

THINGS TO DO > TRAVEL • News

SUBSCRIBER ONLY

Bay Area day trip: Isleton, the 'Little Paris of the Delta,' gears up for its comeback



Visitors cross Main street as they shop in Isleton, Calif., on Sunday, July 30, 2023. The city of Isleton is making a resurgence as a travel destination, due to some new cafes, restaurants and art galleries that have opened up in this small town that exists along the Sacramento River. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Bay Area News Group)

By **MARTHA ROSS** | Bay Area News Group

PUBLISHED: August 31, 2023 at 3:55 p.m. | UPDATED: September 1, 2023 at 4:22 a.m.



After Oakland craft beer enthusiast Iva Walton lovingly restored a historic Chinese gambling den on Isleton's Main Street and opened it as her popular Mei Wah Beer Room in 2017, local leaders hoped that other creatively minded entrepreneurs would follow her path to the sleepy Delta town and help spur its renaissance.

Alas, the renaissance got delayed by the pandemic, but the community of some 800 people appears to be back on track with efforts to become a Bay Area day-trip destination for food, arts, history and small-town charm.

Over the past couple years, others have rehabbed buildings with colorful histories and turned them into cozy restaurants and hip coffee houses. There's also a new art gallery, a cluster of new boutiques, cannabis dispensaries and the gorgeous new Isleton Museum, which opened in October. Housed in the nearly 100-year-old-old Bing Kong Tong Building, the museum highlights the town's once-vibrant Chinese and Japanese communities. In June, Isleton also revived its famous Crawdad Festival for the first time in 16 years, attracting some 50,000 people for a late spring weekend.



40 Main Art Gallery owner Theresa Jessie, of Isleton, sits in her gallery on Main Street. (Jose Carlos Faiardo/Bay Area News Group)

To be sure, Isleton mostly remains a sleepy town, but that's one reason it offers Bay Area residents a quick way to immerse themselves in a very different world. Just over the Antioch bridge from Contra Costa County's suburban sprawl, Highway 160 dips into a landscape of farmlands, meandering waterways and quirky marina communities populated by iconoclasts.

As the highway winds along a levee hugging the Sacramento River, Isleton soon emerges as a curious hodgepodge of wooden and tin-pressed buildings that look transported from an Old West movie set.

Once called "the Little Paris of the Delta," the town has "has had its ups and downs," acknowledges Mike Abood and his partner Sarah McGee. Abood, who grew up in town, met McGee at Mei Wah. They bonded over a shared passion for food and baking and took a chance on opening their sandwich shop, The McBoodery, during the pandemic.

"We found the opportunity to open a small to-go sandwich shop, which the town seemed to need at the time, and continues to support us almost three years later," they said.



Isleton residents Mike Abood and Sarah McGee opened a charming cafe called The McBoodery during the pandemic. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Bay Area News Group)

"It is a kind of renaissance," agreed Jack Doelcher, who opened his coffee shop, Java Jack's 160, just two months ago. A commercial lighting designer from nearby Rio Vista, he transformed an old Richfield gas station into a sleek little cafe that employs local high school graduates as baristas. It also features a drive-through option, designed to lure motorists traveling between the East Bay and Sacramento.

Next door to Java Jack's is Manny's Barzzeria, a friendly, family-owned Italian restaurant with a brick-fronted outdoor patio that opened just before the start of the COVID lockdown.

Certainly, businesses struggled during the pandemic, but Isleton's urban transplants say the downtime gave them a chance to fall in love with its less harried lifestyle. Theresa Jessie, a photographer from Alameda, has been visiting Isleton for decades, mostly to get out on the water, do some fishing and "clear my head." She's made Isleton her home and opened her 40 Main Art Gallery in 2021 to display her own photos of Delta landmarks, as well as paintings by other local artists.



