



BEACH *and* Vine

Exploring Montecito and the Santa Ynez Valley By Rob Dunton

We gaze out at the shimmering Pacific

from our perch above Montecito's picturesque Butterfly Beach. The tide is low, the beach wide, and the damp sand forms a natural esplanade that beckons us to get bikes and ride. I see downtown Santa Barbara a few miles west, up the coast where Stearns Wharf sits surrounded by dozens of sailboats, and to my left, surfers ride gentle waves at Hammonds Reef. The shoreline is lined with palms, eucalyptus and Monterey pines, and behind us are the Santa Ynez Mountains rising more than 4,000 feet. My wife, Susan, and I sign out two pastel beach cruisers from the Four Seasons Resort The Biltmore Santa Barbara, cross the street and walk our bikes to the sand. With the tide so low, we could easily make a 25-mile loop on the sand riding three miles into Santa Barbara then back past Montecito and on to Summerland

and Carpinteria. But that would take effort. We're in weekend mode, and we take the "cruise" in "beach cruiser" to heart.

Santa Barbara is often called the "American Riviera" and, as in France and Italy, adjacent hamlets, rich in character but light on crowds, add to Santa Barbara's appeal. Two of the Southern California city's neighboring gems are coastal Montecito and the Santa Ynez wine country, and I have planned sumptuous get-aways for us to each of these idyllic destinations, with plenty of time to unwind and explore.

With our bikes on the firm tidal sands, Susan and I pedal west toward Santa Barbara. We pass exposed reefs, tide pools and a massive driftwood log stacked with towers of delicately balanced stones. Families play and picnic. Couples walk their dogs. Sandpipers work the surf zone in search of sand crabs. A sun-weather-

ered gentleman casts his line into the surf as his white-bearded dog sits dutifully next to him. We come upon a harbor seal perched on a rock just 15 feet from shore. With each small wave, it lifts its head and tail to keep dry, then relaxes as the wave dissolves on the shore. It surprises us that this much nature, with so few people, is practically right outside our hotel.

We double back and eventually pass the Coral Casino Beach and Cabana Club, the legendary Art Deco landmark built in 1937 and now part of the resort. We continue past surfers at Hammonds Reef; Shalawa Meadow, an ancient Chumash burial site; and rows of eclectic beachfront homes. We see hoofprints in the sand from horses come and gone.

After an hour of relaxed pedaling, we make our way back to paved roads and stroll inland to Montecito's Coast Village. We explore the village's art galleries, antique shops and boutiques before stopping for lunch at a busy sidewalk cafe. Then we continue up a shady road into the foothills, past estate properties hidden behind tall hedges. Today, much of Montecito's mystique revolves around its celebrity residents and their grand manor homes. During the glory days of America's prewar estate-building boom, George Washington Smith, Francis Underhill and Frank Lloyd Wright were just a few of the noted architects crafting vast villas on Montecito's ocean-view hills. Now garden aficionados from around the world can visit one of the town's most storied properties, Lotusland.

We cycle up to the estate's impressive gates, park our bikes and join a group of visitors for a Lotusland tour. Our docent leads us on a leisurely two-hour walk around the 37-acre property, which features numerous distinct gardens, including Japanese, topiary, bromeliad and water gardens, as well as an otherworldly cactus garden. The cycad garden alone has close to 700 mature plants, representing more than half the world's species. It is hard to imagine that such a place was privately owned. It is now open to the public, supported by the fortune left by Madame Ganna Walska, a charismatic singer who toured the United States and Europe in the early 20th century, married six times, and poured much of her time and wealth into developing the gardens at Lotusland.

Inspired by the natural and artistic beauty we've seen



MARK LIPSON, COURTESY: FOUR SEASONS HOTELS AND RESORTS



S. GREG PANOSIAN / ISTOCKPHOTO

throughout the day, we bike back to our handsome cottage room at the Four Seasons Biltmore and change for an elegant dinner at Tydes. The private waterfront restaurant located in the Coral Casino specializes in a unique blend of French, Italian, Spanish and Moroccan cuisine. We are seated with a 180-degree view of the ocean, and I watch three surfers catch their last waves before sunset.

Susan orders a refreshing ginger-and-carrot soup, and I try the grilled scallops topped with sweet corn, basil, chive foam and American-sturgeon caviar. We share our main courses: mushroom lasagna with tangy crescenza cheese, and grilled wild salmon accented with yellow-corn polenta and a romesco sauce (a flavorful blend of roasted garlic, tomatoes, hazelnuts, almonds and ancho chile).

Relaxed and satisfied, we cross the street to the hotel and stroll the curving brick pathways lit by gas lanterns beneath the stars.

The next morning, I wake to the sound of surf and grab my board for an early conference with the waves. Between sets, several dolphins swim leisurely by, poking their heads up to get a better look at the biped floating on the surface. Afterward, Susan and I enjoy an exquisite breakfast buffet in the resort's alfresco Bella Vista restaurant. We check out at noon, but are permitted to spend the afternoon soaking up the sun over a couple of good books at the Coral Casino pool.

Between chapters, I look out at the legendary oceanfront pool filled with families and other guests, and imagine Errol Flynn diving into the deep, or Esther Williams showing off her water

◀ Pacific waves wash the beach in front of the Four Seasons Resort The Biltmore Santa Barbara.

▲ A couple bicycles along Channel Drive beside Montecito's Butterfly Beach. California poppies and lupine blanket a hillside on Figueroa Mountain in Los Padres National Forest near Santa Ynez.



COURTESY: BRIDLEWOOD ESTATE WINERY (2)

ballet skills, and realize what I suspect the Hollywood set learned long ago: This rivals the serenity, elegance and romantic ocean-front of Cinque Terre or Villefranche-sur-Mer.

