooded. The profile says it’s mostly downhill, but I expect we’ll find it rolling up and down. After that, it’s back on the highway for a mile-and-a-half into Groveland and then off one more time on Old Hwy 120 to Yosemite Pines...to the pool and the party; to the bittersweet celebration that ends every tour: happy that we did it but sad that it’s over.

Stage 4:
Columbia State Historic Park
Stage 1: Fiddletown

Stage 3: Climbing Sutter Creek

Stage 3: West of Plymouth
Stage 5: Yosemite Road

Stage 6: Hetch Hetchy

Stage 5: descending Confidence Road
The Mother Lode Tour

Stage 1: Fiddletown-Omo Ranch Loop

Short route: 70 miles, 7500’ up and down

R on Tabeau Road (leave camp)......................0.0
L on Hwy 88 (Pine Grove, 2520’)...................0.7
R on Pine Grove-Volcano Road......................1.5
Straight on Main Street (Volcano, 2053’)......4.6
R on Consolation Street............................4.7
Becomes Rams Horn Grade..........................4.9
R on Shake Ridge Road..............................7.6
L on Fiddletown Road...............................10.5
R on Tyler Road (Fiddletown, 1687’)..........21.0
L on Bridgeport School Road....................26.0
L on Cedar Creek Road.............................28.6
R on Mt Aukum Rd (Mt Aukum, 1940’).........29.8
R on Omo Ranch Road...............................30.2

(Long route diverges)
R on Omo Ranch Rd (Omo Ranch, 3840’).....39.3
R on Hwy 88..........................................48.6
R on Shake Ridge Road.............................51.5
L on Rams Horn Grade.............................60.4
L on Main Street (Volcano, 2053’)............63.3
L on Volcano-Pioneer Road......................63.5
R on Hwy 88..........................................66.1
L on Tabeau Road.................................69.0
L into Gold Country Resort......................69.7

Long route: 74 miles, 8000’ up and down

R on Tabeau Road (leave camp)......................0.0
L on Hwy 88 (Pine Grove, 2520’)...................0.7
R on Pine Grove-Volcano Road......................1.5
Straight on Main Street (Volcano, 2053’)......4.6
R on Consolation St..................................4.7
Becomes Rams Horn Grade..........................4.9
R on Shake Ridge Road..............................7.6
L on Fiddletown Road...............................10.5
R on Tyler Road (Fiddletown, 1687’)..........21.0
L on Bridgeport School Road....................26.0
L on Cedar Creek Road.............................28.6
R on Mt Aukum Rd (Mt Aukum, 1940’).........29.8
R on Tyler Road (Depart short route)........30.2
R on Fairplay Road..................................34.9
L on Perry Creek.....................................35.0
L on Slug Gulch Road...............................38.5
L on Omo Ranch Rd (Omo Ranch, 3840’).....43.9
(Rejoin short route)
R on Hwy 88..........................................53.2
R on Shake Ridge Road.............................56.1
L on Rams Horn Grade.............................65.0
L on Main Street (Volcano, 2053’)............67.9
L on Volcano-Pioneer Road......................68.1
R on Hwy 88..........................................70.7
L on Tabeau Road.................................73.6
L into Gold Country Resort......................74.3
The Mother Lode Tour

Stage 1: Fiddletown-Omo Ranch Loop
70 miles, 7500’ up and down
74 miles, 8000’ up and down
The Mother Lode Tour
Stage 2: Pardee-Paloma Loop