Seattle transplants Ruby Fowler, left, and Aleida Suarez recently opened the town's new Isleton Coffee Company. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Bay Area News Group)

Across Main Street, Aleida Suarez and Ruby Fowler recently opened the town's other new coffee shop, Isleton Coffee Company, after moving from Seattle.

house their storefront cafe, as well as an apartment and studio space to begin producing their own artwork.

By the end of the year, Isleton's dining scene is expected to expand to include Latin fare at another new restaurant called Memo-Os, courtesy of Bay Area chef Guillermo Vidal and his business partner Oscar Hernandez.



Isleton chamber of commerce president Jean Yokotobi fell in love with the town the first time she saw it. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Bay Area News Group)

Chamber of Commerce president Jean Yokotobi has been enamoured of Isleton since she first visited in 1965. The daughter of Japanese American farmers, she

"It was just one of those perfect Delta days in the spring. I knew I had to live here," she said.

Yokotobi eventually fulfilled that dream by buying and rehabbing two historical buildings. One houses The McBoodery, and the other is the Chin family's former general store, which now serves as her home and the offices of the chamber and a local nonprofit. Her neighbors credit her with making the town's history central to its revitalization efforts.

Over the last century, the town has survived fires, floods, revolutions in agricultural production and other economic and cultural forces that at one point left it a "a ghost town," she said.

Since the late 2000s, Yokotobi has worked with state and regional agencies on planning Isleton's Asian American Heritage Park on a quarter-acre plot next to the history museum. The park will feature walkways, a Japanese bell temple and other features that will pay homage to the town's Chinese residents, who came for the Gold Rush and helped build the levees, and to its Japanese residents, who arrived later.

Yokotobi and others hope the park will join the Mei Wah Beer Room and other new businesses in attracting visitors, with the hope that tiny Isleton won't be a ghost town again.

IF YOU GO

Mei Wah Beer Room: Owner Iva Walton drew on her stage design experience to create this space which celebrates local history and the building's origins as a Chinese gambling hall, brothel and opium den. The interior is painted an auspicious red and decorated with a dragon head mask and other Chinese motifs, and an ornate wedding bed is playfully labeled the "opium den." Mei Wah offers 24 mostly local craft beers on tap, as well as kombucha, cider, seltzer and nitro coffee to enjoy indoors or in the beer garden. Open Thursday-Sunday at 35 Main St., Isleton; <https://meiwahbeerroom.com/>.

The McBoodery: Owners Sarah McGee and Mike Abood wake up early every morning to bake bread they use for their sandwiches and "zombies," rolls stuffed with meats, cheeses or pizza-inspired ingredients. Open daily except Tuesdays at 35 Main St.; www.themcboodery.com

Isleton Coffee Company: The cafe serves up really good coffee, including a Cuban-style espresso drink topped with hand-whipped sugary foam. Don't miss the frosty, soft-serve ice cream, swirled into cups or cones or turned into floats topped with coffee, chocolate or A&W Root Beer. Open daily except Wednesdays at 43 Main St., www.isletoncoffeecompany.com.

Manny's Barzzeria: This pizza — Margherita, chicken truffle and "The Isleton, topped with garlic prawns and pesto — is worth the drive. Manny's also serves pasta, cocktails and a warm burrata appetizer you can slather over bread and top with tomatoes and dollops of hot honey. Open daily except Mondays at 212 Second St; www.mannysbarzzeria.com.

Java Jack's 160: Serves fresh-brewed coffee, espresso drinks and a "Jacked Up" frappe with icy espresso, chocolate and caramel. Open daily at 208 Second St.; javajacks160.com.

Peter's Steakhouse: Isleton's version of fine dining serves classic steak, seafood and prime rib sliders in an airy dining dining fashioned out of a former hardware store. Chef/owner Peter Low and his family also run the Pineapple Chinese restaurant on Main Street. The steakhouse is open daily except Tuesdays at 203 Second St.; <https://peterssteakhouse.net>.

