

# The Best of California

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In my early 20s, I took the requisite college student's pilgrimage to Europe, exploring its finer train stations and sleeping on the premier park benches from London to Istanbul. I was relatively anonymous—just another tanned and skinny, blond and blue-eyed American with a backpack. That is, until I crossed into the former Eastern Bloc.

The reaction there was dramatic, almost palpable. Like Moses parting the sea, I wandered the crowded streets of Prague and citizens would stop, stare, and step aside as if I bore a scarlet letter "A" across my chest. It wasn't until a man with faltering English approached me that I discovered the reason for my newfound celebrity status.

"Eh, you. Where you from? No, no. Let me guess." He stepped back and gave a cursory examination, followed by a pregnant pause. "Ah. I've got it! California! You're from California, no?" His eyes gleamed as I told him that, yes, he was quite correct. "Wonderful! Wonderful!" A dozen or so pilsners later with my loquacious new friend, and it all became clear to me: To him, I was a celebrity—a rich, convertible-driving surfer who spent most of his days lazing on the beach, fending off hordes of buxom blondes while arguing with his agent via cellphone. The myth is complete, I thought. I *am* the Beach Boys. I *am* *Baywatch*. Status by association. The tentacles of Hollywood have done what no NATO pact could achieve—they've leapfrogged the staid issues of capitalism versus communism by offering a far more potent narcotic: the mystique of sun-drenched California, of movie stars strolling down Sunset Boulevard, of beautiful women in tight shorts and bikini tops roller-skating along Venice Beach. In short, they've bought what the movie industry is selling.

Of course, the allure is understandable. It *is* warm and sunny most days of the year, movie stars *do* abound in Los Angeles, and you can't swing a cat by its tail without hitting an in-line skater in Venice Beach. This part of the California mystique, however exaggerated, *does* exist, and it's not hard to find.

But there's more—a lot more—to California that isn't scripted, sanitized, and broadcasted to the world's millions of mesmerized masses. Beyond the Hollywood glitter is a wondrously diverse state that, if it ever seceded from the Union, would be one of the most productive, powerful nations in the world. We've got it all: misty redwood forests, an exceptionally verdant Central Valley teeming with agriculture, the mighty Sierra Nevada Mountain Range, eerily fascinating deserts, a host of world-renowned cities, and, of course, hundreds of miles of stunning coastline.

And despite the endemic crime, pollution, traffic, and bowel-shaking earthquakes for which California is famous, we're still the golden child of the United States, America's spoiled rich kid, either loved or loathed by everyone else. (Neighboring Oregon, for example, sells lots of license-plate rims that proudly state, "I hate California.") Truth be told, however, we don't care what anyone thinks of us. Californians *know* they live in one

2 of the most diverse and interesting places in the world, and we're proud of the state we call home.

Granted, we can't guarantee that you'll bump into Arnold Schwarzenegger or learn to surf, but if you have a little time, a little money, and an adventurous spirit, then Harry, Mark, Erika, Kristin, and I can help guide you through one of the most fulfilling vacations of your life. The four of us travel the world for a living, but we *choose* to live in California—because no other place on earth has so much to offer.

