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STAYCATION SAN DIEGO



Alila Marea Beach Resort Encinitas

Santa Barbara Beckons

Luxury and leisure along a storied coastline BY ANDREA NAVERSEN

The Ritz-Carlton Bacara is a sprawling, 78-acre property along a two-mile stretch of beach.



SINCE THE PANDEMIC BEGAN, my husband, Dwight, and I haven't ventured far from home. But by late February, we had both received COVID-19 vaccines, and the pace of the rollout gave us confidence to explore California a bit farther afield. We settled on Santa Barbara, billed as "The American Riviera" because of its beautiful coastal setting. Explorer Juan Cabrillo gave Santa Barbara its name in 1542, but it was settled long before that by the Chumash Indians. Later, Franciscan monks built 21 missions in California including Old Mission Santa Barbara, dubbed the "Queen of the Missions."

We booked a five-day getaway that began at The Ritz-Carlton Bacara, Santa Barbara and ended at the Hotel Californian. These stunning properties offered distinctly different experiences: Bacara is an expansive, family-friendly resort overlooking the coast, while the Hotel Californian is a sophisticated property within walking distance to the waterfront and the lively Funk Zone,

home to galleries, restaurants, tasting rooms, and shops. During our stay, we toured Montecito's exclusive San Ysidro Ranch, where Winston Churchill worked on his memoir. The guest list is now closely guarded, but suffice it to say that Hollywood celebrities, professional athletes, and moguls stay here.

The drive from San Diego can take five hours or more, but Amtrak is another option, and Alaska Airlines will debut daily flights from Lindbergh Field in June. We opted for the drive up the coast and headed straight for La Super-Rica, a modest, cash-only taqueria favored by both Katy Perry and the late Julia Child. While we waited for homemade tortillas and the "Super-Rica Especial" of roasted chili pasilla and marinated pork, we talked with a longtime local who recommended "must-dos" around town and shared her own local celebrity sighting: Oprah Winfrey, once seen shopping in the plumbing store across the street.

Once sated, we set out for the The Ritz-Carlton Bacara, located about 20 minutes away in Goleta. The sprawling resort offers two-story villas surrounded by lush

RITZ-CARLTON BACARA: PHOTO COURTESY OF THE RITZ-CARLTON BACARA, SANTA BARBARA. SANTA BARBARA MISSION: PHOTO BY JAY SINCLAIR, COURTESY OF VISIT SANTA BARBARA. PENCE: PHOTO BY MIA PARK.



LEFT Franciscan monks built 21 missions in California including Old Mission Santa Barbara, called the "Queen of the Missions." BELOW The 200-acre Pence Vineyards & Winery in Santa Rita Hills produces complex, premium wines due to the vineyard's varied terrain, soil complexity, and climate. BOTTOM Hotel Californian offers views of the sea, city, and Santa Ynez mountains. Its rooftop deck, with a swimming pool and hot tub, offers plenty of space for lounging.



landscaping, infinity-edge heated pools with private cabanas, a 42,000-square-foot spa, fitness center, tennis courts, and a championship golf course next-door. To fully enjoy the Bacara experience, Senior Marketing Manager Derek Kokinda says, "Planning is key. You need a reservation for *everything*." That includes booking pool and fitness center time as well as restaurants because of mandates that limit capacity and require social distancing.

Bacara has five restaurants including the well-regarded Angel Oak, which offers the best tuna tartare I've ever tasted, top quality Kobe beef, local halibut and abalone, and imaginative twists on traditional sides. We had breakfast and lunch on the casual Bistro patio, and drinks and appetizers on the oceanview terrace of O Bar & Kitchen. The restaurant's centerpiece is a bar shaped like an "O," which means "water" in the language of the Chumash Indians who had a deep respect for the ocean on which they heavily relied.

