

A BREATH OF MOUNTAIN AIR

Veteran band tour manager Rick Marino drives us to **IDYLLWILD** for chocolate and pine-scented breezes.

JOSH MCNAIR, CALIFORNIA THROUGH MY LENS.COM

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There is no better time to take a trip to Idyllwild than NOW!

This summer the town of Idyllwild barely, and I mean barely, escaped the devastating Cranston Fire. I took a ride up the hill to give the community some love and discover some new mountaintop gems to share.

Less than an hour from Coachella Valley, this community is always cooler than the desert days and nights. It offers up pine-scented breezes, fall colors, sometimes snow – and sometimes lots of snow – great places to eat and tons of hiking trails.

Taking my favorite route from the desert floor, Highway 74 twists and turns for about 9 miles from Palm Desert into the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountain National Monument. There is a great visitor’s center and trailheads worth a stop before you head up the mountain. Sights along the way include Vista Point, with a more than 180-degree view from San Jacinto Peak all the way to the Salton Sea, and big horn sheep! They’ve sometimes been seen along this route depending on the time of year. At the junction of the 74 and 371, the Paradise Valley Café is a favorite weekend spot for bikers and hikers on the Pacific Crest Trail, which passes nearby.

My first stop is at Lake Hemet, where I notice all the new signage and revamped market and grill out front as I pull in. Over the past couple years, they have been improving the facilities here and it looks great. There are several campgrounds, and small cabins for rent. What is really cool is their rent-my-tent service. Wanna try camping and don’t have all the gear? They provide everything. The lake is stocked every month with rainbow trout from spring to fall, and they have a few boats and kayaks for rent as well. I like the idea of a midday jam up the hill for a picnic or to throw a pole in the water for a goof.

Making my way into the fire zone, you can see how scary this was if you live or work up here, not to mention the kick-ass job the firefighters who risked their lives to save as much as they did. You actually see the line on the highway where the fire was stopped just below a dome house set into the lush green pines. Again, hats off to the firefighters – this made me appreciate this road trip all the more!

I am eager to check out the new microbrewery in town so I pull in for lunch. With indoor and outdoor seating, there’s a multi-level terrace built over Strawberry Creek. There are several house brews that change daily, and the food is a great mix of something for everyone. I ordered the giant Bavarian pretzels with dips, a chili cheese dog and some tacos! This place gets packed on the weekends but is definitely worth a visit for the view and the beer.

Next I am off to check into a cabin rental I found through experienceidyllwild.com. Kelly and Joey Halbeisen are owner-operators of six different classic cabins around town and really



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dig what they do. I was really into the mid-century style of cabins they offer and how good the website is to navigate. I chose the Idyllcove A-frame Cabin and it was perfect for us, on a quiet street surrounded by towering pines. The comfy furniture plus a huge terraced deck out back with a hot tub was a BONUS! In town, there are a few small inn and motels, and of course vacation rentals, RV parks and campgrounds.

I spent the afternoon bopping around town on foot, grabbing some coffee at Higher Grounds, then a snack at the Idyllwild Bake Shop & Brew. But it all came together when I discovered El Buen Cacao. Erik and Jessica hand-make their organic chocolate “bean to bar” style. This is what I’m talking about. They offer hot chocolate, a European-style shot of melted chocolate (try it poured over ice cream) and Mexican-style with cinnamon and spice. Plus hand-spun chocolate shakes – they even have a vegan version – and chocolate tea made from the roasted shells of the beans. There’s also all kinds of bars, even a ghost pepper one, as well as truffles and fresh-fruit dipped in, too. OK, so I get excited, but it’s really just fun to experience chocolate so many ways. They have a perfect deck outside the shop to savor it ALL!

In town, you will find several art galleries, cafes and shops, even some wine tasting at Middle Ridge Winery. Near my cabin was the Fern Valley area, or “top of the town,” where one of my favorite antiques stores is located. The Fern Valley Emporium is a well-curated place, and the owner fixes and sells pinball machines. I always have to tell myself not to buy one – soon, though! Also in this area is IDYology, a cool A-frame restaurant with a big ‘ole fireplace in the bar, huge deck out back and laid-back vibes.

If you want to go hiking, then head to Humber Park Trailhead at the base of the Humber Peak. Here, there are many trails from easy to advanced – remember the high altitude up here! Bring plenty of water and wear the right clothes if you wanna get into it. The visitor center and ranger station can point you to all the hiking and biking trails on the mountain.

There is no shortage of place to eat around town. For dinner, I go to Ferro, a really great Italian joint in a restored craftsman home with a beautiful deck outside complete with a wood-fired pizza bar. There’s usually live music, and on this trip I was treated to a jazz trio under the stars with pizza and pasta in hand – does it get any better?

After some starlight hot tub hangs on the deck and great night’s sleep, I must say good bye to the A-frame cabin and make my way to get some breakfast. Since I kind of went off the rails with a chocolate and ice cream overload (I have to try it all for you!), I hit a new vegan place in town. It’s called Plant Food Supper Club, and I LOVE IT. Breakfast is a veggie burrito, plus buckwheat banana pancakes, fresh roasted coffee – French-pressed on the table – and juice. It feels good to eat good with fresh air in the morning. The mid-century café has a great design and an outdoor deck with live music Thursday through Sunday. I know I’ll be running up the hill with out of town guests just for lunch or dinner and some drinks – after all, it’s just a road trip away. 🌱

Follow Rick Marino’s travels on rickmarinotravels.com or on Instagram @rickmarinotravels. You can also write to him with questions at rickmarino@att.net.