TRIP OF A LIFETIME
Santa Barbara, Santa Ynez Valley, Big Sur: A Central Coast road trip makes a vintage romantic getaway

Waves and Wine

Sunset at the beach: the staple of personal ads, romance novels, and Playmate turn-ons. Thee and me and we. The biggest of all California clichés. But trust me—as sunsets go, this is an epic, a masterpiece. As if van Gogh had decided to work in Cinerama.

We’re at Oso Flaco Lake, on California’s Central Coast. My wife, Becky, has never been to this spot, so I wanted to show her the lake and, beyond it, a beach with churning, restless surf.

BY MATTHEW JAFFE • PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID ZAITZ
Glimpses of a golden coast (clockwise from top left): Santa Barbara’s shoreline; the Four Seasons Resort; tasting at Foxen Vineyard & Winery; Foxen vintage; vineyards near Inn at the Pinnacles; Foxen winery sign; La Super-Rica.
We follow the boardwalk along the lake and then through the shifting dunes. The day has been overcast, but the sands begin to brighten to gold. By the time we reach the ocean, the setting sun has emerged beneath the layer of clouds along the horizon. Everything—ocean, dunes, underside of clouds—is suddenly on fire with spinning oranges and reds and purples.

Even though we’ve both lived in California for a while now, Becky remains a genuine Jersey girl at heart, and I’m still a Chicago guy. Neither of us has ever seen a sunset quite like this. But while we’re astounded, we’re not entirely surprised. Because when we began our 670-mile round-trip drive through the Central Coast’s wine regions and along its incomparable coastline, we were venturing into the California of our dreams.

**2 DAYS, 30 MILES**

Santa Barbara to Santa Ynez Valley

In my mind, Santa Barbara is California: Mediterranean architecture, palm trees, the beach, and islands veiled in mist. (Chicago winters will do that to you.) But it’s a city that has always remained just out of reach. I’ve lived an hour to the northwest and now live an hour to the east, but never in Santa Barbara itself.

We splurge with a night at the Four Seasons Resort. It’s Santa Barbara condensed, all ocean and gardens, archways and decorative tile, trailing bougainvillea and rambling Moreton Bay figs. The mood here is decidedly relaxed, especially compared to posh oceanfront spots in other beach cities that have an almost white-gloved fussiness about them. This too seems to be a reflection of Santa Barbara, where the surf vibe and sea breeze seem to chill out loftier pretensions. Santa Barbara is a city that reveres not just its Dons but its dudes too.

In that spirit, we eschew some of the fancier dinner spots in town for one of the best. La Super-Rica is really
a glorified taco stand, with a zigzag rooﬁlline and a covered patio. But what
it lacks in decor it makes up for in
authenticity, from its handmade
tortillas to ﬁre-roasted pasilla peppers
stuffed with cheese.

With its long lines, La Super-Rica
demands some strategizing. The patrons
in line ahead of us are weighing their
choices with the solemnity of the con-
demned choosing a last meal. Becky, a
much nicer person than I, senses my
escalating impatience. She gives me a
sweet but ﬁrm “Be nice” look as I feel
the declamation “Holy pozole, just
make a choice!” rising up from the molten core
of my being. But it only
takes one bite of my
taco to make me a
contented man.

DAYS, 170 MILES
Santa Ynez Valley to Pinnacles N.M.
Let the Sideways back-
lash begin!
I issue this fatwa not
out of any dislike for
last year’s best movie.
But having watched the
Santa Ynez Valley’s
emergence from languid
ranchland into a top
wine region over the
past few decades, it was
a shock to suddenly see
favorite haunts on the
big screen. Think of it
this way: You live in the Amazon rain
forest and Angelina Jolie or Sting visits
your village. You appreciate the atten-
tion but also know that things will nev-
er quite be the same again.
The joy of the Santa Ynez Valley and
its fellow Central Coast wine regions
has always been their blend of kick-
back vibe and knockout wines. These
are places to discover wines without
being intimidated by adjective-spouting
pedants. Terroir without terror.

Maybe it’s just a coincidence, but
our favorite wines come from the
least opulent and most un-faux-
ﬁnished spots. Near Los Olivos, Foxen
Winery’s tasting room is little more
than a tin shack, while Garretson
Wine Company up in Paso Robles
is located in a generic, hard-to-reach
industrial center better suited to a
plumbing-supply business. It’s sym-
bolic of how the wine industry has
become engrained in the life of the
Central Coast. In Los Angeles, every
young dreamer is an aspiring screen-
writer. Here the dream is to create
great wines, with waiters, store clerks,
and winery employees all eager to talk
about their vines.

