

Bridges of the California Delta

Experience the charm of its bridges, waterways & towns

By Noel O'Brien Photos by Diane King, Greg Mitchell & Doris Noriega

The California Delta has a distinct uniqueness when you begin to explore and identify the overall size and complexity of what actually makes up the Delta. The beauty of it all is that you can travel by car or boat and experience the charm and history of the many bridges, towns, roads, and waterways throughout.

Let's get started with a little more of an overview and understanding of just what makes up the California Delta. The "Delta" covers over 1,000 miles of waterways. The Sacramento River and the San Joaquin River are the major rivers that help make up the California Delta. Other rivers feeding into them are the American, the Mokelumne, the Cosumnes, and the Calaveras Rivers. Then the many sloughs and waterways contribute to the Delta's character. With that perspective, one can only imagine the wildlife complexity that has developed within this delicate balance many of us call home. The bridges on the Sacramento River and adjoining waterways have a history and a charm that are unsurpassed. It is possible to spend and enjoy many days boating through the best waterways in the country while being transported back in time to a different era. A time when these bridges had a different meaning as they transformed and developed the local communities.

It does not take long to find yourself drifting away from the pace of everyday life exploring the backwaters and sloughs. The lush natural surroundings, overhanging trees and berries, wildlife at every turn, various bird sounds emanating from Sandhill Cranes to Kingfishers and Great Blue Herons, geese, ducks and egrets take over while you move along through the water. Not to mention the outstanding game fish opportunities to be found teeming in the waters. Sturgeon are plentiful, Striped Bass, Salmon, Largemouth and Smallmouth Bass, Crappie, and Catfish can be caught throughout the year.

If you maneuver a boat on the Delta waterways, you are bound to deal with at least one or two bridges. In fact, there are more than 100 bridges throughout the Delta; approximately 30 bridges are found on the Georgiana Slough, Mokelumne River, San Joaquin River and the Sacramento River.



*Birds eye view of the Rio Vista Bridge.
Photo: "Bridge Man" Greg Mitchell*



Isleton Bridge on a sunny day. Photo: Doris Noriega

Let's focus on the Sacramento River and its adjacent waterways. It is important to know how to request a bridge to be raised so you can pass through safely. The size, mast height, and maneuverability of your boat must be taken into account. The tide can affect the boat's height clearance for any bridge in question. "Rules of the Road" on the water must be taken into consideration. It may be necessary to contact the bridgetender well in advance of your arrival. For example, the Isleton Bridge needs a four-hour advanced notice to the Rio Vista Bridge after normal hours. So, planning is necessary at times. Most bridges monitor VHF Channels 9 and 16. It is wise to hail them on Channel 9 upon

visual sighting to request the bridge to be opened. The horn signal is one long followed by one short blast to request it to open. Bridgetenders will respond to a phone call during operating hours. Operating hours are seasonal for California Delta bridges – shorter hours are the norm for winter. There are Bridge guides and references to read before taking to the California Delta. The information on the Delta Boating web site at DeltaBoating.com/bridges.htm is especially helpful. Your preparation can help you enjoy the

time you spend on the Delta.

To get a quick overview, the following bridges are similar in being "movable bridges" but are exceptional in their own way due to the different construction evolving from 1919 to 1962 and the geographic land structures they are built upon. These bridges are considered historical and unique.

Helen Madere Memorial Bridge, known locally as the Rio Vista Bridge, it is a vertical lift bridge that crosses over the Sacramento River at Rio Vista. It wasn't always a vertical lift bridge. The original Rio Vista Bridge was built in 1919 as a Strauss Double Leaf Bascule Bridge - two sections of bridge directed towards each other and connected in the middle. When powered, the sections lift up and away from each other to allow ship or boat passage. A counterweight continuously balances a span, or "leaf," throughout its upward swing.

The vertical lift bridge you see today was completed in 1960 and won an American Institute of Steel Construction class IV (movable bridges) award. The bridge was re-named the Helen Madere Memorial Bridge after a former vice-mayor of Rio Vista who served as that city's representative to the Solano Transportation Authority.

