

Californian Dream



Ten days in California barely touched on what this great state has to offer the traveller. We picked a couple of the best: Orange County to the south and San Francisco in the north – with a hedonistic side trip to Napa Valley.

*Words and photos by
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Gorgeous Orange County

“You’re going to put our restaurant into a magazine in Singapore? Sure, take all the photos you like! And you’re going up to Napa next week? I’ve got a contact at The French Laundry – he’ll put you on the waiting list!”

Orange County is right next to LA, and in this part of the world, it seems, everyone wants to be famous. We’re at bustling **Nick’s** at **Laguna Beach**, tucking into sublime deep-fried giant asparagus, veggie-burgers and beef salad, washed down with draught beer.

Historic Laguna Beach was always a tourist town. Across from Nick’s is the charming **Hotel Laguna**, built in 1928 on the site of the original hotel that dated back to the 1890s. The picturesque mid-1930s **lifeguard tower** on Main Beach was originally a gas station, and brick-paved **Peppertree Lane**, home to chichi little shops such as La Rue du Chocolat, dates from the same period.

This was our first trip to the US West Coast; I don't think California could have been anything but fun, even if we'd been exploring alone. But having friends at Newport Beach made it marvellous. We met the Campbells while they were living in Singapore; now they're home for good.

Bounded by Los Angeles county to the southwest and the Pacific Ocean to the west, Orange County is spectacularly pretty in parts and a top tourist destination: fans of theme parks (and that doesn't include us) visit **Disneyland** and **Knott's Berry Farm**. "We'll show you the best places," said our friend Ellie. "Don't bother with LA. It's ugly."

Everything we saw was, indeed, picture-postcard perfect: a series of suburban seaside villages with immaculately maintained homes, bougainvillea-festooned neighbourhoods and those ridiculously tall palm trees



everywhere. One thing's for sure: the residents of Newport Beach, Laguna Beach, Corona del Mar and Dana Point would not be impressed by Singapore's much-vaunted cleanliness and beauty. Super-high-end cars such as Lamborghinis and Maseratis abound; this is a prosperous community by any standards.

And aren't Californians gorgeous and friendly! Wherever you go in Newport Beach, zip-slim women – many with startlingly enhanced bosoms and all with dazzling white teeth –

greet you warmly. That's whether you're shopping at **Fashion Island**, an amazing "outdoor mall", or seeing and being seen at the imposing **Pelican Resort's** sweeping bar and pricey Italian restaurant. It was the same at the trendy **Ocean Club** where we dined alfresco and I could barely dent my gigantic house salad with shrimp, avocado and blue cheese. Perhaps even better was the authentic Mexican fare at **Javier's**, which has open fires, salty margaritas and superb crab enchiladas.

Clockwise from top:
Laguna Beach Hotel;
Veggie burger at Nick's;
Newport Harbour view



TRAVEL

Our friends like nothing better than to rent a little Duffy electric boat, loaded up with drinks and snacks, on a Saturday afternoon. Ten-year-old twins Payton and Prescott took turns to steer us fairly creditably through **Newport Harbour** – described as one of the world’s largest and most beautiful small-boat harbours – passing palatial villas and picturesque **Balboa Island’s** bayside cottages.

Did we ever get that half-promised table at Thomas Keller’s acclaimed French Laundry restaurant in Yountville, Napa Valley? Sadly, no – but when we got there a week later and stopped by to ask, our name was on the waiting list.

Getting There:

We flew into LAX Airport on a six-hour United Airlines flight from New York. From there, it’s a 45-minute drive to Newport Beach if your timing is good, or up to two hours if you hit peak-hour traffic.



From the top:
Payton the skipper;
Lifeguard tower at
Laguna Beach;
Palms at Corona Del Mar

Facing page:
San Francisco’s
Golden Gate Bridge



SarFranSophistication

Not only are the states of the USA so different from one another that they feel like separate countries, but parts of the same state can feel like chalk and cheese – and that’s what we found when we took a trip up north.

Sadly, I can’t guarantee you the same brilliant experience we had, because we were outrageously spoiled: Ellie drove Roy and me there from San Jose in the family Jaguar and gave us a personal tour of the city, together with a To Do list that we would disregard only at extreme peril. (Heroically, she also chauffeured us on a two-day wine-tasting extravaganza around nearby Napa Valley; more on that later.)

In Bill Cosby’s sketch, “Driving in San Francisco”, he says: “They built a street there called Lombard Street that goes straight down... and they put flowers there where they’ve buried the people that have killed themselves.” Before dropping us off at our hotel, Ellie plucks up the courage to negotiate the big car down all eight zig-zags, brave woman!



Hotel with History



We lucky souls stayed at **The Fairmont San Francisco** – the iconic hotel from which grew the global five-star brand. Our beautiful, bright room had a lovely view and all the comforts you’d expect from the top-notch Fairmont.

Perched squarely on affluent Nob Hill, on the corner of Mason and California streets, it’s an ideal spot from which to explore the city: just a tramcar-ride away from Union Square, the Financial District, Chinatown, Fisherman’s Wharf and Ghirardelli Square.