Short route: 49 miles, 5300’ up and down

R on Tabeau Road (leave camp)...................... 0.0
L on Hwy 88 (Pine Grove, 2520’) ....................... 0.7
R on Climax Road ........................................... 2.6
L on Ridge Road (Hwy 104) ...................... 5.6
L on New York Ranch Road ......................... 6.5
R on Court Street (Jackson, 1200’) ............... 10.7
LR on Water Street/Main Street .............. 11.2
R on Hwy 49 ................................................. 11.4
L on Hoffman Street (“To Pardee Dam”) ......... 11.5
Becomes Stony Creek Road ..................... 11.8
Pardee Reservoir; ride across Jackson Creek
Spillway (580’)............................................ 20.3
L on Pardee Dam Road ..................................... 21.2
(Sign says, “Pardee Dam 2; Valley Springs 7”)
(Long route diverges)
Becomes Sandretti Road .............................. 23.2
(Cross Pardee Dam, Mokolumne River Canyon)
L on Campo Seco Road ............................. 25.4
(Long route rejoins)
L on Paloma Road ...................................... 26.3
L on Gwin Mine Road (Paloma, 1346’) ........... 30.6
Becomes Middle Bar Road ....................... 33.9
(Cross Mokolumne River)

Long route: 54 miles, 5900’ up and down

When short route turns L on Pardee Dam Road,
continue on Stony Creek .................... 21.2
L on Buena Vista Road ............................. 22.0
Becomes Camanche Parkway South ........... 25.3
L on Chile Camp Road ............................... 27.1
R on Campo Seco Road .................................. 28.8
Rejoin short route on Campo Seco Road ...... 30.8
L on Paloma Road .................................... 31.7
L on Gwin Mine Road (Paloma, 1346’) ........... 36.0
Becomes Middle Bar Road ....................... 39.3
(Cross Mokolumne River)
L on Hwy 49 .................................................. 42.1
R on Broadway (Jackson, 1200’) .................. 42.7
R on Clinton Road ........................................ 43.0
R on Butte Mountain Road ....................... 43.4
R on Clinton Road ........................................ 47.6
R on Tabeau Road ....................................... 47.9
R into Gold Country Resort ................... 53.7
The Mother Lode Tour

Stage 2: Pardee-Paloma Loop

49 miles, 5300’ up and down
54 miles, 5900’ up and down
The Mother Lode Tour
Stage 3: Sutter Creek Loops

Short route: 58 miles, 6400' up and down
R on Tabeau Road (leave camp).................0.0
R on Hwy 88 (Pine Grove, 2520') .............0.7
L on Aqueduct Road ................................1.3
R on Pine Grove-Volcano Road..................2.2
Straight on Main Street (Volcano, 2053')......4.6
L (straight) on Charleston Road................4.7
L on Shake Ridge Road............................7.4
Becomes Gopher Flat ................................14.1
Cross Old Hwy 49 to Hayden Alley............18.2
(Sutter Creek, 1198')
R on Spanish Street ...............................18.3
L on Sutter-Ione Road (Goffinet Road) .......18.8
R on Hwy 124 ........................................25.6
L on Willow Creek Road .........................26.6
R on Hwy 16 ..........................................30.9
(Long route diverges)
R on Hwy 49 ...........................................32.5
L on Main Street (Drytown, 620') .............33.2
Becomes New Chicago Quartz Mtn Road .......33.4
R on Turner Road (no signs) ......................35.4
LR on Turner at Amador Creek Road jctn ......36.6
L on Amador Road (AKA: Stringbean Alley) ..37.6
Cross Old Hwy 49 to N. Amelia Street ......38.6
L on Spanish Street ...............................38.7
R on Old Hwy 49 (Sutter Creek, 1198') .......39.1
L on Church Street ................................39.2
Becomes Sutter Creek Road ......................39.5
R on Pine Grove-Volcano Road .................51.3
L on Volcano-Pioneer Road ......................51.6
R on Hwy 88 .........................................53.9
L on Tabeau Road ..................................56.8
L into Gold Country Resort .....................57.5

Long route: 67 miles, 6900' up and down
When short route turns R on Hwy 16...
L on Hwy 16 ..........................................30.9
R on Latrobe Road ..................................32.0
R on Old Sacramento Road ......................34.2
Becomes Main Street (Plymouth, 1086') .......38.7
R on Hwy 49 ..........................................39.3
Rejoin short route at Hwy 16 junction .........41.3
Add 9.2 miles at each remaining turn on short
route.

