

Travel | Small town

Lily Rock rises above the Strawberry Valley and has more than 200 established climbing routes. **RIGHT** There are plenty of quiet nooks to be found on the 1¼ piney acres at the Strawberry Creek Inn.

Art and outdoors

With more galleries per capita than most big cities, a jazz festival, and an enviable setting in Southern California's San Jacinto Mountains, Idyllwild is pretty idyllic

BY MATTHEW JAFFE PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID ZAITZ

IN THE RUGGED San Jacinto Mountains on the edge of arty Idyllwild, the silence is broken by a primal sound: a castanet-like rhythm that freezes a pair of hikers in their tracks. There, next to a log maybe a foot off the trail, is a coiled rattlesnake with eight quivering rattles.

The rattler's sudden appearance is a reminder of Idyllwild's dual nature. Situated in a wooded canyon above Palm Springs, the mile-high village of 3,500 has a cultural life that towns many times its size might envy. With its out-the-door access to wilderness, it's also a destination for hikers, climbers, and other fresh-air fanatics.

Summer is prime season in Idyllwild. Its many galleries are joined by a busy schedule of events at the Idyllwild Arts Academy, a first-rate jazz festival swings in August, and the wild country that surrounds the town beckons.

Rising above Idyllwild are steep, forested slopes broken by granite domes reminiscent of the Sierra Nevada. It was these internationally known climbing rocks that first drew local restaurateur Hubert Halkin to the area.

After coming here to climb in the 1970s, the emeritus professor of mathematics at University of California, San Diego, made

what he describes as a "progressive move." A native of France's mountainous Auvergne region, he loved Idyllwild's natural setting. He also discovered a town with many resident artists—screenwriters, musicians, and painters.

"These are people who came here to do the work they want to do," Halkin says. "Sometimes they may need to go to Los Angeles, but the rest of the time they can ply their craft in peace and serenity."

Halkin's restaurant, Café Aroma, is one of Idyllwild's creative hubs. Here you can dine under the stars and catch poetry readings or sets by jazz musicians. And if it





LEFT Café Aroma is as much a community center as an eatery; it features events like the “Shakespeare Smackdown” as well as a lending library, live music, and an art gallery. **ABOVE** Get a taste of mountain air on the Devil’s Slide Trail, which rises to almost 11,000 feet. **RIGHT** You can find ceramics and other artwork at the many galleries in Idyllwild.



seems like everyone knows everyone at Café Aroma, that’s no accident. “This is quite a bit of a social club,” says Halkin. “We wanted to keep the place relaxed, arty, and a little funky.”

Which is a pretty good description of Idyllwild. With its knotty pine and log-cabin vibe, it’s a bit of a throwback. But there’s also a relaxed sophistication to Idyllwild, especially at its galleries, which feature local and international artists. Idyllwild has such a concentration of galleries that art critic John Villani named it one of the 100 best art towns in the country.

Idyllwild abounds in inspiration for its artists and visitors alike. Just head up the Devil’s Slide Trail, past springs lined with wildflowers, to reach views of Tahquitz Rock that change as the clouds and fog drift and roll. Listen as the wind begins as distant rustling in the forest before arriving in the trees overhead like a crashing wave. It’s a different kind of primal sound: serene yet invigorating, not unlike Idyllwild itself. ■

Getting there

Idyllwild is about 100 miles southeast of Los Angeles. For area information, contact the Idyllwild Chamber of Commerce (www.idyllwildchamber.com or 888/659-3259).

Arts

14TH ANNUAL JAZZ IN THE PINES Leading jazz artists perform on three stages in a beautiful outdoor setting. Aug 25–26; \$55 per day, ages 12 and under (with adult) free; 52500 Temecula Dr.; www.idyllwildjazz.com **GALLERIES** Idyllwild has 18 galleries, with a large concentration in the Village Centre along North Circle Dr.; pick up a free guide published by the Art Alliance of Idyllwild. Rotating galleries host weekly Saturday Morning Art Cafés

from 10 to noon, featuring artist demonstrations. Guide available at area art galleries; www.artinidyllwild.com or 866/439-5278.

IDYLLWILD ARTS ACADEMY Multiday workshops for adults and children in a variety of fields, as well as lectures, recitals, and a gallery open to the public. 52500 Temecula Dr.; www.idyllwildarts.org or 951/659-2171.

SKYE AT NIGHT An Idyllwild happening featuring dance, music, spoken word, and theater performances in a gallery setting. \$15 in advance, \$20 at door; 7:30 p.m. daily; 54445 N. Circle Dr.; www.skyegallery.com or 800/863-4146.

Outdoors

Stop at the **IDYLLWILD RANGER STATION** (8–4:30; Pine Crest Ave. at State 243; www.fs.fed.us/r5/sanbernardino or 951/659-2107). Adventure passes (\$5) required; some hikes also require free wilderness day-use permits. Top trails include the following. **DEER SPRINGS TRAIL** A 6.5-mile round-trip; the 1,700-foot climb leads to dramatic Suicide Rock. **DEVIL’S SLIDE TRAIL** Beautiful views and forests on a 1,700-foot ascent on the 5-mile round-trip to 8,100-foot Saddle Junction.

Where to eat

THE BREAD BASKET A popular spot for breakfast, with tables beneath the pines. \$\$; 54710 N. Circle Dr.; 951/659-3506.

CAFÉ AROMA It’s one of Idyllwild’s prime gathering spots and offers a good selection of pastas. \$\$; 54750 N. Circle Dr.; 951/659-3506.

Where to stay

QUIET CREEK INN Modern duplex cabins with wood-burning fireplaces along Strawberry Creek. It also offers vacation rentals, including beautiful vintage cabins. From \$120; www.quietcreekinn.com or 800/450-6110.

STRAWBERRY CREEK INN This bed-and-breakfast offers rooms, in various country and mountain motifs, along its namesake creek where you can hang out in hammocks under the pines. From \$115; www.strawberrycreekinn.com or 800/262-8969.