What’s more, it’s bursting with history. James Graham Fair, a “miner, forty-niner” made rich by a silver strike in nearby Nevada, planned to build a stately mansion on the site; when he died before doing so, his two daughters turned the project into a hotel instead. It was scheduled to open on 18 April 1906, but this was the very day that **The Great Earthquake** rocked San Francisco. The new Fairmont’s stone exterior stood unscathed, but the fire-ravaged interior had to be completely rebuilt before the hotel finally opened to the public, a year later to the day.

Since then, it has hosted hundreds of **famous guests**, including numerous US Presidents and visiting heads of state, movie stars and other celebrities. Its lobby was used for Aaron Spelling’s TV series *Hotel*, and it was in the hotel’s Venetian Room that Tony Bennett first sang *I Left My Heart in San Francisco*. www.com.fairmont/sanfrancisco

Sights to Behold

Nob Hill is right on the crossroads of the city’s cable car lines. Sadly, the service was closed down for maintenance during our stay, and replaced by buses; just one cable car obligingly passed by so we could snap a hurried photo or two.

Our first walk took us to Union Square, where one might easily be lured into Macy’s for a spot of shopping; from there, we caught a streetcar back up the hill and down the other side to **Fisherman’s Wharf** – a bit of a tourist trap.

But along from there, at **39 Pier**, is **Boudin**, a must for clam chowder served in a hollowed-out round sourdough loaf. A cappuccino at **Blue Bottle Coffee Co.** in the **Ferry Building** was another



From the top:
Clam chowder at Boudin’s;
Iconic cable car;
Steep San Francisco street



city, the bridge, the bay and the sea, dozens of walkers, runners and cyclists were lapping up the perfect spring weather.

Off to one side of the bridge is the famous former penal institution on **Alcatraz Island** – popular with many tourists, but somehow not our bowl of gruel: we preferred the Mediterranean charms of bayside **Sausalito**'s sun-drenched pavements, continental coffee bars and restaurants, and eclectic art galleries; try the gorgeous Italian **Poggio**. Sausalito is across the bay from the city, and you can either drive there or take the ferry.

Stepping Out

The thatch-and-bamboo Polynesian décor of the Fairmont's **Tonga Room and Hurricane Bar** is something of a throwback to the 80s. As you sip an umbrella-festooned tropical cocktail, a simulated monsoon shower and thunderstorm breaks out intermittently over the central pool. Quaint, yes, but perhaps not everyone's pint of piña colada. Off the hotel lobby is the elegant **Laurel Court** restaurant and bar, with an upmarket menu and a popular afternoon tea.

Just across the road, the **Top of the Mark** on the 23rd floor

Left:
Ferry Building Market place
Below:
Bayside restaurant
in Sausalito

of Ellie's recommendations, but the yummy cupcake from the stall opposite was my own genius. Further along, we found a stall with the most amazing display of exotic mushrooms that cried out to be taken home and fried in lots of butter; outdoors, the sun shimmered off stands of gorgeous flowers and piles of dew-fresh produce in the **Ferry Building Marketplace**.

The hugeness and grandeur of San Francisco's **Golden Gate Bridge** is expected; but what you don't necessarily get from the movies is how lush and green the area is, and that's because it's usually shrouded in mist or

fog. Luckily for us, the sky was stunningly clear – a rarity, says Ellie. In the nearby **Presidio** – a park with scenic views of the



of the Mark Hopkins Hotel has floor-to-ceiling windows and sweeping views of the city. Get there for sunset, and if you're in luck, you can jive to the same slick jazz band we were treated to. But your visit probably *won't* coincide with that of about 30 big guys all sporting little black dresses, hairy legs and trainers, and wearing flowers in their hair (San Francisco, the song, get it?); and that's a great pity.

One lunchtime, we tottered down California Street to **Tadich Grill** at number 240 for a memorable meal of cioppino, a fragrant seafood dish that's similar to the French bouillabaisse. This venerable institution rather tenuously traces its roots back to 1849, when a trio of Croatian immigrants set up a coffee-stand somewhere else in the city: it's a long story, and it's all there on the menu. You can't book a table, so get there early.

Getting There:

From Orange County, we took an hour's flip (US\$170 each way) to San Jose on Southwest Airlines; famous for its wisecracking crew, this has to be the friendliest budget airline ever. Of course, you can also fly direct to San Francisco.

Presidio View, a park on the southern tip of San Francisco



NapaSide-Trip

If you're going to San Francisco, be sure to visit Napa Valley: it's just a half-hour drive away. Be warned: pack loose clothing and punch an extra notch in your belt: Napa is as much about food as it is about wine.

But I can tell you right now that you're not going to have as good a time as Roy and I did – unless you too have a friend like Ellie to drive you from vineyard to vineyard, sipping water and staying heroically sober while you taste flight after flight of wine and your own good sense gradually deteriorates. An angel, in short.