—Matthew R. Poole

## 1 THE BEST OF NATURAL CALIFORNIA

- **Redwood National and State Parks:** Acres of inconceivably massive redwood trees, up to 350 feet tall, tower over thick, lush, oversize ferns, mosses, and wild orchids in the old-growth forests along the Northern California coast. Walking through these groves is an unforgettably humbling, serene experience. See “Redwood National & State Parks,” in chapter 8.
- **Point Reyes National Seashore:** This extraordinarily scenic stretch of coast and wetlands is one of the state's best bird-watching spots for waterfowl, shorebirds, songbirds, osprey, and red-shouldered hawks. You might even catch a glimpse of a whale from the Point Reyes Lighthouse. See “Point Reyes National Seashore,” in chapter 8.
- **Lake Tahoe:** One of the world's most magnificent bodies of fresh water, sparkling Lake Tahoe contains close to 40 trillion gallons—enough to cover the entire state of California to a depth of 15 inches. See “Lake Tahoe,” in chapter 9.
- **Mount Shasta:** The mighty volcano Mount Shasta, a solitary tower of rock and snow, rises thousands of feet above the valley floor. If you're fit, it makes for an exhilarating climb as well. See “Mount Shasta & the Cascades,” in chapter 9.
- **Yosemite National Park:** You're in for the ultimate treat at Yosemite. Nothing in the state—maybe even the world—compares to this vast wilderness and its miles of rivers, lakes, peaks, and valleys. With 3 of the 10 tallest waterfalls on earth, the largest granite monolith anywhere, and some of the world's largest trees, Yosemite is one of the most superlative natural places on the planet. See “Yosemite National Park,” in chapter 10.
- **Big Sur:** Sloping redwood forests and towering cliffs pounded by the Pacific create one of the world's most dramatic coastal panoramas. See “The Big Sur Coast,” in chapter 12.
- **Channel Islands National Park:** This is California in its most virginal state. Paddle a kayak into sea caves; camp among indigenous island fox and seabirds; and swim, snorkel, or scuba dive tide pools and kelp forests teeming with wildlife. The channel waters are prime for whale-watching, and winter brings elephant-seal mating season, when you'll see them and their sea-lion cousins sunbathing on cove beaches. See “Channel Islands National Park,” in chapter 13.
- **Joshua Tree National Park:** You'll find awesome rock formations; groves of flowering cacti and gnarly, eerily beautiful Joshua trees; ancient Native American petroglyphs; and shifting sand dunes in this desert wonderland. If you choose to camp here, you'll sleep under a brilliant night sky. See “Joshua Tree National Park,” in chapter 16.
- **Anza-Borrego Desert State Park:** California's largest state park attracts most

of its visitors during the spring wildflower season, when a kaleidoscopic carpet blankets the desert floor. Others come year-round to hike more than 100 miles of trails. See “Anza-Borrego Desert State Park,” in chapter 16.

- **Torrey Pines State Reserve:** This pristine park is named for the rare, dramatic

little species of pine that grows only here and on a tiny island off the coast. Eight miles of trails immerse hikers into a delicate and beautiful coastal environment featuring mesas, canyons, and marshes. One of San Diego’s best beaches awaits at the foot of the sandstone cliffs. See chapter 17.

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## 2 THE BEST BEACHES

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- **Sonoma Coast State Beaches:** Stretching 10 miles from Bodega Bay to Jenner, these sands draw 300 bird species. Look for osprey from December to September, seal pups from March to June, and gray whales from December to April. See “Along the Sonoma Coast,” in chapter 8.
- **Santa Cruz’s Beaches:** Santa Cruz has 29 miles of beaches, varied enough to please surfers, swimmers, fishers, sailboarders, the sand-pail-and-shovel set, and the bikini-and-biceps crowd. For starters, walk down the steps from the famous Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk to the mile-long Main Beach, complete with summer lifeguards and golden-oldie tunes drifting over the sand. See “Santa Cruz,” in chapter 12.
- **Pismo Beach:** Pismo’s 23-mile stretch of prime beachfront has been an annual destination for generations of California families. Fishing, shopping, surfing, and renting dune buggies are just a few of the many outdoor activities here. Even dogs are welcome to play on the beach. See “Pismo Beach,” in chapter 13.
- **Santa Barbara’s East Beach:** This wide swath of white sand hosts beach

umbrellas, sand-castle builders, and volleyball games. On Sundays, local artists display their work beneath the palm trees. See “Santa Barbara,” in chapter 13.

