

Chapter 1

County at a Glance

MISNAMED BUT BELOVED, Contra Costa is suburban-commercial county of 948,816 residents, the great majority of whom live in 20 cities and about a dozen unincorporated towns.

The county is rippled by hills and valleys, bordered on three sides by water and dominated at its middle by Mt. Diablo, 3,849 feet high. In the winter, the mountain often dons a mantle of snow and delights the eye.

In size, the county covers about 733 square miles (about half the size of Rhode Island) and is the ninth-most populous among California's 58 counties.

When Spanish explorers looked east from San Francisco, they saw what they called "Contra Costa," the opposite shore, in reality present-day Alameda County. In the 1800s, Alameda split off from Contra Costa, took its own name, and left Contra Costa with a name that makes little sense but is here to stay.

Two ranges of hills and low mountains run north to south, dividing the county into three regions popularly called west, central and east. The central section divides into two valleys: Diablo, north of Walnut Creek, and San Ramon, south of Walnut Creek. East of Mt. Diablo, the land gradually flattens into the Delta of the Sacramento-San Joaquin rivers.

Many of the hills have been placed into permanent open space. Contra Costa still has its groves of walnut, pear and olive trees, its fields of corn and tomatoes, and hills dotted with cows, steers and horses. In summer and fall, farmers' markets come to life, fresh produce from the countryside.

But rare is the Contra Costan who supports himself by farming. Many people work in the service industries or in large office or industrial complexes.

Crime is generally low and falling lower, school scores generally middling to high. In things to do and parks, the county is unusually bountiful: movies, plays, symphonies, operas, ballet, sporting events, games and activities for children and adults.

For decades, Contra Costa suffered from the suburban blahs. Restaurants, with few exceptions, were OK but not exciting. Shopping was adequate but not up to the sophistication of San Francisco. This has all changed. The high-class