Picturesque Yountville was a good place to start and **Bistro Jeanty** is amazingly like a little corner of France. Think duck and goat's cheese *rillettes* served with freshly delivered baguettes from **Bouchon's Bakery**,

just down the road; rich onion soup and gizzard salad; and pig's trotter b o i l e d lovingly in stock for a long time,

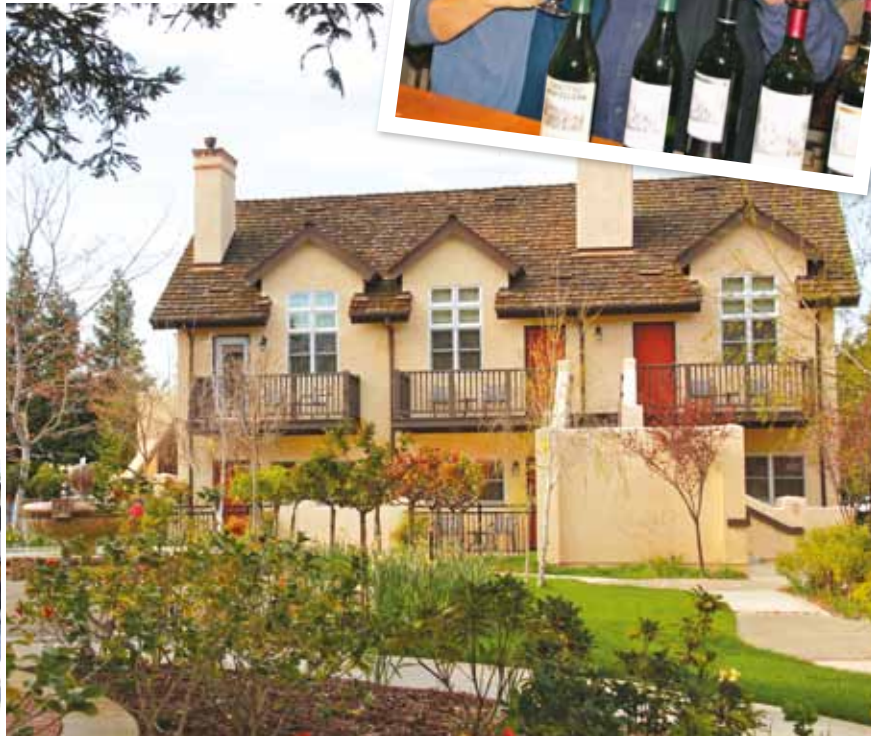
stripped off the bone, reformed into a trotter shape, deep-fried and served with mustard sauce and fries. It is, admittedly, a heart attack on a plate. Yountville is also home to the famed **French Laundry**, but you need to book months in advance.

We spent two nights at the excellent **Harvest Inn** in **St Helena** (US\$240) loving its rustic ambience, huge fireplaces, landscaped gardens and location right next to a vineyard.



Vineyard adjacent to the Harvest Inn in St Helena, Napa Valley





In spring, the vines are still bare, but the rows are illuminated by strips of brilliant yellow wild mustard. St Helena is perfectly placed for forays up and down the valley and has a nice selection of restaurants that you can walk to.

On the first night, after a bottle of Chateau Montelena Zinfandel at the **Culinary Institute of America**, we tried some pukkah Californian nosh at the heralded **Cindy's Backstreet Kitchen**: roasted artichoke with herbed mayo; chillies stuffed with braised beef; mushroom *tamales*. "Napa holds regular festivals," says Ellie, "There's a mushroom festival, an artichoke festival, and when it's garlic's turn, the plane back home reeks of the stuff."

Heading straight up the valley to the old town of **Calistoga** on Day Two, we pause to marvel and salivate at dozens of tri-tip (sirloin) roasts turning golden on an expansive barbecue. It's set

up next to a casual joint serving enormous portions of steak, fries, ribs and refried beans ... nothing remotely green.

Next stop is **Chateau Montelena**, made famous by the movie *Bottle Shock*. This is essential viewing before a trip to Napa, if only to get you in the mood, and our visit to this winery was something of a pilgrimage. Like all the older chateaux in this valley, Montelena took a hit when Prohibition was declared in 1913. A Chinese couple acquired it and had the Jade Lake built for their pleasure; the alcohol ban was lifted in 1933, and in the early 70s, James L. Barrett replanted the vineyard and started wine production.

Auberge du Soleil is the perfect spot to stop for lunch on a terrace with entrancing views over the valley – cherry blossoms everywhere and the warm air alive with big, fat bees. We

shared a selection of small plates: blue crab cakes with coleslaw and *remoulade* sauce, ceviche, octopus and chickpea salad, asparagus soup and outstanding bread, together with a glass of their own divine chardonnay.

Mumm Napa doesn't offer tastings, but you can sip two flutes of their bubbly on a sunny terrace for \$30, and the well-stocked gift shop is worth a visit. Next door, the boutique **ZD Winery** (the ZD stands for Zero Defect) produces a lovely pinot noir; and at nearby **Duckhorn**, you can have a flight of six delicious drops, again for \$30. By this stage of the day, of course, everything tastes wonderful.

Our first Californian trip was incredible, at least partly because we had local friends to show us their home state. As the song goes: somewhere in our youth or childhood, we must have done something good. 🍷

From the left:
Chateau Montelena;
The Harvest Inn, St Helena;
Ellie and Roy at
Chateau Montelena