Isleton Museum: Exhibits explore Isleton's history from its Native American origins to the decades when it had a Chinatown at one end of Main Street and a Japantown at the other. Open Saturday afternoons at 29 Main St., <https://isletonmuseum.com>.

40 Main Art Gallery: Browse photos, paintings and other artwork by Northern California artists. 40 Main St., <https://40mainartgallery.com/>

Rivers Edge Studio: Longtime residents Clay and Lilian Bodenhamer transformed a former Chinese market on Main Street into a deli and cafe, which they ran until 2009. They reopened the building several years later as a ceramics studio, where they sell their own pots, bowls and other artwork at 7 Main St. Call 916-952-3682 for information.

For more travel coverage in the Bay Area and beyond, [follow us on Flipboard](#).

Main Street

[Report an error](#)

[Policies and Standards](#)

[Contact Us](#)



The Trust Project

Tags: [Bay Area Travel](#), [Day Trips](#), [Editors' Picks](#), [PM Report](#)

 Martha Ross, Features writer for the Bay Area News Group is photographed for a Wordpress profile in Walnut Creek, Calif., on Thursday, July 28, 2016. (Anda Chu/Bay Area News

Martha Ross | Features writer

Martha Ross is a Bay Area News Group features writer for The Mercury News and East Bay Times who covers everything and anything related to popular culture, society, health, women's issues and families. She has previously reported or edited for Bay Area news and lifestyle publications, including Walnut Creek Patch, and Diablo, Oakland and Alameda magazines, as well as The Nation in Bangkok, Thailand and The Economist. She graduated from Northwestern University with a BA degree in German studies and from Mills College with a MFA degree in creative writing and English.

 Follow Martha Ross [@marthajross](#)

1 Cup of This Daily Burns Pounds of Fat! Try Tonight

One Teaspoon Every Night Burns Body Fat Like Never Before, You Will Fit In Your Pants Again!

Liv Pure | Sponsored

[Learn More](#)

Doctor: Throat Phlegm? Your Body Is Trying To Tell You Something

SaneSolution | Sponsored

Heart Surgeon Begg Americans: “Stop Doing This To Your Blueberries”

In this free presentation, Dr. Gundry unveils exactly which foods you may need to avoid.

Gundry MD | Sponsored

[Learn More](#)

Heart Surgeon Begg Americans: “Stop Doing This To Your Blueberries”

Dr. Gundry has released an informative free video showcasing exactly which foods you may need to avoid.

Gundry MD | Sponsored

[Learn More](#)

Tommy Chong: The Horrifying Truth About CBD

It hit me right where I live...

Tommy Chong's CBD | Sponsored

[Watch Now](#)

Stream like never before

The best way to stream live sports, shows and movies is with the Xfinity 10G Network.

Xfinity | Sponsored

[Learn more](#)

Cardiologists: Overweight? Do This Before Bed

Healthy Guru | Sponsored

[Learn More](#)

The Nutritionist 4 Vitamins You Need After 50 For "Overall" Health

Here Are 7 Big Discounts Seniors Only Get If They Ask

Great list of discounts and benefits for seniors in 2023.

Senior Discounts By National Penny | Sponsored

[Learn More](#)

What if WW1 had never happened? Game simulates historical scenarios

This game takes you back to a crucial moment in US history.

Historical Strategy Game | Sponsored

[Play Now](#)

New Retirement Villages Near Stockton (Take A Look At The Prices)

Senior Living | Sponsored Searches | Sponsored

In Fact, Millions Of Americans Are Using New Innovative EasySplit Drill Bit...

Streamline your firewood cutting with this high-hardness, super-tough Wood Log Splitter Drill Bit – don't miss out!

Dotmalls | Sponsored

[Learn More](#)

Harrison Ford's Inheritance Makes The Headlines

investing.com | Sponsored

2023 > August > 31

SPONSORED CONTENT



By Bleacher Breaker



I actually got 17!

SUBSCRIBE TODAY!
ALL ACCESS DIGITAL OFFER FOR JUST 99 CENTS!