Santa Ynez Wine Country

A month has passed since our weekend in Montecito, and Susan and I are ready to escape again. Fifteen minutes northwest of downtown Santa Barbara, we crest San Marcos Pass and see shimmering Lake Cachuma and the pastoral Santa Ynez Valley below. As we descend, California poppies splash the roadsides with a tint of orange, and rolling hills are dotted with twisted oaks among yellow wildflowers in some places and lined with rows of symmetrical grapevines in others.

Santa Ynez is a small town (population 4,633) with a colorful saloon, a wine gallery, boutiques and handful of restaurants. We check in during happy hour at the Santa Ynez Inn, an immaculate, nuevo-Victorian hotel. A massage therapist is giving free back-and-neck massages (Fridays only), while glasses of fine local wines are served with a bounty of gourmet cheeses in the sitting room next to the lobby. We graze lightly because we have reservations at the Zagat-recommended Ballard Inn Restaurant.

After a quick 3.5-mile trip to tiny Ballard (founded in 1880 at a Wells Fargo stagecoach station), we find Budi Kazali's heralded 12-table restaurant. We read through the Asian-influenced French menu and start with truffle-cauliflower soup and a duck-and-spinach salad with warm bacon vinaigrette. Susan selects a pan-seared duck breast with pureed sweet potato for her entree, while I try the filet mignon with wasabi spaetzle and blue-cheese scalloped potatoes. As dinner unfolds, I savor a 2005 red Rhone Kaena Hapa (a delicious blend of Syrah, Grenache and Mourvèdre) and a 2007 Calzada Ridge Viognier, and settle into a perfectly balanced meal matched with impeccable service.

We rise the next morning excited for a reprise of our cycling adventures in Montecito. We cross the street to the offices of Santa Barbara Wine Country Cycling Tours and opt for a guided tour to take advantage of good wineries and a tasty lunch. Proprietors Corey Evans and Tim Gorham—who, judging from their lean, muscular frames, spend as much time in the saddle as they do in the store—add us to a small group and soon we find ourselves cycling behind Evans on broad, quiet roads through the picturesque countryside. We spend an hour winding our way up

Happy Canyon, past sun-drenched vineyards and rolling hills where massive oak trees shade the two-lane road. The population density, pace and topography are so different from Santa Barbara's, I feel like we've been transported to another country.

Two hours later, we turn into an impressive tree-lined drive at Bridlewood Estate Winery, pedal past pruned Syrah vines and dismount at the mission-style complex. Lunch is served on a shaded veranda overlooking the vineyards, from which we can see a horse-drawn carriage taking guests on a tour of the grounds. Afterward, our group adjourns to the tasting room to sample flights of hand-crafted wines; the '05 Estate Syrah and an '07 Reserve Viognier are standouts.

Back on our bikes, we swing by a small family-owned lavender farm, then on to Los Olivos, a polished Americana town with several wine-tasting rooms, excellent cafes, a variety of shops and art galleries, and even a bocce ball court. We stop in at Global Gardens, a food boutique, to sample a delicious variety of locally made olive oils, and later spot a good restaurant to return to that evening. We pedal back on quiet roads to Santa Ynez, and complete our breezy 30-plus-mile ride at the shop.

After a rejuvenating soak in our room's whirlpool bath, we return to Los Olivos Wine Merchant & Cafe for supper. The town and the restaurant are buzzing. Famished from our ride, we savor a butternut salad and a wonderful crustada made with warm chèvre and baby spinach in shredded phyllo crust. I order chicken piccata, and Susan selects one of her favorites, gnocchi, and we top the meal off with a decadent cookie-and-cream dessert—any calories burned on the bikes have returned in style.

We start Sunday with a luxurious breakfast in bed before driving to Demetria Estate, a highly recommended winery whose vineyard is farmed biodynamically (an organic farming process). The drive up the secluded ridgetop road is as stunning as anything we biked the day before.

The European-style winery sits atop a knoll surrounded by rows of vines: Syrah, Mourvèdre, Grenache and Viognier, Roussanne and Grenache Blanc. We enter the tasting room and

▲ Bridlewood Estate Winery in Santa Ynez wine country features a mission-style tasting room. Winemaker David Hopkins makes award-winning Viognier, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay wines from grapes grown in dozens of vineyards located throughout the Central Coast.

meet John Zahoudanis, the owner, who is pouring samples of his small-batch wines—he makes only 180 to 600 cases of each. As I sip a rich 2006 Pinot Noir named Cuvée Sandra, the premium wine of the flight at \$65 per bottle, I ask if there is a story behind the name.

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www.lotusland.org

SANTA YNEZ

STAY

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DINE

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www.oliverevolution.com



BILL DEWEY, COURTESY: LOTUSLAND

“It is named after my wife. I wanted the most expensive and best named after her,” Zahoudanis responds with a wry grin.

▲ Lotusland's horticultural clock keeps time in the topiary garden.

Fellow tasters encourage us to explore the wildflowers on nearby Figueroa Mountain. We drive up a long, winding road, back into Los Padres National Forest, and after one curve no different from the others, the hillside bursts into a torrent of lavender and orange, blanketed with more lupine and California poppies than I have ever seen. We join the dozen or so others hiking a small trail that climbs through the stunning field of flowers, and take pictures to try to capture this impressionistic masterpiece of nature. But no word or image can relay this bounty of beauty. Like the rest of the Santa Ynez Valley, it must be experienced to be believed. ▲

Rob Dunton is a freelance travel writer and photographer living in Santa Barbara.

GETTING THERE



Santa Barbara is 90 miles northwest of Los Angeles, which is served by Alaska Airlines daily. Sister airline Horizon Air serves Santa Barbara daily. Book tickets on the Web at alaskaair.com or call 800-ALASKAAIR.