- **Malibu’s Legendary Beaches:** Zuma and Surfrider beaches inspired the 1960s surf music that embodies the Southern California coast culture. Surfrider is home to L.A.’s best waves. Zuma is loaded with snack bars, restaurants, jungle gyms, and other amenities. The beach affords some of the state’s best sunbathing, in front of the Malibu Colony, a star-studded enclave of multimillion-dollar homes. See “Beaches,” in chapter 14.
- **La Jolla’s Beaches:** “La Jolla” may be misspelled Spanish for “the jewel,” but *this* is no mistake: The bluff-lined beaches here are among the state’s most beautiful. Each has a distinct personality: Surfers love Windansea’s waves; harbor seals have adopted the Children’s Pool; La Jolla Shores is popular for swimming, sunbathing, and kayaking; while the Cove is a top snorkeling spot—and the best place to spot the electric-orange California state fish, the garibaldi. See “Beaches,” in chapter 17.

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## 3 THE BEST GOLF COURSES

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- **Pebble Beach Golf Links:** The famous 17-Mile Drive is the site of 10 national championships and the celebrity-laden

AT&T Pebble Beach National Pro-Am. The nearby Pacific and a backdrop of the Del Monte Forest *almost* justify

the astronomical greens fees. See “Pebble Beach & the 17-Mile Drive,” in chapter 12.

- **Poppy Hills** (Pebble Beach): *Golf Digest* has called this Robert Trent Jones, Jr.-designed course one of the world’s top-20. Cutting through the Del Monte Forest pines, it is kept in state-of-the-art condition. Unlike many competitors, it’s rarely crowded. See “Pebble Beach & the 17-Mile Drive,” in chapter 12.
- **PGA West TPC Stadium Course** (La Quinta): The par-3 17th hole has a tiny island where Lee Trevino made Skins

Game history with a hole in one. The rest of Pete Dye’s 7,261-yard design is flat with huge bunkers, lots of water, and severe mounding throughout. See “The Palm Springs Desert Resorts,” in chapter 16.

- **Torrey Pines Golf Course** (La Jolla): Two 18-hole championship courses overlook the ocean and give players plenty of challenges—and distractions. In February, the Buick Invitational Tournament takes place here; the rest of the year, these gorgeous municipal courses are open to everyone. See “Outdoor Pursuits,” in chapter 17.

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## 4 THE BEST CALIFORNIA TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

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- **Riding a Cable Car:** It’s the quintessential San Francisco experience, taking the Powell-Hyde cable car down to Fisherman’s Wharf. When you reach the top of Nob Hill, grab the rail with one hand and hold your camera with the other, because you’re about to see a view of the bay that’ll make you all weepy. See chapter 5.
- **Exploring Alcatraz Island:** Even if you loathe tourist attractions, you’ll dig Alcatraz. Just looking at the Rock from across the bay is enough to give you the heebie-jeebies—and the park rangers have put together an excellent audio tour. Heck, even the boat ride across the bay is worth the price. See chapter 5.
- **Hot-Air Ballooning over Napa Valley:** Sure, you have to rise at dawn to do it, but drifting over the Napa Valley’s vineyards in a balloon is the best way to view the verdant, undulating hills, meticulously striped with vines and bordered by mountains. Flights run in the morning on clear days, when the air is calm and cool. You can book a trip through your

hotel or with **Bonaventura Balloon Company** (☎ 800/FLY-NAPA) or **Adventures Aloft** (☎ 800/944-4408). See “Hot-Air Ballooning over the Valley,” in chapter 7.

- **Wine Tasting in Napa or Sonoma:** You don’t have to be a connoisseur to appreciate the wine trail. All you need is a decadent streak and a designated driver. Sniff and sip at a few wineries, take in the bucolic views, and see why this region is one of the hottest destinations in the country—a place to sample some of the world’s best wines right at the source. See chapter 7.
- **Taking a Train Ride Through the Redwoods:** Where else on this planet would you get an opportunity to ride a historic steam train through a remote coastal redwood forest? The **Skunk Train** (☎ 866/457-5865), in Fort Bragg, once lugged logs and now takes tourists on an all-day outing through a redwood forest, an 80-mile journey that crosses over 31 bridges and trestles and through two deep tunnels. They even

offer a Sunset Dinner Barbecue excursion. See chapter 8.