We enjoyed a guided hike with Meghan Leon, a naturalist and graduate of the nearby University of California Santa Barbara. She showed us the blue blooms of the black sage, which the Chumash used to brew into tea, and California sagebrush, called "cowboy cologne" because ranch hands used it to freshen up after a hard day's work. Leon also pointed out Bird Island just offshore, a former oil pier rebuilt as a habitat for brown pelicans and cormorants. ritzccarlton.com

While Bacara offers wine tastings on property through the Foley Food & Wine Society, we decided to spend half a day in the Santa Ynez wine country with a private tasting and tour at Pence Vineyards & Winery

in Santa Rita Hills, founded by developer Blair Pence, who cultivated a taste for California cabernets at the University of Southern California's Delta Tau Delta fraternity house. The 200-acre working ranch and farm includes 38 acres of organically grown chardonnay, pinot noir, gamay, and syrah. The winery offers several lovely tasting areas including a gazebo overlooking a pond. Dwight and I had an intimate tasting for two, but you can also book appointments for groups and special events. pencevineyards.com

Our next stay was in Downtown Santa Barbara at the stunning Hotel Californian just blocks from the beach and the historic Stearns Wharf. When it opened in 2017, the hotel's take on Spanish Colonial Revival architecture with modern Moorish-themed interiors caused quite a splash. Celebrity designer Martyn Lawrence Bullard combined bold, black-and-white patterns with Moroccan motifs, adding gilded snake sconces. The hotel encompasses four buildings with two restaurants, a library bar, and 121 guestrooms offering views of the sea, city, and Santa Ynez mountains. >>





« The hotel is in The Funk Zone, and while no one knows exactly how the neighborhood got its name, it may have stemmed from the fish processing plants that were once located there. They have since given way to artists' studios, shops, wine and craft beer tasting rooms, and such restaurants as The Lark, a hip urban eatery housed in a former fish market. Also recommended: clam chowder and oysters at Brophy Bros. on Stearns Wharf, and barbecue at La Paloma Café, which celebrates the cuisine of the Californios, early settlers who were influenced by the flavors of Spain and Mexico. hotelcalifornian.com

Another highlight was sailing along the beautiful Santa Barbara coastline. We boarded *The Double Dolphin*, a 50-foot catamaran, at the Santa Barbara Sailing Center for a two-hour whale watching excursion. We saw sleek seals scrambling aboard buoys, and despite gray whale sightings eluding us, the sparkling views of the coastline and the Santa Ynez Mountains as a backdrop were well worth the outing.

On the last leg of our trip we visited Montecito, an understated enclave of multimillion-dollar estates where celebrities like Prince Harry and Meghan Markle now reside. In the morning, locals line up for coffee and homemade pastries at Bree'osh Bakery on Coast Village Road. Insiders also recommend Tre Lune for Italian specialties. Its bustling dining room, hung with black-and-white photos of celebrities, also has miniature chairs attached to the walls labeled with the names of "regulars." Explains an insider: "It means you'll always have a seat here."

At the 550-acre San Ysidro Ranch, tucked into the foothills of the Santa Ynez Mountains, we toured rose gardens and groves with General Manager Ian

LEFT The 550-acre San Ysidro Ranch is tucked into the foothills of the Santa Ynez Mountains. BELOW The Santa Barbara Sailing Center offers tours along the sparkling Santa Barbara coastline.



Williams, who related the history of this 100-year-old hideaway, once a citrus farm tended by Franciscan friars and now a Forbes Five-Star resort. The property was damaged by mudslides in 2018 and reopened two years ago after extensive renovations. In fact, the celebrated cellar, a winner of the prestigious *Wine Spectator* Grand Award since 2014, has rebounded after the mudslides destroyed 12,000 bottles, valued at \$3 million, some dating back to World War I. Franco de Bartolo, the ranch's director of restaurants, redesigned the cellar, and its stellar collection of more than 2,000 labels has since been restored.

The resort has two restaurants that include The Stonehouse, once a fruit packing house now famous for tableside flambé, and 38 cottages, decorated with fine antiques and artwork, each with its own outdoor Jacuzzi and rain shower. Stay at the Kennedy Cottage, where Jackie and JFK spent their honeymoon, or book the two-bedroom Ty Warner Cottage, named after the resort's owner, a billionaire businessman and creator of Beanie Babies who also has a string of high-end hotels.

At San Ysidro Ranch, guests can enjoy sunrise yoga, horseback riding, hiking along 17 miles of trails, a dip in the secluded hilltop pool, spa treatments, or simply relaxing in the rose garden to the sounds of a flamenco guitar. It is little wonder that guests cannot wait to return to the ranch overlooking The American Riviera. sanysidroranch.com, santabarbaraca.com 

SANTA BARBARA SAILING CENTER: PHOTO BY BLAKE BRONSTAD