

# Geotourism expands to Southern Sierra region

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By Marek Warszawski / The Fresno Bee

Planning an excursion to the Southern Sierra Nevada has never been simpler.

Just point and click.

Hiking trails, scenic drives, historic museums, local cafes – all are waiting to be discovered on the Sierra Nevada Geotourism Map Guide ([sierranevadageotourism.org](http://sierranevadageotourism.org)), an interactive website and map.

The Southern Sierra Nevada, which includes Madera, Fresno, Tulare and Kern counties, is the third of four Sierra regions to be included on the site created from a partnership between National Geographic, the Sierra Nevada Conservancy and the Sierra Business Council.

What separates the Map Guide from other tourism sites is that anyone can nominate favorite destinations, activities, events and places to eat. Nominations for the Southern Sierra section run through the end of April.



Hikers work their way past a clear deep pool while exploring at Angel Falls in Sierra National Forest. A new interactive website – the Sierra Nevada Geotourism Map Guide – makes it easier than ever to find such hidden gems.

"The type of information you find on the map is the kind you would get from having dinner with locals," Sierra Business Council project manager Nicole DeJonghe said.

National Geographic defines geotourism as tourism that sustains or enhances an area's geographical character, including its environment, culture, aesthetics and heritage.

In other words, you won't see chain restaurants or motels on the Map Guide. According to National Geographic project manager Jim Dion, it is geared toward travelers who "enjoy a locale's sense of place."

"A McDonald's is like any McDonald's anywhere and doesn't really enhance your experience," Dion said. "But if you walk into the Happy Burger in Mariposa, or the Butterfly Cafe, then you're going to have an authentic local experience. That's what people are looking for when they travel: to visit iconic places and maximize their experience."

Launched last year, the Map Guide already boasts more than 800 nominations from the Yosemite Gateway and Tahoe Emigrant Corridor region and has generated more than 45,000 online visitors, according to a news release. A fourth region, Sierra Cascades, will have its nomination period later this year.

The Map Guide features much more than national parks. Click around the site's main map to descriptions of Coarsegold Historic Museum, Jones Store at Beasore Meadow or the Westbrook Wine Farm, situated at 1,800 feet in O'Neals.

Tulare County tourism manager Eric Coyne said the Map Guide is a great way to promote visitation, adding that travel-related spending in Tulare County totaled \$362 million in 2008.

"Rural counties like ours are really invested in getting people to come up here, having a good time, spending a little money and telling someone else about us," Coyne said. "It's a fantastic opportunity and something we want to develop very quickly."

The site is participant-driven. All entries must include a description of the place or event being nominated as well as at least one piece of high-resolution art, be it a photo or video.

The Southern Sierra Nevada area has a 20-member council, five each from Madera, Fresno, Tulare and Kern counties, that will consider all nominations for accuracy before adding them permanently to the site.

"We'd like to see as many nominations as possible," Coyne said. "It's not an onerous process."

National Geographic also has launched Map Guides for California's Redwood Coast, Greater Yellowstone and the Central Cascades of Oregon and Washington.