With our tastings done, I cleanse
my palate with a full-bodied and slight-
ly assertive root beer from the 21st
Street Drive-In in Paso Robles. Mis-
souri may be the Show-Me State, but
California is the What-If State. And as
Becky and I drive past rows of vines
exaggerating the contours of the
rolling hills, we ponder the possibili-
ties of a life in wine country.

It’s the life that Jan and Jon
Brosseau have been building with their
own hands since they bought land
here in 1978. They’re the owners of
the Inn at the Pinnacles, a Monterey
County bed-and-breakfast set in the
middle of acres of Pinot Noir, Syrah,
and Chardonnay grapes. During the
week, Jon works in aerospace in the
Bay Area, then the couple loads up
their car with provisions and heads to
the inn for the weekend. Their prop-
erty sits adjacent to the historic Chalone
Vineyard and a few miles from Pinna-
cles National Monument, the land-
mark volcanic outcrops that Becky and
I are eager to explore.

Roughly 36 million people live in
California, but we’re the only 2 at Pin-
nacles. And for good reason. Just as
Becky steps out, the threatening skies
stop their threatening and deliver the
goods. The rock formations disappear
behind a curtain of rain and fog. The
rain goes all Ringo on the roof and we
listen to the pounding while scanning
the skies for the slightest hint of blue.
Finally we give up and opt for—what
The sweet life (clockwise from top): 21st Street Drive-In in Paso Robles; Cannery Row; Ed Ricketts’s Lab; Carmel City Beach; Pinnacles National Monument.
The road trip

CONTACKS

- Monterey County visitors bureau (www.montereyinfo.org or 888/221-1010)
- San Luis Obispo County visitors bureau (www.santabarbaracounty.com or 800/634-1414)
- Santa Barbara visitors bureau (www.santabarbaraca.com or 800/676-1266)

Dining and lodging

Some of our lodging choices are splurge; for more options, see “Contacts.”

SANTA BARBARA COUNTY

Four Seasons Resort Santa Barbara. Oceanfront classic. From $500, two-night minimum on weekends. 1260 Channel Dr., Santa Barbara; www.fourseasons.com/santabarbara or 888/424-5866.

La Super-Rica. Mexican food well worth long peak-hour waits. $; lunch and dinner daily. 622 N. Milpas St., Santa Barbara; 805/963-4940.


ATASCADERO AND PASO ROBLES


21st Street Drive-In. Sip a root beer at this vintage drive-in. $; lunch and dinner daily. 2110 Spring St., Paso Robles; 805/238-0360.

MONTREY AND PACIFIC GROVE


Inn at the Pinnacles. Ideal wine country setting at the gateway to Pinnacles. Open weekends only; from $200, two-night minimum. 32025 Stonewall Canyon Rd., Soledad; www.innatthepinnacles.com or 831/678-2400.

Loulu’s Griddle in the Middle. Updated take on waterfront breakfast joint. $; breakfast and lunch daily. On Municipal Wharf II, Monterey; 831/372-0568.

Monterey Bay Inn. Newly renovated hotel on waterfront. From $199, two-night minimum on weekends. 242 Cannery Row, Monterey; www.montereybayinn.com or 800/424-6242.

CARMEL

Casanova Restaurant. Classic romantic setting, Mediterranean cuisine. $$$$; lunch and dinner daily. Fifth Ave. between Mission St. and San Carlos St.; 831/625-0501.

La Playa Hotel. One-time Carmel estate a couple of blocks from Carmel City Beach. From $180, two-night minimum on weekends. Camino Real at Eighth Ave.; www.laplayahotel.com or 800/582-8900.

BIG SUR

Big Sur River Inn. After a meal of fresh fish and organic produce, kick back in a chair in the river. $; breakfast, lunch, and dinner daily. On State 1 at Phemerger Creek; www.bigsurriverinn.com or 800/548-3610.

Big Sur Roadhouse. California fusion cuisine with funky roadhouse décor. $$; dinner Wed–Mon. On State 1, about 25 miles south of Carmel; 831/667-2264.

Treebones Resort. Upscale camping, where roughing it includes a morning waffle bar. Campsites from $55 and yurts from $129, two-night minimum on weekends. 71895 State 1, 1 mile north of Gorda; www.treebonesresort.com or 877/424-4787.

Attractions


Ed Ricketts’s Lab. Mentioned in John Steinbeck’s Cannery Row, the historic site is occasionally open to the public. On Cannery Row, Monterey; visit www.canneryrow.org for details.

Hearst Castle. A classic example of California history and architecture. Five different tours available this month. From $24, reservations recommended. 750 Hearst Castle Rd., San Simeon; www.hearstcastle.com or 800/444-4445.

