

Chapter 1

Discovering the Best of California

In This Chapter

- ▶ Drawing a bead on California's outstanding experiences
 - ▶ Serving up the best of California's hotels and restaurants
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 - ▶ Making your way to California's elite museums
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California is really an awesome place, in the truest sense (not the surfer-dude sense) of the word. Its jaw-dropping diversity is what continues to amaze us (and we're natives, mind you) more than anything else. With two of the nation's largest megalopolises — the San Francisco Bay Area, which has grown beyond speculator's wildest dreams with the rise of Silicon Valley, and metropolitan Los Angeles, whose urban sprawl has a glamorous heart called Hollywood — California has the largest, wealthiest, and most urbanized population of any state in the nation. Yet it's also an agricultural wonderland with a bounty that runs the gamut from artichokes, raisins, garlic, and asparagus to some of the finest wine-making grapes in the world. And it still manages to be home to much of the country's most striking and varied wilderness — from purple mountains' majesty to arid, marvelously barren desert to coastlines of unsurpassed beauty.



Even with all that, California is so much more — much more than we can possibly include here. So we've designed this book to highlight what we consider the best of the best of this awesome state — at least the best of the best of what we think may appeal to you. In this chapter, you get an added bonus: a quick reference to the experiences, hotels, restaurants, and more that stand out as the absolute best. In the destination chapters in Parts III, IV, and V, we discuss the places and experiences noted here (the ones highlighted in bold) in more detail; just look for the Best of the Best icon you see next to this paragraph.

The Best California Travel Experiences

Without taking the easy way out and suggesting that all travel experiences in the Golden State are the best, here are a few prime cuts to consider adding to your California itinerary:

- ✓ **Strolling along San Francisco's Embarcadero to Aquatic Park:** This is a quintessential San Francisco activity, ideally experienced on a sunny day. We love to begin near the baseball park, although it's more convenient to take public transportation to the end of Market Street and start there. With the water on your right and city landmarks popping up on your left, a leisurely walk past the piers, through Fisherman's Wharf, leads to Aquatic Park and the Municipal Pier. Be sure to hike all the way to the end of the pier, stopping if you will to see what, if anything, the anglers have caught. You'll be rewarded with million-dollar bay vistas and a spot-on view of the beautiful Golden Gate Bridge. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Hiking in Yosemite Valley during the winter:** Snow covers the ground and clings to the tree branches, the air is crisp, the sky is bright blue, and Yosemite Falls roars with snowmelt. With so few visitors in the park during this low season, you'll feel as though you have this wonderland almost to yourself. Take advantage of winter rates and stay at the grand Ahwahnee Hotel. See Chapter 16.
- ✓ **Biking along the Monterey coastline:** The Monterey Peninsula's 18-mile Recreation Trail was a brilliant piece of civic planning, a useful and beautiful path for all to enjoy. It ends (or starts, if you like) at Seal Rock past Pebble Beach and wends its way along the coast through Monterey north to Marina. The most traveled section is from Custom House Plaza past Cannery Row, the Aquarium, and on to Lover's Point; however, we suggest you carry on to Pacific Grove, stop for lunch, and dawdle on the beach on your way back. If you're more than just a recreational cyclist, you may want to carry on through the 17-Mile Drive. See Chapter 18.
- ✓ **Sitting on a beach in Southern California:** This activity's not so active, but there has to be a reason for all those Beach Boys songs, right? You could surf, too, and you probably should get your feet wet in the Pacific. But really, it's all about the imagery, the girls, the boys, the sand, the surf, the sun, the palm trees, and did we mention that it's January? See Part V.
- ✓ **Cruising Sunset Boulevard:** It's the way to best see all that L.A. has to offer in a short amount of time, as you drive this iconic boulevard from its origins at Olvera Street (L.A.'s oldest) through ethnic neighborhoods, bohemian enclaves, dumps and dives, the dregs of Hollywood, the spick-and-span wealth of Beverly Hills, the subdued hush of Bel Air, past scenes of crime and shame (John Belushi and River Phoenix each died within steps of the street, and the infamous O.J. murder case happened blocks away), and catch glimpses

of the Hollywood sign and stars on the sidewalk, all the way to the end at the Pacific Ocean. We love L.A., and this drive is one of the reasons why. See Chapter 23.

