

LUXURY RIVER TRIPS P. 68

Sunset

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Northern California weekend

Inside The East Bay's funkier little art town » 3 new spots to get your ice cream fix » Yoga like you've never done it »



BY PEGGY NAUTS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID FENTON

East Bay day trip Benicia

Why go now: A clutch of new shops, galleries, and restaurants is turning this refinery town around. **Population:** 27,000 **Artists in residence:** An estimated 500 **Lay of the land:** Most of the action goes down on First Street, an old-timey main drag of bungalows turned boutiques that ends at a palm-lined promenade. **On the waterfront:** Benicia sits on the northern bank of the Carquinez Strait (pictured). **Translation:** Warm summer breezes and southeastern glimpses of Mt. Diablo. **Culinary arts boom:** Of downtown's 26 restaurants, 8 have opened within the last two years. **Best burger in the bunch:** The half-pound, 100 percent Angus, handmade meat-bomb at Frankenburger (\$; 131 First St.; 707/747-9800). **London trawling:** As a young man, Jack London patrolled the Carquinez Strait hunting oyster pirates. **Happy hour score:** The dollar oysters at Sailor Jack's (\$\$\$; 123 First St.; 707/745-0943), a new fish house with no freezer (read: no frozen fish) and wide-angle views of the strait. **Bike the bridge:** The two-year-old, 2.2-mile bike path sweeps you past the rocky waterfront and over the Benicia-Martinez bridge. **Local tongue:** Many Benicians pronounce it Ben-ish-uh. (Like "militia.")

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Northern California Day trip



1. Your one-of-a-kind postcard

A couple of years ago, a group of local open-air painters banded together to launch the **Plein Air Gallery** (307 First St.; 707/745-3157), a repository for their colorful—and relatively inexpensive—landscapes. Up the block, Leah Shelhorn works with hundreds of artists to sell their wares in **Studio 41** (above; 700 First St.; 707/745-0254), her 1,600-square-foot barnlike shop, where you'll find everything from free-form wall sconces to earrings shaped like dragonflies.

2. Ditch the car, see the architecture

Benicia was the state capital in 1853–54, and you can still get a peek of that bygone era with a self-guided walking tour through the **Downtown Historic District**. Comb the neighborhood for turreted Queen Anne Victorians, Italianate houses, and lavish Gothic revival cottages—one prefabbed on the East Coast, shipped around the Horn, and reassembled beside the strait. Check out maps at beniciahistoricalsociety.org



3. Glass that will blow you away

The pros at **Lindsay Art Glass** (at left; 109 E. F St.; lindsayartglass.com) twirl molten blobs into elegant fluted vases and paperweights. Up the road, legendary glass studio **Nourot** (675 E. H St.; nourot.com) creates platters, bowls, and lampshades, and once even made communion dishes used by Pope John Paul II.



4. Pop in for a comfort lunch

Don't let the mood lighting and linen napkins throw you: **Lucca Bar & Grill** knows how to bring the fun, especially at happy hour, when a basket of bacon-wrapped jalapeño poppers is all but mandatory. The restaurant gets bonus points for classic comfort food like Cobb salad and pulled-pork sandwiches punched up with a garlic aioli. \$\$. 439 First St.; 707/745-0943.



Getting there

Benicia is about 30 miles northeast of Oakland. Take I-80 to I-780, then travel east about 5 miles.

Make it a weekend

The dozen guest rooms at the **Union Hotel**, on First Street, are decorated with Victorian flourishes like stained glass, gold sconces, and crystal chandeliers. For a little extra elegance, request the Coast Lotus suite, whose heavy oak-carved bed is perfectly angled to a picture window that catches sunsets over the bay. From \$99; unionhotelbenicia.com



SHARE YOUR WEEKEND FINDS. Favorite waterfront spots? Email your suggestions to the weekend guide editor at wgeditor@sunset.com