- **Rafting Scenic Northern California Rivers:** You can white-water raft through cascades of raging Class IV waters or float under blue skies, through deep forests, past all sorts of wildlife. Depending on the river and the time of year, some trips are okay for children over age 6. See chapters 9, 10, and 11.
- **Spelunking a Real Gold Mine** (Sutter Creek): Don your hard hat, “tag in,” board the mine shuttle, and experience what it’s like to be a gold miner. The **Sutter Gold Mine** tour company (☎ 866/762-2837) takes you deep into a mine that’s loaded with gold deposits. You’ll have the chance to sluice for some real gold. See chapter 11.
- **Panning for Gold in the Gold Country:** In southern Gold Country, you can dig into living history and pan for gold. Several companies, including **Gold Prospecting Adventures** (☎ 800/596-0009) in Jamestown, offer dredging lessons and gold-panning tours. You’ll quickly learn that this is backbreaking labor, although an adventure. And who knows? You might get lucky and launch a new gold rush. See chapter 11.
- **Taking a Studio Tour** (Los Angeles): Studio tours are opportunities to see actual stage sets for shows, past and present, such as *ER* and *The West Wing*, and you never know who you’re going to spot emerging from his or her star wagon. See “Exploring the City,” in chapter 14.
- **Learning How to Surf:** What could be a better experience during your California vacation than learning how to surf on the same breaks that the Beach Boys surfed? Surfing schools, such as **Learn to Surf L.A.**, in Manhattan Beach, will guarantee you’ll get up on a longboard and be surfing the easy waves in one short lesson. See “Surfing,” in the “Outdoor Pursuits” section, in chapter 14.
- **Cruising Sunset Boulevard:** It’s a must for first-time visitors because you’ll see a cross-section of everything that is L.A.: legendary clubs, studios, hotels, and zip codes that you’ll instantly recognize from the silver screen and TV shows. The journey ends with a trip to Malibu’s fabled beaches, where those classy *Baywatch* episodes are filmed (how perfect). See “L.A.’s Top Attractions,” in chapter 14.
- **Skating Venice Beach:** You haven’t visited Southern California properly until you’ve rented some skates at Venice Beach and taken in the human carnival around you. Nosh on a Jody Maroni’s “haute” dog; buy some cheap sunglasses, silver jewelry, or ethnic garb; and relish the wide beach, blue sea, and performers along the boardwalk. See “L.A.’s Top Attractions,” in chapter 14.
- **Flying a World War II Fighter Aircraft:** Strap yourself into a vintage 600-horsepower fighter aircraft and prepare to blow your mind as you (yes, *you*) perform aerobatic maneuvers—loops, rolls, and lazy-eights—above the Carlsbad coastline, accompanied (but not flown) by a pilot from Biplane, Air Combat & Warbird Adventures (☎ 800/759-5667). It’s an experience you’ll never forget. See p. 744.
- **Explore Wreck Alley:** Several scuttled vessels sit on the ocean floor, about 1 mile off Mission Beach, providing certified divers the chance to investigate a nautical graveyard teeming with sea life. The artificial reef includes a 366-foot Canadian destroyer, the *Yukon*, as well as the remnants of a research station toppled by a storm in 1988. See “Outdoor Pursuits,” in chapter 17.