- ✔ **Getting within 6 feet of a star:** We can't promise you'll spot any celebrities while in L.A. (keep your eyes peeled), but we can promise you proximity to some of the biggest names of the past . . . by visiting their graves. Forest Lawn, Hollywood Forever, and Westwood Memorial Park are just some of the resting spots of Gable, Monroe, Disney, Valentino, and more. See Chapter 23.

California's Best Hotels

When vacationing in California, swimming is nearly always an option — for the kids and the adults. So if you're looking for the best hotel pools — or the best hotels for a romantic getaway or for a decidedly unromantic stay with the kids — this section is the right place.

Best all-around family hotels

Traveling with the kids? We know from experience that a good kid-friendly hotel can make all the difference between a classically good vacation and a classically bad one. The following are our favorite family-friendly hotels in the state:

- ✔ The playful **Argonaut Hotel** in San Francisco shares lobby space with the Maritime Museum, and its enviable location next to the Cannery near Fisherman's Wharf means you'll be close to many kid-pleasing attractions. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ The moderately priced **Hotel del Sol** in San Francisco has a heated outdoor pool, treats for the kids, and a few units with kitchenettes. Plus, the parking is free! See Chapter 11.
- ✔ Up in Calistoga, the enormous mineral pool at **Indian Springs** is all that your kids need for happiness. The easygoing resortlike atmosphere is relaxing for the grown-ups as well. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ The new **Treebones Resort** in Big Sur offers an alternative to both hotels and camping by housing guests in gorgeous yurts. Reserve the yurt with the ping-pong table and then try to get the kids outside to hike. See Chapter 19.
- ✔ **Asilomar Conference Grounds** in Pacific Grove resembles an organized camp with better sleeping accommodations. Find the kids on the beach or playing ping-pong. See Chapter 18.

Best hotels for a romantic weekend

Not traveling with the kids? Ahh, you're in for a treat at these fine destinations for two:

- ✔ In San Francisco, romantics have a couple of choices. The new **Hotel Vitale** on the Embarcadero has a small spa with two semi-secluded outdoor baths and rooms with knockout views of the bay. If you need to duck the paparazzi, the **St. Regis Hotel** is a self-contained oasis you and your partner won't want to leave. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ Cocoon at the ultracomfy and chic **Milliken Creek**, convenient to the town of Napa but providing a sense of being somewhere much more glamorous. If you'd rather really be in the relative country of the Sonoma Valley, hide away at the beautiful **Kenwood Inn and Spa**, our pick for honeymooners. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ Mendocino is a popular romantic getaway. Lots less fancy than Kenwood, but private, relaxed, and well tended, is the village's **Alegria Oceanfront Inn & Cottages**. The beach access and excellent breakfast make it extra nice. If you're seeking a Mendo retreat with all the extras, wonderful **Stanford Inn by the Sea** has more comforts than you'll find at home, plus on-site spa services and a very good vegetarian restaurant. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ Our northernmost pick is Ferndale's **Gingerbread Mansion Inn**. We've never seen anything quite like the over-the-top Romanesque (as in Caesar) Empire Suite. See Chapter 14.
- ✔ For pure pampering and four-star dining, **Château du Sureau** in Oakhurst will not disappoint, plus you'll be close enough to Yosemite to enjoy a day in the park. See Chapter 16.
- ✔ There's nothing like endless ocean views to stir the senses and you'll find them, as well as a splendid breakfast and unobtrusive service, in Monterey/Pacific Grove at the **Grand View** and **Seven Gables** inns. See Chapter 18.
- ✔ It's tough to choose between Big Sur's **Post Ranch Inn** and **Ventana Inn & Spa** — both are splendid examples of luxury properties. Post Ranch is smaller and has the ocean view; Ventana is friendlier. See Chapter 19.
- ✔ Santa Barbara's **Four Seasons Biltmore** is right on the beach and is a divine old (built in 1927) hotel run by the most pampering of hoteliers in the country. See Chapter 22.
- ✔ When in L.A., consider the **Chateau Marmont**, where the Art Deco and Beaux Arts castle-style main building and individual bungalows remind us of the noir days of Los Angeles, where a rendezvous in a dark corner seems like a very good thing indeed. See Chapter 23.
- ✔ La Jolla's **Lodge at Torrey Pines** is a dreamy, breathtaking five-diamond resort full of Craftsman furniture and luxe touches; however, as a resort, it may be a bit more bustling than you want. See Chapter 27.

