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### **JOURNEYS; 36 HOURS | BAKERSFIELD, CALIF.**

**BY MARC WEINGARTEN . . .**

BAKERSFIELD is the land that time and tourists forgot. Its heyday was 150 years ago, when the oil was discovered in the Kern River region, bringing wealth-seeking prospectors from all over the country and Europe. Now, this sprawling community (population 250,000) is a ghostly industrial town, a sleepy Nowheresville in which laborers who toil in the San Joaquin Valley farmbelt saunter around with unironic trucker caps perched high on their heads. The city's appeal isn't readily apparent; you have to dig deep into its native culture to discover how sui generis it truly is. It is the country music capital of the West Coast, for starters, and its polyglot culture (Spanish shepherds settled here in the early 1900's) has also made it the United States capital of Basque cuisine. In the spring and summer, it becomes a hub for outdoor types, with white-water rafting, bicycling, and hiking in the nearby Sequoia Forest. As for tourist-friendly gentrification, forget it. In a state that prides itself on civic reinvention, Bakersfield is refreshingly fossilized. MARC WEINGARTEN

#### **Friday**

**7 p.m.**

##### **1. On Time for Dinner**

You've got to belly up to the bar if you want to sample Bakersfield's best food. The Noriega Hotel (525 Sumner Street, 661-322-8419), with its well-worn counter top and voluble barkeepers, is the place to go when you're really, really hungry. The Noriega's multi course Basque feast includes pickled tongue, cabbage soup, spaghetti and sheep cheese washed down with Picon punch, a potent local specialty made from brandy, maraschino syrup and liqueur.

The Noriega only has one dinner seating, at 7 each evening, so make reservations and be prompt. Walk-ins and laggards are out of luck.

**10:30 p.m.**

##### **2. Students and Stars**

Guthrie's Alley Cat (Wall Street Alley, 661-324-6328) is the hot spot for drinking-age undergraduates. Students from Bakersfield College and San Joaquin Valley College meet here to party as if they were on MTV's "Real World." But it is the bar's visuals that make it a must see, particularly the wall-length reproduction of an Al Hirschfeld drawing of Hollywood stars and the great neon sign of a blinking cat, one of a handful of stunning neon artifacts in the city.

#### **Saturday**

**10 a.m.**

##### **3. Black Gold**

Stepping onto the sprawling grounds of the Kern County Museum (3801 Chester Avenue, 611-852-5000) is like entering a 19th-century time warp. This 60-year-old institution is really a careful reconstruction (with well-dressed mannequins) of what the city looked like when it was an oil boomtown, complete with a doctor's office, general store, Southern Pacific locomotive and shepherd's cabin. "Black Gold: The Oil Experience" is a permanent interactive exhibition that offers a hands-on introduction to the science and history of oil in the region.

**Noon**

##### **4. Pink Beans and Salsa**

The most popular Basque restaurant in Bakersfield for a half-century, Wool Grower's (620 east 19<sup>th</sup> Street, 661-372-9584) is packed six days a week with farmers and their clans wolfing down huge family-style meals that might include pork dip, lamb dip, (both \$7) and the Basque stew of the day with

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pink beans and salsa (\$10). And if the tables are taken, you can always eat at the crowded bar, a veritable sea of oily trucker caps.

**1:30 p.m.**

### **5. Second Hand Treasure**

Bakersfield isn't big on tearing down old buildings; they just become reconfigured. A 1949 Woolworth's storefront has been converted into the city's biggest second-hand store, and it is a tchotchke-hunter's delight. The store, now called the Five and Dime Antique Mall (1400 19<sup>th</sup> Street, 661-323-8048), subscribes to the dictum that one man's junk is another man's treasure. Here is the place to snag second-hand jewelry, poker-chip trays, World Series of Pool beer steins, and kitschy cookie jars that Andy Warhol would have loved. A pristine Royal typewriter was recently bought here for the obscenely low price of \$35.

**4:30 p.m.**

### **6. Sweet Stop**

Take a number at Dewar's (1120 Eye Street, 611-322-0933), park it at the shiny counter and be prepared to get the sugar rush of your life. Dewar's sublime ice cream and candy is handmade, and they don't skimp on portions. The marshmallow topping in the black-and-white sundae (\$4.77) oozes down the side of the parfait glass like pyroclastic flow. Save a little room for the peanut-butter chews; you won't be sorry. Well, you might be sorry later.

**7:30 p.m.**

### **7. Buck Owens and You**

Short of Nashville and Austin, Bakersfield may be the best place in the nation to hear country music, which makes the city an essential pilgrimage spot for any serious fan. Merle Haggard was born and raised in nearby Oildale and performs in the region regularly. Dwight Yoakam has spent a fair amount of time here as well, and had a No. 1 hit a few years back with a song called "A Town South of Bakersfield." Buck Owens, a member of the Country Music Hall of Fame, is the city's favorite son. In 1996, he opened Buck Owens' Crystal Palace (2800 Buck Owens Boulevard, 661-328-7560), a kind of Hard Rock Cafe for country music, with a bandstand, a dance floor and Owens memorabilia in glass display cases on the ground floor. Mr. Owens performs just about every weekend (there's a \$6 to \$12 cover charge) and Mr. Haggard, Mr. Yoakam, and other

stars perform all year. Where else can you scuffle your Tony Lamas a few feet from the man who sang "Okie From Muskogee"?