Extra-long route: 77 miles, 7600' up and down
When long route turns R on Hwy 49...
Cross Hwy 49 to Shenandoah Road ............39.3
R on Shenandoah School Road .................40.9
L on Shenandoah Road .............................44.8
L on Hwy 49 (Plymouth, 1086') ..............49.5
Rejoin short route at Hwy 16 junction .........51.5
Add 19 miles at each remaining turn on short
route.
The Mother Lode Tour

Stage 3: Sutter Creek Loops
58 miles, 6400’ up and down
67 miles, 6900’ up and down
77 miles, 7600’ up and down

Sutter Creek detail
The Mother Lode Tour
Stage 4: Pine Grove to Columbia

Through route: 68 miles, 6000' up, 6500' down

R on Tabeau Road (leave camp)......................0.0
L on Hwy 88 (Pine Grove, 2520’)...................0.7
L on Irishtown Road ....................................1.7
L on Clinton Road .......................................3.7
L on Broadway (Jackson, 1200’) ...................12.3
L on Hwy 49 ................................................12.7
L on Main Street (Jackson, 1200’) ..................12.3
L on Historic Hwy 49 Bypass (Center St) .......18.1
R on Main Street (Mololumne Hill, 1474’) .......19.0
L on Lafayette Street (at the Hotel Leger) ......19.1
L on Hwy 26 .................................................19.6
R on Jesus Maria Road ................................20.7
R on Whiskey Slide Road .................................27.8
R on Mountain Ranch Road .........................34.0
L on Michel Road .........................................34.5
L on Old Gulch Road ....................................37.2
L on Calaveritas Road ..................................40.9
R on Dogtown Road ......................................42.2
L on Gardner Lane (Angels Camp, 1379’) ......51.7
R on Murphys Grade Road ...........................52.2
L on Hwy 49 ................................................52.2
L on Old Hwy 4 .............................................53.7
R on Angels Road .........................................57.8
R on Main Street (Vallecito, 1750’) ..........58.1
R on Parrots Ferry Road .............................58.8
L on Jackson Street (Columbia, 2143’) .......67.6
Becomes Yankee Hill Road .........................67.9
R into Marble Quarry Resort .......................68.2

Drivers’ loop: 58 miles, 7000' up and down

R on Tabeau Road (leave camp)......................0.0
L on Hwy 88 (Pine Grove, 2520’) ..................0.7
L on Irishtown Road ....................................1.7
L on Clinton Road .......................................3.7
L on Broadway (Jackson, 1200’) ...................12.3
L on Hwy 49 ................................................12.7
L on Historic Hwy 49 Bypass (Center St) .......18.1
R on Zumwalt Way (Mololumne Hill, 1474’) ....19.2
L on Lafayette Street ...................................19.3
L on Hwy 26 .................................................19.6
R on Jesus Maria Road ................................20.7
L on Railroad Flat Road ..............................33.6
Town of Railroad Flat (2600’) ........................38.9
R on Hwy 26 .................................................45.4
Town of West Point (2790’) ..........................46.3
L on Red Corral Road (Still Hwy 26) .............46.6
L on Hwy 88 ................................................54.9
L on Tabeau Road ........................................57.8
L into Gold Country Resort .........................58.5
Stage 4: Pine Grove to Columbia

Through route: 68 miles, 6000' up, 6500' down

Drivers’ loop: 58 miles, 7000' up and down
The Mother Lode Tour

Stage 5: Columbia to Groveland

Through route (basic): 44 miles
6000' up, 5300' down
R on Yankee Hill Road (leave camp) ..................... 0.0
R on Saw Mill Flat Road .................................. 1.0
L on Big Hill Road .......................................... 1.1
L on Longeway ............................................... 10.1
L on Middle Camp Road ................................... 10.5
Becomes Middle Pine Sugar Camp Road ............... 12.8
R on Confidence Road ..................................... 14.4
(AKA: Confidence South Fork Road)
Cross Hwy 108 to continue on Confidence ............. 15.5
R on Cedar Springs Road .................................. 18.5
L on Tuolumne Road N. (E17) .............................. 18.9
Becomes Carter St (Tuolumne, 2577') ................... 24.2
R on Chestnut Avenue ...................................... 24.3
L on Main Street ............................................ 24.4
Becomes Yosemite Road (Ponderosa Way) ............. 24.8
L on Wards Ferry Road ................................... 30.2
L on Deer Flat Road ......................................... 39.8
L on Hwy 120 (Groveland, 2844') ....................... 41.3
R on Old Hwy 120 ........................................... 42.8
L into Yosemite Pines Resort ............................. 44.0