Best hotel pools

Just when you thought a hotel pool is a hotel pool is a hotel pool, along come these two heavenly respites:

- ✔ Children under 16 aren't actually allowed in the spa at the **Huntington** in San Francisco, so the lovely, large pool, which reflects an eastward view of downtown, is the purview of the grown-ups. If we had a category for best hotel spa, the Huntington would get the nod there as well, although the St. Regis spa is magnificent, too. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ Many Wine Country lodgings have pools, but none as inviting as the Olympic-sized mineral pool at **Indian Springs** in Calistoga. The view from the deck chairs is awesome as well. See Chapter 12.

California's Best Restaurants

Eating out in California is not quite a competitive sport — but almost. In this section, check out some of the state's most innovative and most inexpensive — and many others in between.

Best to impress

Expect no surprises when looking for the meal to die for (or the restaurant to be seen). The Bay Area and L.A. offer the cream of the crop of California's trendiest restaurants. However, you can find a gem or two in other parts of the state.

- ✔ In San Francisco, **Gary Danko** runs a smooth operation from the kitchen to the front of the house. His prix-fixe menu is unusual in that guests do the choosing and it's impossible to make a mistake. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ Serious foodies regard the **French Laundry** in the Napa Valley village of Yountville as the Holy Grail of Gourmetdom; the problem is actually getting a reservation. Of course, if it were easy to get into, it would lose some cachet. See Chapter 12 for info on making an attempt.
- ✔ If you're near Santa Cruz around dinnertime, try booking a table at the tiny **Oswald**. It does everything right, but quietly, which means you may not have heard of the place. Take our word for it — the food is worth a detour. See Chapter 17.
- ✔ You could get into some serious arguments with Los Angeles food critics, daring them to choose between their beloved **Campanile**, where owner Mark Peel has long demonstrated his gift with seasonal cooking; **Patina**, which spawned a restaurant empire, and

now in its new Disney Hall–adjacent space, regularly thrills diners; and the new **Providence**, whose French-influenced seafood earned a James Beard nomination for Best New Restaurant, and may be the finest dining option in Los Angeles. See Chapter 23.

Best for families with picky eaters

We don't propose you let anyone starve (although that thought has crossed our minds on occasion); on the other hand, no one ought to be a hostage to chicken fingers in the bountiful state of California. The restaurants in this list should satisfy the dining wish list of everyone in your traveling party:

- ✓ In San Francisco, there's something good for everyone on the menu at **Chow**, which has two locations — one in the Castro district and one near Golden Gate Park.

Another brilliant suggestion in the Bay Area (if we do say so ourselves) is to let everyone graze to his own taste around the **Ferry Building** on the Embarcadero where Market Street ends. Seafoodies can wait for a stool at the Hog Island Oyster Bar, while those in the mood for Japanese can pick up a bento box at Delica rf-1. The kids (and probably you, too) will gleefully join the lines at Taylor's Refresher, a two-restaurant chain that redefines fast food for health-conscious Northern Californians. See Chapter 11.

- ✓ In Monterey, **Rosine's** is kind of what a Denny's ought to have aspired to: a plain, let's-please-the-mainstream menu, but with mom in the kitchen and better desserts. See Chapter 18.
- ✓ L.A. has many options for fussy eaters. The **101 Coffeeshop** (in the Best Western Hollywood Hills Hotel) has serious grown-up food alongside one of the best burgers in the area. The **Farmers Market** features a number of food stalls and restaurants around a central food court area, so there is something for every taste — diner food or homemade pies, doughnuts or Chinese food, deli or Greek, and more. **Angeli Café** will make a simple pasta for your young diners, as well as give them a ball of dough to mash and mold before baking the creation as a take-home souvenir, all while you dine on the cafe's seasonal Italian delights. See Chapter 23.