## 5 THE BEST OF SMALL-TOWN CALIFORNIA

- **St. Helena:** In the heart of the Napa Valley, St. Helena is known for its Main Street. In a horse and buggy, Robert Louis Stevenson and his bride once made their way down this thoroughfare lined with Victorian homes. The Victorians remain, but now they're stores for designer clothing, hardware, bath products, you name it. Come for the old-time, tranquil mood and the food. See "Napa Valley," in chapter 7.
- **Healdsburg:** An exceptional destination within the vast wine country region of Sonoma, this charming town is centered on its historic square, which maintains old-fashion charm despite being home to world-class hotels, restaurants, and shopping. And did we mention that it's a 5-minute drive to some of the state's best wineries? See "Healdsburg," in chapter 7.
- **Mendocino:** An artists' colony with a New England flavor, Mendocino doubled as Cabot Cove, Maine, as the backdrop for *Murder, She Wrote*. On the cliffs above the Pacific Ocean, it has small art galleries, general stores, weathered wooden homes, and organic restaurants. See "Mendocino," in chapter 8.
- **Arcata:** If you're losing faith in America, restore it by spending a few days in this Northern California coastal town. Arcata has it all: its own redwood forest and bird marsh, a charming town square, great family-owned restaurants, and even its own minor-league baseball team, which draws the entire town together on many an afternoon. See "Eureka & Environs," in chapter 8.
- **Nevada City:** The entire town is a national historic landmark and the best place to understand Gold Rush fever. Settled in 1849, it offers fine dining and shopping and a stock of the multi-gabled Victorian frame houses of the Old West. Relics of the Donner Party are on display at the 1861 Firehouse No. 1. See "The Gold Country," in chapter 11.
- **Pacific Grove:** Escape beach crowds just 2 miles west of Monterey, in Pacific Grove, known for its tranquil waterfront and clean air. It draws thousands of monarch butterflies between October and March. See "Pacific Grove," in chapter 12.
- **Ojai:** When filmmakers needed a Shangri-La for the movie *Lost Horizon*, they drove to Ojai Valley, with its unspoiled eucalyptus groves and small ranches in soft, green hills. Ojai is the amiable village at the valley's heart—a mecca for artists, free spirits, and city folk in need of a restful weekend in the country. See "The Ojai Valley," in chapter 13.
- **Santa Catalina Island:** A day trip to the small town of Catalina makes for a most indulgent day: Take a scenic boat ride, shop, snorkel and dive, golf, hike, lick ice cream, get a sunburn, and barhop sans fear of a DUI. **Tip:** The helicopter taxi is cheaper than you'd expect. See "Santa Catalina Island," in chapter 15.
- **Julian:** This old mining town in the Cuyamaca Mountains near San Diego is now known for a different kind of mother lode: apples (and the ensuing apple pies). The pioneer legacy here includes a local-history museum, an Old West cemetery, and some of the town's original gold mines. See "Julian: Gold, Apple Pies & a Slice of Small-Town California," in chapter 17.

## 6 THE BEST FAMILY VACATION EXPERIENCES

- **San Francisco:** The City by the Bay will entertain every member of the family. If you're traveling with kids, ride the cable cars that "climb halfway to the stars," visit the Exploratorium, the Metreon, the zoo, the ships at the National Maritime Museum, Golden Gate Park, and more. See chapter 5.
- **Lake Tahoe:** Lake Tahoe has fun activities galore for families: skiing, snowboarding, hiking, tobogganing, swimming, fishing, boating, water-skiing, mountain biking, and so on. The possibilities seem endless. See "Lake Tahoe," in chapter 9.
- **Yosemite National Park:** Camping or sleeping in a cabin in Yosemite is one of California's top family attractions. Sites lie scattered over 17 campgrounds, ringed by the Sierra Nevada. By day, families can pack their schedule with hiking, bicycling, white-water rafting, scaling snowy peaks, and more. See "Yosemite National Park," in chapter 10.
- **Santa Cruz:** This funky bayside town has the stuff of an ideal family trip: surfing, sea kayaking, hiking, fishing, and shopping. And those fantastic beaches and the legendary amusement park on the boardwalk will please travelers of all ages. See "Santa Cruz," in chapter 12.
- **Monterey:** It's been called "Disneyland-by-the-Sea" because of all its tourist activities, including those on Cannery Row and Fisherman's Wharf. The state-of-the-art Monterey Bay Aquarium, however, is a class act, the best in the world. See chapter 12.
- **Disneyland Resort:** The "Happiest Place on Earth" is enhanced by its sister theme park, **Disney's California Adventure**. Whether you're wowed by the animation, thrilled by the coasters, or interested in the history and secrets of this pop-culture juggernaut, you won't leave disappointed. Get a FAST-PASS to skip those long lines! See "The Disneyland Resort," in chapter 15.
- **San Diego Zoo, Wild Animal Park & SeaWorld:** San Diego boasts three of the world's best animal attractions. At the zoo, animals live in naturalistic habitats, and it's one of only four zoos in the U.S. with giant pandas. At the Wild Animal Park, most of the 3,500 animals roam freely over an 1,800-acre spread. And SeaWorld, with its water-themed rides, flashy animal shows, and detailed exhibits, is an aquatic wonderland of pirouetting dolphins and 4-ton killer whales with a penchant for drenching visitors. See "The Three Major Animal Parks," in chapter 17.