Drivers’ loop: 40 miles
3500' up and down
R on Yankee Hill Road (leave camp) ..................... 0.0
R on Saw Mill Flat Road .................................. 1.0
L on Big Hill Road .......................................... 1.1
L on Longeway ............................................... 10.1
R to continue on Longeway .................................. 10.5
(at Middle Camp Road junction)
L on Soulsbyville Road ................................... 13.3
R on Black Oak Road ...................................... 15.5
Cross Tuolumne Rd to Woodham Carne Rd .......... 16.1
R (almost straight) on Yosemite Road ................. 17.1
L on Wards Ferry Road ................................... 20.8
R on Algerine Wards Ferry Road ......................... 21.7
Becomes Algerine Road ................................... 25.9
R on Campo Seco Road ................................... 30.3
L on Lime Kiln Road ......................................... 33.5
Becomes S. Washington St (Sonora, 1796’) .......... 33.6
L on Shaws Flat Road ...................................... 35.2
(Unsigned...turn in front of Sonora High School)
Becomes Springfield Road ................................ 38.3
L on Broadway ............................................... 38.9
R on Jackson Street (Columbia, 2143’) ................. 39.6
Becomes Yankee Hill Road ................................ 39.8
R into Marble Quarry Resort ............................. 40.2

Through route (long): 58 miles
7100' up, 6400' down
...L on Wards Ferry Road ................................ 30.2
R on Algerine Wards Ferry Road ......................... 31.2
(When basic route goes straight on Wards Ferry)
R on Lime Kiln Road ....................................... 34.7
R on Jacobs Road ........................................... 38.1
R on Old Wards Ferry Road ............................... 38.7
R on Wards Ferry Road ................................... 40.7
L on Deer Flat Road ......................................... 53.8
L on Hwy 120 (Groveland, 2844’) ....................... 55.3
R on Old Hwy 120 .......................................... 56.8
L into Yosemite Pines Resort ............................. 58.0
The Mother Lode Tour

Stage 5: Columbia to Groveland

Through route (basic): 44 miles, 6000' up, 5300' down
Through route (long): 58 miles, 7100' up, 6400' down
Drivers' loop: 40 miles, 3500' up and down
The Mother Lode Tour
Stage 6: Mather-Hetch Hetchy Figure 8

Basic route: 62 miles, 6000' up and down

R on Old Hwy 120 (leave camp) ......................0.0
L on Hwy 120 (Groveland, 2844') ...................1.2
R on Feretti Road .......................................2.0
L on Hwy 120 ..........................................12.4
L on Cherry Lake Road (NF-1N07) ..................18.6
Becomes Cherry Lake Road (NF-N3801) ...........20.8
R on Mather Road (NF-1S02) .......................24.0
R on Evergreen Road (Mather, 4522') .............31.3
R on Hwy 120 to L on Hardin Flat Road ......38.7
L on Hwy 120 ..........................................45.2
Vista Point (nice views and restrooms) ..........49.4
L on Smith Station ..................................55.5
R on Sutton Road .....................................55.7
Becomes Elmore Road ................................56.1
Becomes Sprague Road E. .........................56.5
L on Hwy 120 to R on Sprague Road W. .......59.0
R on Hwy 120 ..........................................59.9
L on Old Hwy 120 ....................................61.1
R into Yosemite Pines Resort .................61.7