The importance of bridges and the connection to our Delta livelihood is reflected in an incident that occurred on 15 January 1967. There was a collision when a freighter, the *Ilice*, rammed the Rio Vista Bridge in heavy fog. It took three weeks to repair the closed bridge and a ferry was assigned to transport traffic across the river.

Isleton Bridge is a more unique historic bridge because of its unusual combination of concrete and steel spans that are both capable of being considered "main spans." The bridge is another Strauss designed bascule span, with a different structural finish. It has two concrete rainbow spans on the east side of the bridge. The visual impact of this bridge outdoes the written word. Both the rainbow arch spans and the bascule span retain historic integrity by way of their lack of alteration of original materials and design. This Isleton Bridge is an outstanding bridge that should receive a high priority for preservation. It's beautiful design and distinctive color make the Isleton Bridge a favorite of locals. Joseph Strauss, the engineer, went on to become the Chief Engineer to head up the design of the Golden Gate Bridge.

Three Mile Slough Bridge was built in 1949 and is similar in design to the Rio Vista Bridge as a vertical lift bridge. It is part of the CA Route 160 connection from Antioch to Sacramento.

Walnut Grove Bridge was constructed in 1951 and is a Strauss Heel Trunnion Bascule Bridge. This bridge connects both sections of Walnut Grove and is another bridge loaded with character. Walnut Grove offers a nice docking facility and many shops and restaurants to enjoy. The bridge literally brings life together for the community.

Steamboat Slough Bridge is another bascule bridge built by Strauss Bascule Bridge Co. It is located over Steamboat Slough near the town of Courtland. Built in 1924, it is a charming old bridge that is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.



End view of the Walnut Grove Bridge. Photo: Diane King

Freeport Bridge is an historic bridge built in 1929 and upgraded in 1955. This is another bascule type bridge with counterweights on either side to lift the middle section for shipping vessel traffic. It is a true delight to see these type of bridges in motion.

Paintersville Bridge was built in 1923 and is one of the very few unmodified examples in California of the Strauss Heel Trunnion Bascule Bridge. It was also a link with the Victory

Highway, which played an integral part in transportation and agricultural history in the California Delta region. (The Victory Highway was established following WWI as a memorial to those who fought and died in that war. It ran from Kansas City to San Francisco. The western end for the Victory Highway is in South San Francisco.)

Miner Slough Bridge is a swing bridge over Miner Slough connecting Ryer Island to the mainland on CA Route 84, built in 1933 and rehabilitated in 1953. This bridge is located west of the Sacramento River and east of the Sacramento River Deep Water Ship Channel.

Mokelumne River Bridge on Highway 12 between Rio Vista and Lodi is a swing bridge over the beautiful Mokelumne River built in 1942 and had a major overhaul completed in 2016. The total length of this bridge is 1,436.1 feet and has a vertical clearance of 27.9 feet. That's good to know if you are traveling with an RV and have items stored on the roof.

Georgiana Slough Bridge is a Steel Girder Swing Bridge, built by Duncanson-Harrelson Co in 1962 over the Georgiana Slough on Isleton Road.

The opportunity to share some time on the California Delta is an occasion to be taken seriously and with great pride. Part of your experience is seeing firsthand, how the Delta has created the fabric of the independent people who live here. The agricultural and livestock contributions span the country and have done so for generations. The sport fishing contributions abound with years of development – fetching back when there was a strong commercial fishing industry, one of the best on the west coast. The Delta, right here, is one of the most impressive waterways the world has to offer. It has great expanses, still waters, storms that rival some of the best ones, calm summers and beautiful starry evenings. Then there are the people who make it all happen.

Rio Vista, Courtland, Locke, Walnut Grove, Isleton, Freeport, Paintersville, Grand Island, Ryde, Hood and many more cities and towns are what make up the Delta community. The bridges connect all the roads and afford boaters the opportunity to appreciate the uniqueness of what is here. Whether by boat or by car, there is plenty to do for all, so come on out and enjoy!