## 7 THE BEST ARCHITECTURAL LANDMARKS

- **The Golden Gate Bridge** (San Francisco): More tomato red than golden, the famous bridge remains the cheery hallmark of the San Francisco skyline. It's also an excellent expanse to walk. See "The Top Attractions," in chapter 5.
- **The Painted Ladies** (San Francisco): The so-called "Painted Ladies" are San Francisco's famous, ornately decorated Victorian homes. Check out the brilliant beauties around Alamo Square. Most of the extant 14,000 structures date from the second half of the 19th century. See chapter 5.
- **Winchester Mystery House** (San Jose): The heiress to the Winchester rifle fortune, Sarah Winchester, created one of the major "Believe It or Not?" curiosities

of California, a 160-room Victorian mansion. When a fortune-teller told Sarah she wouldn't die if she'd continue to build onto her house, her mansion underwent construction day and night from 1884 to 1922. She did die eventually, and the hammers were silenced. See chapter 6.

- **The Carson Mansion** (Eureka): This ornate Victorian is one of the state's most photographed and flamboyant Queen Anne-style structures. It was built in 1885 by the Newsom brothers for William Carson, the local timber baron. Today it's the headquarters of a men's club. See chapter 8.
- **The California State Capitol Building** (Sacramento): The Golden State's dazzling white capitol was built in 1869 and renovated in 1976. Its dome—which looks like a Fabergé egg from inside—and original statuary along its eaves remain, and antiques from the original offices furnish its historic rooms. The collection of California governors' portraits is strangely compelling. See “Sacramento,” in chapter 11.
- **Mission San Carlos Borromèo del Río Carmelo** (Carmel): The second mission founded in California, in 1770 by Father Junípero Serra, is perhaps the most beautiful. Its stone church and tower dome have been restored, and a garden of poppies adjoins the church. See “Carmel-by-the-Sea,” in chapter 12.

- **Hearst Castle** (San Simeon): William Randolph Hearst's 165-room abode is one of the last great estates of America's Gilded Age. It's an astounding, over-the-top monument to unbridled wealth and power. See “San Simeon: Hearst Castle,” in chapter 13.
- **Walt Disney Concert Hall** (Los Angeles): You would have to fly to Spain to see Frank Gehry's other architectural masterpiece, and this one is sufficiently awe inspiring. And the dramatically curvaceous stainless-steel exterior houses one of the most acoustically perfect concert halls in the world. See chapter 14.
- **The Gamble House** (Pasadena): The Smithsonian Institution calls this 1908 Arts and Crafts landmark one of the nation's most important houses. Visitors can tour the spectacular interior, designed and impeccably executed, down to the last teak armchair, by Charles and Henry Greene. See chapter 14.
- **Balboa Park** (San Diego): The Spanish Colonial Revival-style buildings along El Prado were originally built as temporary structures for the Panama-California Exposition (1915–16). The ornately decorated and imposing facades create a romantic aura amid the beautifully landscaped mesas and canyons of one of the world's finest city parks, home to many of the city's top museums. See “Exploring the Area,” in chapter 17.