Best for a lovely, but reasonably priced dinner

Not in the market for a meal to die for? You can dine just as nicely (and also trendily) at any of the following establishments:

- ✓ **Isa** is one of two San Francisco restaurants we recommend in this category. It serves absolutely delicious meals in a friendly, casual, but professional little place in the Marina. We also adore the more intimate **Tablespoon** on Russian Hill. See Chapter 11.

- ✔ In the Wine Country, **Angèle** in Napa is run by second-generation restaurateurs and it shows, from the warm design of the lodge-like interior to the carefully crafted menu. Our hands-down favorite in Sonoma is **Café La Haye**. If an eatery can be described as having clarity of purpose, this is it. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ Adorable Pacific Grove is preferable to Monterey, in our opinion, for dining, and we especially recommend **Passionfish**. The menu has a light Southeast-Asian bent, and this is a calm place in which to enjoy excellent food. See Chapter 18.
- ✔ Santa Barbara's **Sage & Onion** is a little gem with some of the cleverest cooking in Southern California. See Chapter 22.
- ✔ **Angelini Osteria** in Los Angeles has remarkably authentic Italian food, lovingly and passionately prepared. See Chapter 23.

Best dining with views

Good food and a view don't usually mix; our theory is that, when you're facing a great view, the kitchen figures no one is really concentrating on the meal, but that's not fair, now, is it?

- ✔ One of San Francisco's most celebrated restaurants, the **Slanted Door**, recently moved to the new Ferry Building, so now you can chow down on stellar Vietnamese and look at Alcatraz while enjoying both. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ The **Ravens Restaurant** at the Stanford Inn by the Sea in Mendocino overlooks both the gorgeous property and the ocean in the distance. The vegetarian menu will convince even the toughest carnivore that green things are good. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ The food is just okay at **Nepenthe**, but this is the view to sigh for in Big Sur. For great food and views, splash out at **Cielo** in the Ventana Inn. See Chapter 19.

Best local traditions

Join the local residents and sample a meal at these time-tested eateries, and you'll discover how these establishments came to be so, er, well established:

- ✔ It's hard to find a single native who, when discussing food in Santa Barbara, won't bring up **La Super-Rica Taqueria**. It's just a taco shack, but one with lines out the door just about any time of day. There's a reason why. See Chapter 22.
- ✔ "Just" a French-dip sandwich doesn't explain why locals have kept **Philippe's** in Los Angeles open since they created said sandwich in 1918. Join the crowds and become a regular yourself. See Chapter 23.

Best inexpensive meals

Los Angeles's real claim to culinary fame isn't so much brand-name chefs, though it does boast more than a few. In our opinion, where other cities can't compete is with the heavenly and often-shockingly cheap fare found at nondescript hole-in-the-wall restaurants. And, after all, eating a variety of cuisines is a way to pay homage to the melting pot that is California. You won't have time in a short trip to do some serious, daring poking around, so we direct you to two of our standout favorites: **Sanamluang Café**, where you can dine for weeks on a massive Thai menu, and **Zankou Chicken** (with three locations), where the perfect roast chicken would be good enough, but when they add their special garlic paste, it's lifted into perfection. See Chapter 23.

