



Strait Scoops: Carquinez and Mare Island Where History Mixes With Renewal, Recreation and Rest

By Patricia Kutza

It was once the nautical highway of superlatives: From Port Costa's deep-water port during the late 1870s, the Carquinez and Mare Island straits were plied by megatrain ferries and huge merchant sailing ships.

They hauled grain, as well as a lively mix of sailors, townsfolk, railroad workers and, earlier on, carried such passenger luminaries as General Mariano Vallejo, the Mexican commandant for Northern California.

Nowadays a lively mix of tourists and commuters board ferries at Mare Island Strait, bound for San Francisco. They leave their cars behind in the city that shares its name with the general, Vallejo.

It's a different century, but the Carquinez and Mare Island straits still make their mark on the cities that front their waters.

Slumbering Port Costa

Boaters cruising the Carquinez Strait see a vista that's at once very



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modern and very much a throwback to earlier days. Approaching both the new and old Carquinez Bridges, on their starboard side Benicia's horizon is a mesh of townhouses, shops and a busy marina.

In sharp contrast on their portside, Port Costa has few vestiges of its once-bustling past. Nestled between Crockett and Martinez, reach Port Costa by car from I-80 west, taking the Pomona Street exit.

Follow Pomona Street through Crockett and it eventually becomes Carquinez Scenic Drive. It will lead you into town.

With a population of 250 and sporting two restaurants, a hotel and a smattering of shops, the town is a refreshing reminder there are areas of the Golden State yet to be supersized. Among reasons for trekking to this remote spot is the duck and prime rib fare offered by the Bull Valley Restaurant.

A mile west of Port Costa stretch the undulating hills of the Carquinez Strait Regional Shoreline, managed by the East Bay Regional Park District. This is a great place to bask in unparalleled views of ocean-going tugs, ships and pleasure boats navigating the Strait and the broad expanse of Benicia and Vallejo.

Sharing Fish Tales

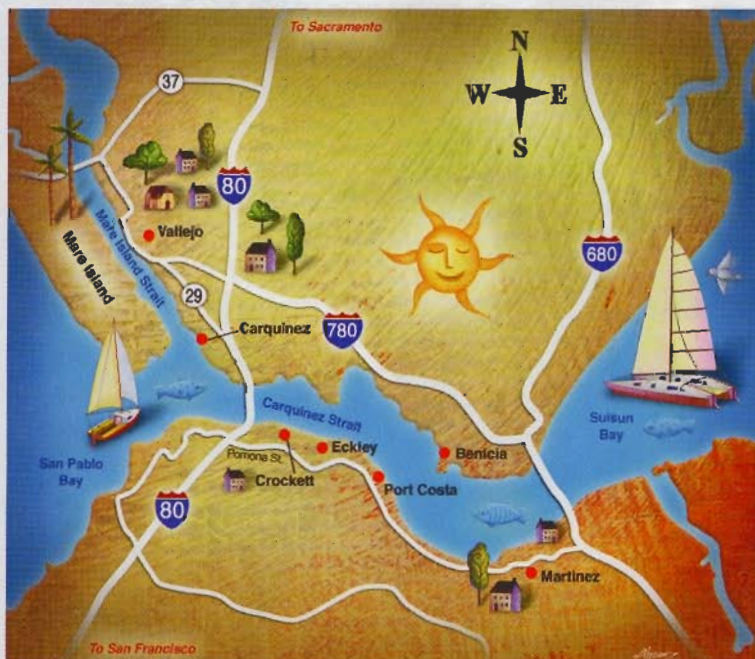
Stop at the Bull Valley Staging Area, the entry point for the Carquinez Strait Regional Shoreline. Park your car and share fishing tales with the locals, some who call Eckley Pier their second home. Season permitting, a day's catch can include sturgeon, striped bass and perch.

A few hairpin turns from the Regional Shoreline take you to Crockett. Avid hikers will enjoy its wickedly pitched 45-degree angled streets. Looking for parking meters, trinket shops and tony restaurants? You won't find them here. Instead, you'll find lush home gardens, quiet neighborhood parks and the sense that life is moving a tad slower in this ZIP code.

Crockett is noted for its lively art community. The Epperson Gallery is a frequent haunt for buyers with a penchant for mixed media created by Northern California artists.


Twin Bridges and a Promenade

The new Al Zampa Suspension Bridge parallels the older Carquinez Bridge as you approach Mare Island Way and the lengthy promenade that stretches from Norm's Bait & Tackle shop to the Vallejo Marina. Park your car for a spell and people-watch,



Reach intelligent life forms here on earth.

roller blade or take a leisurely stroll to the Sardine Can restaurant, where locals knosh on seafood and sandwiches.

Culturally diverse Vallejo hosts a variety of events, including Filipino Independence Day (Pista SA  www.visitvallejo.com Nayan), featuring food, arts and crafts (June 4). A Juneteenth Afro-American Celebration soon follows on June 18 at the WaterBarge Restaurant.


Enjoy the Vallejo Symphony's Pops Concert during the Fourth of July festivities, followed by the city's signature event, the Vallejo Jazz, Art & Wine Festival, which kicks off the weekend of August 28-29.

Rich History, Spectacular Views

It's been nearly a decade since the Mare Island Shipyard closed to regular traffic. Word is only now beginning to spread that the island is again welcoming visitors to experience what only a select group of ship workers and navy personnel have enjoyed for years: 5,252 acres with a rich history and spectacular views of San Pablo Bay and wildlife.

Signs of renewal include the Mare Island Golf Course, expanded to 18 holes, and walking trails at the San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge to maximize wildlife observation opportunities for photographers and birdwatchers.

Another priority is attracting history and architecture buffs to the two-hour tours offered by the Mare Island Historic Park Foundation.

For more information phone Mare Island tours, (707) 557-1538. 

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