**10:30 p.m.**

### **8. Go Honky-Tonking**

They may not make honky-tonks like they used to, but in Bakersfield, they never got rid of them. Trout's (805 North Chester Avenue, 661-299-6700) is the real deal — a dark, dank bar festooned with Budweiser bunting, and a large, well-lighted area reserved for serious pool players. Thirty years ago, you might have found Trout's to be a more rough-and-ready spot, but now it's a place for aging ranch hands and their wives to kick up their heels to the hard-driving country-boogie of Red Simpson, a local legend who has made a career of singing about the trucking life, as well as other local country-tonk acts.

## **Sunday**

**8 a.m.**

### **9. Eggs or Ostrich?**

If any restaurant in Bakersfield could be classified as upscale, it might be the 24<sup>th</sup> Street Café (1415 24<sup>th</sup> Street, 661-323-8801). In addition to well-prepared traditional dishes like eggs Benedict and chicken-fried steak, there are ostrich steak and eggs, pan-fried trout, the crab scramble and for heartier sorts, fresh oysters. Be prepared to wait at least 30 minutes for a table.

**10 a.m.**

### **10. More Than Just Warthogs**

No trip to Bakersfield would be complete without a stop to the Buena Vista Museum of Natural History (2018 Chester Avenue, 611-324-6350), an odd repository of prehistoric artifacts. It's in a 1950's storefront that looks like it might have housed a bank or an insurance office, but instead of actuaries, there is taxidermy everywhere you turn — lions, tigers, bears, warthogs, even elephants. Old glass-enclosed booths hold shark teeth, dinosaur bones, pottery from the Yokuts tribe and beautiful rocks and minerals mined locally. The guides are also archaeologists, so an informal walking tour becomes a rich history lesson about the region's geological origins.

## **THE BASICS**

### **Visiting Bakersfield**

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Continental, America West, and United Express have flights from Kennedy Airport in New York to Meadows Field, seven miles from downtown Bakersfield. The three airlines also provide direct flights from major West Coast cities. Meadows Field is served by most major rental car companies.

Bakersfield is not long on charm when it comes to overnight accommodations, with one exception — the Rio Bravo Resort (11200 Lake Ming Road, 611-872-5000). It has 18 lighted tennis courts and an Olympic-size pool. There are 110 rooms; one suite has a fireplace. Rates are \$85 to \$250.

Four Points by Sheraton Bakersfield (5101 California Avenue, 661-325-9700) is the best of the franchise hotels. Situated on 7.5 well-manicured acres, the Four Points has 198 rooms with high-speed Internet access.

La Quinta Inn (3232 Riverside Drive, 661-325-7400) has three suites among its 129 rooms and is five minutes from Buck Owens' Crystal Palace and other attractions.

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The following are some of my recommendations for places to visit in Bakersfield:

### **CALM**

California Living Museum is located at 10500 Alfred Harrell Hwy. (661)872-2256. It was created as a public charity to exhibit animals retrieved from the Kern County area, usually an injured bird or animal or the offspring of a lost animal. It is now owned and operated by the Kern County Superintendent of Schools as a charitable organization as well as a school oriented zoo. It has a live reptile underground cave and show area, a substantial cage with two bears, one of which was the off-spring of a mother bear killed by a train. Community input into the showing and caring for the semi-wild animals is a community treasure. The education contribution of CALM for student groups is obvious and the Superintendent of Schools' ownership has naturally improved the status of the animals and their showing. To have bird experts show predator birds on leather tongs being released and re-caught and shown to visitors on special crowd days continued to be a specialty of CALM.

### **LUIGI'S RESTAURANT & DELICATESSEN**

Luigi's is located at 725 - East 19<sup>th</sup> Street, (661)322-0926. It is a third generation East Bakersfield Italian restaurant, especially related to weekend lunch-time. Tonya Lemuchi Valpredo maintains a sports collection of literally thousands of Kern County athletes and events. Every Saturday noon sees hundreds of Kern County people, especially grammar school age children. Tonya personally supervises the great Italian lunch, especially her Luigi burger.

### **URICCHIO'S TRATTORIA**

Uricchio's Trattoria is located at 1400 - 17th Street, at the corner of 17th and K Street (661)326-8870. It was opened in 1995 by Nicolas Uricchio. It is open Monday through Friday for lunch from 11:00 am to 2:00 pm; Monday through Thursday for dinner at 5:00 pm to 9:00 pm, and Friday and Saturdays for dinner at 5:00 pm to 10:00 pm.

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