The Best Family Excursions

Assuming you and your family will be unable to schedule several weeks covering the whole of the Golden State, we've highlighted a few can't-miss family destinations for whichever part of the state you target:

- ✔ We wouldn't have believed it if we hadn't experienced it for ourselves, but taking the ferry to **Alcatraz Island**, trooping up the hill, pulling on the headset for the audio tour, and staring at prison cells turns out to be fascinating. And we did it with a couple of teenage girls. Alcatraz may be one of the biggest tourist attractions in Northern California, but it's actually worth the price of admission. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Humboldt Redwoods State Park** is ideal if you're an outdoorsy type, and a hike amongst the giants is a memorable experience. During the summer, stop by the visitor center for information on ranger-led nature walks and the Junior Ranger's program for kids 7 to 12. See Chapter 14.
- ✔ The **Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk**, a cartoon-character-free zone, may not have the glitz or polish of pristine Disneyland, but its manageable size, beachside location, and old-fashioned ambience hearken back to amusement parks such as New York's Coney Island. Bay Area teens flock here in the summer along with vacationing families; we recall bringing the kids when they were still too short to qualify for the more daring rides. Be sure to buy a bag of saltwater taffy, because you can't find that stuff just anywhere. See Chapter 17.
- ✔ The **Monterey Bay Aquarium** is no glorified fish hostel; few aquariums come anywhere close in grandeur to this spectacular compound. Stand at the window into the Outer Bay exhibit for a while and we bet you'll agree this is one of the few "educational" stops on a tour of Northern California that probably ought to be mandatory. See Chapter 18.

- ✔ The original — and still the champion — **Disneyland Resort** remains the must-see family destination in California. It's expensive; it can be crowded and hot; it's magic. Really, did you think there was any way we weren't going to recommend this for children? Actually, there is; if your kids are under the age of 6, do take into consideration any fears or phobias they may have. For example, if your kids are anxious in dark places, many of the rides — even those geared toward the very young — start off in the dark. It would be a shame to spend that much money, time, and effort just to ride the merry-go-round a bunch. See Chapter 24.
- ✔ Speaking of merry-go-rounds, you can find an all-wood one from the 1920s on the **Santa Monica Pier**, along with other carnival rides, shops, and food stalls. A sweet little excursion right on the edge of not-so-sweet Los Angeles. See Chapter 23.
- ✔ A couple of L.A. museums may be just the ticket for your kids. If you're the sort of parent who wants an educated holiday, try the **California ScienCenter**, which has all sorts of hands-on interactive displays and, as of this writing, actual human bodies preserved in plastic. Yuck! But we bet kids will remember they saw it, long after they've forgotten about the Grand Canyon. Or if you really want your kids to love you, let them watch TV on their vacation, but do so at the **Museum of Television & Radio**, where an extraordinary number of hours of classic TV, from sitcoms to Moon landings to Olympic moments, are available for viewing on monitors. See Chapter 23.
- ✔ Kids and zoos go together, and though we're partial to the sometimes overlooked, but still worthy Los Angeles Zoo (see Chapter 23), the **San Diego Zoo** (see Chapter 27) gets a lot of headlines for a reason. One operation is slick and sharp, the other perhaps not so much, but honestly, we don't see enough of a difference to justify the disparity in ticket prices. Pick whichever one you're closest to geographically. But remember that animals are smart, and that's why, when it's hot, they snooze in the shade. If you want to see more than slumber, be sure to go early or late or on a generally cool or overcast day.

The Best Scenic Drives

Beauty may be in the eye of the beholder, but California offers so much to behold that we think it's essential to plan for at least one day of just driving. These scenic drives promise the best views, stopovers, and distractions that very quickly fill up that one day of just driving:

- ✔ **Best in Northern California:** If you're in San Francisco with plans to head south, rent a car the day you're leaving. Say farewell to the city by driving west on **Geary Boulevard** all the way out to the ocean where you'll turn left onto the **Great Highway**. This road leads along the water to the tiny village of Pacifica and to **Highway 1**. Traffic

can be dense on weekends, but there's no lovelier way to reach Santa Cruz or points farther south. After you pass the town of Napa, the drive along **Highway 29** up to and past Calistoga is so pretty you'll want to draw straws to determine who gets the passenger seat. Although the drive to Mendocino gets enthusiastic raves from people who love car trips, the 32-mile tour along the **Avenue of the Giants** is easier on folks who get carsick, because the road is comparatively less curvy.