Henry Miller Memorial Library. Gallery with concerts, lectures, and other events. 11–6 Thu–Sun; free. On State 1, Big Sur; www.henrymiller.org or 831/667-2574.

Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park. About 10 miles of trails, including the 0.5-mile round-trip Overlook Trail, which offers a view of a waterfall dropping 80 feet into the ocean. Free. On State 1, 37 miles south of Carmel; www.parks.ca.gov or 831/667-2315.

Monterey Bay Aquarium. The nation’s top aquarium has added a new octopus habitat and a walk-through wave-crash exhibit. 9:30–6 daily; $12, $10.95 ages 3–12. 886 Cannery Row, Monterey; www.montereybayaquarium.org or 831/648-4888.

Oso Flaco Lake. Rare coastal lake and dune habitat. $5 per vehicle. About 3 miles north of Guadalupe, turn west at Oso Flaco Lake Rd. and continue about 3 miles to parking area at visitor center (closed Mon; 1055 Guadalupe St. [State 1], Guadalupe); www.dune-center.org or 805/343-2455.

Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park. Plenty of redwood-shaded picnic space and trails that lead to swimming holes; try the 1.5-mile round-trip Pfeiffer Falls Trail. $8 per vehicle. On State 1, 26 miles south of Carmel; www.parks.ca.gov or 831/667-2315.


Point Lobos State Reserve. The 1.4-mile North Shore Trail offers the best look at the reserve’s coves and forests. 9–7 daily; $8 per vehicle. www.poinlobos.org or 831/624-4909.


Wineries

There are many distinct wine regions (American Viticultural Areas, or AVAs) along our route. Our favorite wineries include:

- Chalone Vineyard. 11:30–5 Sat–Sun and by appointment; $5 tasting fee. 7525 Orcutt Rd., San Luis Obispo; 805/541-9463.

- Garretson Wine Company. 11–5 daily; $6 tasting fee. 7525 Orcutt Rd., San Luis Obispo; 805/541-9463.

- Foxen Vineyard & Winery. 11–4 daily; tasting fee from $5. 7200 Foxen Canyon Rd., Santa Maria; 805/937-4251.
California has always represented the promise of better days, and songs about the state are filled with seekers in search of their dreams, whether good times, spiritual uplift, or the kind of beauty found nowhere else. We chose tunes spanning nearly 40 years that capture the excitement that comes with this quest.

“California Dreamin’”
The Mamas & the Papas

“Going to California”
Hezekiah & The House Rockers

“California Sun”
The Dictators

“Estimated Prophet”
Grateful Dead

“A Thousand Songs About California”
Milton Mapes

“Bottle of Red Wine”
Eric Clapton

“The Late Great Golden State”
Dwight Yoakam

“California”
Gina Villalobos

“Monterey”
Eric Burdon and the Animals

“Big Sur”
The Thrills

“King of California”
Dave Alvin

“California Stars”
Billy Bragg & Wilco

Road tunes

Go to www.sunset.com/tunes to buy this song list.
else—a glass of Pinot by the fire. Both warm with nary a hint of smoke.

2 DAYS, 40 MILES

Pinnacles N.M.
to Monterey Peninsula

“The hour of the pearl,” John Steinbeck called it: The early-morning fog hangs low over Monterey Bay and muffles the calls of seagulls and the barks of sea lions as we walk past the Victorians of Pacific Grove, bound for Cannery Row.

The mist obscures the crossovers, the bridges used to transport millions of sardines during the heyday of Monterey’s fishing industry. Fishing boats with upturned bows and low-slung sterns bob along the Monterey Harbor, with its corrugated-iron buildings and lines of heavy wheelbarrows for transporting fish. Otters swim close enough to hear them chew, and I prove my theory to Becky that every harbor has at least one boat named Sea Wolf.

Later in the day we head to Carmel, where people don’t name boats, they name cottages. My tastes run more toward the rusted and weathered, so I find today’s Carmel quotidianly quaint. We watch as husbands, hearing that most dreaded of spousal orders—“Honey, let’s go in here”—look on with envy at jovial foursomes of guys straight off the 18th hole at Pebble Beach. Fortunately, Becky is not a professional shopper, and soon we veer off into the side streets, where we’re able to get more of the feeling of the old arts colony that was home to some of the greatest artists that California ever produced: poet Robinson Jeffers and photographers Edward Weston and Ansel Adams.

The fog comes back just in time for our hike at Point Lobos State Reserve, south of Carmel. Harbor seals haul out in hidden coves, and the fog drifts through a grove of rare Monterey cypress, where lace lichen dangles from the branches and an orange algae crusts the trunks. Here nature is more perfect than art: wind-sculpted trees placed just so on granite rocks rhythmically washed by waves rising from a jade-colored sea.