Bonus miles out-&-backs
L on Hetch Hetchy Road in Mather (4522')...31.3
Short out-&-back to vista point overlooking Hetch Hetchy Reservoir: add 8 miles round trip and 700' up and down.
Long out-&-back to lakeshore: add 18 miles round trip and 2000' up and down.
The Mother Lode Tour

Stage 6: Mather-Hetch Hetchy Figure-8
Basic route: 62 miles, 6000’ up and down
Hetch Hetchy out-&-back (to vista point): 8 miles round trip, 700’ up and down
Hetch Hetchy out-&-back (to lakeshore): 20 miles round trip, 2000’ up and down
The Mother Lode Tour

Stage 7: 49er loops

Basic route: 50 miles, 6000' up and down

R on Old Hwy 120 (leave camp) ...................................... 0.0
L on Hwy 120 (Groveland, 2844') .................................. 1.2
L on Old Priest Grade (at bottom of hill) ......................... 9.8
Becomes Moccasin Switchback Road ......................... 10.0
L on Hwy 49 ............................................................... 10.6
R on Marshes Flat Road (Kelly Grade) ......................... 11.0
L on Blanchard Road .................................................. 18.5
L on Granite Springs Road ......................................... 20.2
Becomes Penon Blanco Road ..................................... 22.2
R on Hwy 49 ............................................................... 26.7
L on Greeley Hill Road (Coulterville, 1740') ............... 29.5
Becomes Smith Station Road* .................................. 38.0
*L: Bonus out-&-back: continue on Greeley Hill Road to trailhead at Merced River bridge for short hikes to Diana Falls and/or Bower Cave. (See map.) Adds 9 miles and 800' up and down.
L on Sutton Road ....................................................... 43.6
Becomes Elmore Road ............................................... 44.0
Becomes Sprague Road E ........................................... 44.4
L on Hwy 120 to R on Sprague Road W .................... 46.9
R on Hwy 120 ............................................................. 47.8
L on Old Hwy 120 ....................................................... 49.0
R into Yosemite Pines Resort .................................... 49.6

Basic route, alternate finish:

Same as long route from Coulterville...
L on Priest-Coulterville Road ..................................... 31.6

Long route: 85 miles, 9000' up and down

R on Old Hwy 120 (leave camp) ...................................... 0.0
L on Hwy 120 (Groveland, 2844') .................................. 1.2
L on Old Priest Grade (at bottom of hill) ......................... 9.8
Becomes Moccasin Switchback Road ......................... 10.0
L on Hwy 49 ............................................................... 10.6
R on Marshes Flat Road (Kelly Grade) ......................... 11.0
L on Blanchard Road .................................................. 18.5
R on Granite Springs Road ......................................... 20.2
Becomes Penon Blanco Road ..................................... 22.2
R on Hwy 132 ............................................................. 21.1
L on Merced Falls Road ............................................... 22.6
L on Hornitos Road (Merced Falls, 361') ................... 35.2
Bear R on bridge over Merced River.
L on Bear Valley Road (Hornitos, 980') ................... 42.8
L on Hwy 49 (Bear Valley, 2050') ......................... 53.2
R on Greeley Hill Road (Coulterville, 1740') ............ 68.3
L on Priest-Coulterville Road .................. 70.4
R on Hwy 120 ............................................................. 78.4
R on Black Road ....................................................... 79.6
L (straight) on Harper Road ..................................... 79.8
Becomes Merrell Road .............................................. 81.2
R on Hwy 120 (Groveland, 2844') ......................... 82.3
R on Old Hwy 120 ....................................................... 83.9
L into Yosemite Pines Resort .................................... 85.1
The Mother Lode Tour

Stage 7: 49er Loops

- **Basic route:** 50 miles, 6000’ up and down
- **Long route:** 85 miles, 9000’ up and down

**Start / Finish:** Yosemite Pines

**Moccasin detail**

- Moccasin Res.
- 936’
- MARSHES FLAT ROAD (AKA: Kelly Grade)

**Diana Falls-Bower Cave detail**

- Diana Falls
- Bower Cave
- 816’