- ✓ **Best on the Central Coast:** Paying to drive through some of the more expensive real estate in the country may seem counterintuitive, but the fact is, the **17-Mile Drive** through Pebble Beach is a worthy attraction (despite the price of gasoline). We can't ever get enough of the splendid coast however, and the always-toll-free **Highway 1** between Point Lobos State Reserve (just south of Carmel) and San Simeon is on the top-ten list of excitingly gorgeous drives.
- ✓ **Best in Southern California:** The **Pacific Coast Highway** (Highway 1) runs along some of the most spectacular coastal scenery in the country. Pretty much anywhere is good, from the start at San Juan Capistrano all the way up through San Luis Obispo, although it varies: The stretch alongside Los Angeles County is somewhat developed, but after you get past Malibu and on your way up to (and past) Santa Barbara, you're rewarded with rocky cliffs tumbling into the ocean. The stretch of 19 miles in Santa Barbara County is one of the finest, and while continuing north into Central Coast Wine Country adds green vineyards into the scenic mix, that is technically no longer Southern California.

The Best Museums

You can find some nice little museums in California cities outside of the Bay Area and L.A. — and we introduce you to some of them in the destinations chapters in this book. But for hardcore museum-philes, to the big cities you go.

- ✓ **Best with kids:** Try San Francisco. The **Exploratorium** benefits from being educational but not boring — all the exhibits are hands-on and there are plenty of them. Science-minded scions will settle in happily for hours. Artsy teens may be intrigued by the **Cartoon Art Museum**, not far from the Sony Metreon. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Best for contemporary-art lovers:** San Francisco's **Museum of Modern Art** (see Chapter 11) is our kind of gallery; the art is well curated, the building is beautiful, the cafe has really good food, and the gift shop is tops. But Los Angeles's two-part **Museum of Contemporary Art/MOCA at the Geffen Contemporary** (see Chapter 23) has significant exhibits, from Lucien Freud retrospectives to a recent Minimal Art exhibit that was featured in *Time* magazine to fantastic permanent collections.

- ✔ **Best encyclopedic museum other than the Met in NYC:** The **Los Angeles County Museum of Art** has something for everyone: old masters, young modern artists, antiquities from across the globe and through the centuries, some of the finest collections of Asian art anywhere, and the list goes on. The building is no great shakes, but it's oddly and undeservedly uncrowded much of the time. See Chapter 23.
- ✔ **Best museum with a message:** The **Museum of Tolerance** in Beverly Hills may be more Holocaust-centric than one would like (only because the tragic consequences of intolerance manifest in many different times and places), but its message is universal, now in these perilous times more than ever. See Chapter 23.
- ✔ **Best-looking museum:** Listing the very wealthy and powerful **Getty Museum** this way is probably odd, but we know the truth: The collection is boring, but the setting, way up in the hills over West Los Angeles, with views out to the sea, and in a very modern urban space, is anything but. It's worth it just to come here for a snack, and because it's free (albeit with a \$7 parking fee), not at all a risk. The newly reopened **Getty Villa**, with an emphasis on Roman and Greek antiquities, styled as a classical Roman villa and set on a Malibu cliffside, is a near-perfect combination of structure and collection. See Chapter 23.

The Best Guided Tours

We generally are reluctant to heartily recommend guided tours — armed with this book and your own intimate knowledge of your personal interests, you're likely to do just about as well as any tour guide. However, we do make some exceptions for the following:

- ✔ **Best for food and wine lovers:** In San Francisco, we suggest either **Wok Wiz Chinatown Tour** or **Mangia! North Beach** (see Chapter 11). Though expensive, both are scads of fun and offer an opportunity to meet some local characters while walking around the city's more fascinating neighborhoods. In Napa, let the boys from the **Napa Winery Shuttle** (see Chapter 12) show you their favorite wineries, or they can customize a daylong itinerary.
- ✔ **Best for architecture buffs:** The major sights of Los Angeles are easy to do on your own, but if you want to see the hidden charms of this city, we highly recommend **Architecture Tours L.A.** The owner does two-hour tours of the overviews and highlights of various L.A. neighborhoods (and she can customize for you), from Greene and Greene beauties to the groundbreaking work of Neutra and Schindler.