



you can enjoy a quiet lunch or climb up the bank and venture into the woods.

The last time I visited, the river was blocked about 4-6 miles in by a giant redwood that extended bank to bank. If it hasn't been removed, it marks the end of the trip.

As with all the rivers on the Mendocino coast, the return trip is a lot of work, as the inevitable afternoon wind marches an army of chop along the water. Pleasantly tired, I struggled back to the put in beach.

On another trip, about half way up the river, my solitude was shattered by mechanical booming and crashing. Rounding a turn, I saw a clearing, and less than a half mile from the river, in plain view, was a huge cable logging operation

Fortunately since then, land along the Big River has been added to our public domain and logging has stopped.

#### **NOYO RIVER: From Town to Train**

Looking at the Noyo River in Fort Bragg for the first time, I wondered where it wandered. Not knowing where the boat ramp was, I drove down into the harbor, past the gift shops and seafood restaurants and out to the beach at the river mouth. Setting out from the cold and gray beach, I rode the plump, slow swells between the breakwaters and into the marina area.

On the following trip, I discovered a paved public boat ramp and parking lot. Its a few blocks inland on Highway 20, which leads to Willits and the inland terminus of the Skunk Train. Turn left from Highway 20 onto South Harbor Drive, then right on Basin.

On the underside of the marina is an intermittently submerged world. Remnants of metal and wooden structures hang down, and each surface is covered with the assortment of sea creatures that cling and wait. Unidentifiable items bob in the dark green water, and various swimming creatures leave tiny wakes in the shadows. Life prospers in the under shadows just as it does on the docks above.

Beyond the old touristy town, the river becomes rural. The last vestige of town is the trailer park, with the luckier residents boasting waterfront addresses. Fences and spots of cultivation continue for a mile or more. Once-used structures are slowly consumed by the relentless river.

## MENDOCINO ACCOMMODATIONS

The Mendocino kayaker, tired at the end of a long day on the water, has a wide choice of accommodations. They range from very pricy to free.

There are upscale bed and breakfast places in and around Mendocino. Many of these can be found online. More modest lodging is available in Fort Bragg. One motel I'm familiar with is the Seabird, right on the highway, just past the Noyo River. The price is right and includes an indoor pool.

For the camper, there are three really lovely state parks. MacKerricher is just north of Fort Bragg near a nice beach. Van Damme is at Little River, two miles south of Mendocino. Russian Gulch, which has a beach launch, is just north of Mendocino. There's also the small camp ground at the mouth of the Navarro. Visit the California State Parks website, [www.parks.ca.gov/parkindex/](http://www.parks.ca.gov/parkindex/), for more details on camping in Mendocino County.

If these sites are booked, drive eight miles up Highway 128 to Paul Dimmick State Park. It's in a thick grove of redwoods, but is seldom full. The only drawback is the lack of hot water.

There are many places along the Mendocino coast where one can camp for free, but since they are not official campgrounds, you'll have to discover them yourself.

Soon the river enters the shaded green world that characterizes western Mendocino County. Thick trees line the river, and the sounds of birds dominate the landscape.

That is, until the historic steam whistle of the Skunk Train, whose tracks parallel the river, shatters the forest silence. Eventually, the river passes under the train trestle, and shortly after that it becomes too shallow to paddle.

Each of these tidal rivers has a unique charm, and each is worth at least one visit.

Between paddling a river a day, taking in some of the local hikes, and seeing the sights of Mendocino, you can easily while away a wonderful week in this area. **ASJ**