2 DAYS, 30 MILES

Monterey Peninsula
to Big Sur

Trailed by a collie mix, the woman appears in the doorway of the Henry Miller Memorial Library at Big Sur. Clad in a fuzzy fake-fur coat, she’s in her 70s and is carrying some paintings. It takes a moment before the library and cultural center’s director, Magnus Toren, notices her, but the woman turns out to be the day’s speaker, Gui de Angulo. Gui, who chronicled San Francisco’s Beat Generation in photographs, is here to discuss his biography of her father, Jaime de Angulo, a legendary Big Sur figure and celebrated Native American linguist and anthropologist.

I had already decided to buy the book before Gui arrived, and she signs it as Toren praises her work. “Well, I think it’s accurate,” she says simply, then explains how her father didn’t think Henry Miller was very smart and mostly ignored the author and painter who settled in Big Sur in 1944.

It’s very much a Big Sur moment: slightly eccentric and wholly serendipitous. Gui, after all, provides a connection through her father to that pre–State Highway 1 Big Sur, when it was an even more pristine and wild frontier than it is today. “What a scene!” Jaime de Angulo wrote as he...
Green and easy (clockwise from top left): Pfeiffer Falls Trail in Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park; relaxing at the Big Sur River Inn; Big Sur overlook; McWay Falls at Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park; Treebones Resort; ice cream bus at Big Sur River Inn.
rode horseback down the coast on trails so steep he became dizzy. “Yes, I lost my heart to it, right there and then. This is the place for a freedom loving anarchist. There will never be a road into this wilderness …”

There is a road along the Big Sur coast now, but also much that Jaime de Angulo would recognize. Big Sur has a way of perpetually remaking itself yet retaining its essence. The fog repaints the Pacific, the ocean keeps carving the land, and the land changes from gold to green with the arrival of the rains. Beautiful as it is to look at, I’m not sure any landscape smells as good as Big Sur either. We stop at a canyon, where the first rains have unleashed the oils in the sage, which join the pine spice of redwoods and the salt air of the ocean into a fragrance that should be bottled as Eau de Sur.

I’d like to claim that, inspired by Jaime de Angulo’s story, we decided to camp alongside a creek with only the redwoods and stars above us. But instead we semi-rough it at Treebones Resort, where we stay in a yurt—complete with electricity and a hardwood floor—that overlooks the ocean at the southern end of Big Sur. The yurt’s insulated canvas walls and wooden lattice supports rise to a roof, where a round skylight offers views of the night sky. Becky sleeps soundly, lulled by the rhythmic crashing of the waves, but I wake up frequently to watch the passage of the stars across our private galactic porthole.

1 DAY, 65 MILES

Big Sur to Hearst Castle

William Randolph Hearst wasn’t satisfied with just gazing out on the universe. He wanted to own it too.

We drop down from the cliffs of Big Sur to the more open coastline of Point Piedras Blancas and San Simeon.

La Cuesta Encantada, better known as Hearst Castle, is the California dream writ large: a Mediterranean fantasy, created by the great Berkeley architect Julia Morgan, where Hollywood stars and the San Francisco elite were brought together by perhaps the only man colossal enough to stand astride both worlds.

Near the wharf where much of the treasures used to build Hearst Castle came ashore, we stop at another San Simeon landmark. The Sebastian Store dates back to 1852, when the whaling industry thrived along this coast. It’s now run by Neil Hansen and has been owned by his family since 1914, when his great-grandparents bought the store from the lighthouse keeper at Point Piedras Blancas. But Hansen’s roots run even deeper: He’s a sixth-generation Californian and can date his father’s side of the family back to mission days.

Hansen spent his summers exploring the grottoes and caves along the coastline, surfing its waves, and playing in the forests on San Simeon Point. He left California to work in Florida before returning to renovate and run the store. It’s no longer the nuts-and-bolts general store that it once was, and Becky browses through its CDs and gifts. But Hansen also points out the vintage equipment that the last of San Simeon’s whaling captains gave to his grandfather, and the old postboxes see a steady stream of locals from up and down the coast. Just as it always has. Hansen is clearly thrilled to reconnect both to his family’s history and the place he considers home. “For people who are native Californians, it’s good to go away for a year or two to see how the rest of the world functions,” says Hansen. “But there’s always a piece of California that calls you back.”

Unlike Hansen, we’re basically newcomers to California, but I think we’ve heard the call of this coast too. It’s a call where many parts harmonize: the wind, the waves, the high cries of seabirds, and the low moans of elephant seals. You never know. One day our question may change from “What if?” to “Why not?” and this gorgeous coastline of ragged cliffs, sea stacks, and mountains could become home. Or maybe not. But there’s certainly no harm in dreaming, right?