## 8 THE BEST MUSEUMS

- **De Young Museum** (San Francisco): The city's oldest museum was rebuilt from the ground up, and in late 2005 debuted as one of San Francisco's top attractions. Anchored in beautiful Golden Gate Park, surrounded by stunning flora, and shimmering in its fabulous copper exterior, it has a fantastic collection of American paintings, decorative arts and crafts, and arts from

Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. Topping it off is a tower with great city views and a surprisingly good cafe with outdoor tables overlooking the sculpture garden. See p. 119.

- **The Exploratorium** (San Francisco): The hands-on, interactive Exploratorium boasts 650 exhibits that help show how things work. See p. 120.

- **California State Railroad Museum** (Sacramento): Old Sacramento's biggest attraction, the 100,000-square-foot museum was once the terminus of the transcontinental and Sacramento Valley railways. It displays dozens of locomotives and railroad cars, among other attractions. See p. 342.
- **Getty Museum at the Getty Center** (Los Angeles): Designed by Richard Meier and completed in 1997 to the tune of \$1 billion, the Getty Center is a striking, starkly futuristic architectural landmark, with panoramic views of the city and ocean. The building itself is enough reason to visit, but so is the permanent collection, the crown jewel of which is Van Gogh's "Irises," which the museum paid \$54 million to acquire. See p. 531.
- **Petersen Automotive Museum** (Los Angeles): This museum is a natural for Los Angeles, a city whose personality and history is so entwined with the popularity of the automobile. Impeccably restored vintage autos are displayed in life-size dioramas accurate to the last period detail (including an authentic 1930s-era service station). Upstairs galleries house celebrity vehicles, car-related artwork, and exhibits. See p. 542.
- **The Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego**: In 2007, San Diego's internationally respected contemporary art museum opened its third space, transforming a portion of the historic downtown train station into the city's newest cultural icon. Together with its other downtown annex and the flagship space that overlooks the ocean in La Jolla, MCASD stakes its claim as the boldest, most important museum in San Diego. See p. 542.

## 9 THE BEST LUXURY HOTELS & RESORTS

- **The Ritz-Carlton San Francisco** (Nob Hill; ☎ 800/241-3333), is the sine qua non of luxury hotels, offering near-perfect service and every possible amenity. Even if you can't afford a guest room, come for the mind-blowing Sunday brunch. See p. 79.
- **The Mandarin Oriental** (San Francisco; ☎ 800/622-0404), is perched so high above the city that the fog rolls in *below* you. It's surreal. Maybe you really did die and go to heaven? See p. 74.
- **Calistoga Ranch** (Calistoga; ☎ 707/254-2800): Napa Valley's latest upscale hotel blows away the competition, with individual luxury cabins stocked with every imaginable luxury. In a secluded canyon, it's where nature meets nurture, with a fabulous pool, spa, gym, and guest-only restaurant overlooking a lake. See p. 184.
- **Château du Sureau** (Oakhurst; ☎ 559/683-6860): Near Yosemite, the Château du Sureau and Erna's Elderberry House restaurant stand out for their European attention to quality and detail. Room furnishings are exquisite, and the cuisine is worthy of the stars. See p. 302.
- **Casa Palmero Resort** (Pebble Beach; ☎ 800/654-9300): A small, ultraluxury resort on the first tee of the Pebble Beach Golf Course, Casa Palmero has 24 intimate and private cottages and suites. Is \$2,550 per night okay with you? See p. 397.
- **Post Ranch Inn** (Big Sur; ☎ 800/527-2200): Twelve hundred feet above the sea, the elevated wood-and-glass guest cottages at this romantic cliff-side retreat give guests the illusion that they're living at cloud level. See p. 411.

- **Four Seasons Resort** (Santa Barbara; ☎ 800/819-5053): Open since 1927, this Four Seasons operation, on the grounds of the historic Biltmore Hotel, has palm-studded formal gardens and prime beachfront along “America’s Riviera.” Wander the elegant Spanish-Moorish arcades and walkways, accented by exquisite Mexican tile, and then play croquet on manicured lawns or relax at the Coral Casino Beach and Cabana Club. The rooms are the epitome of refined luxury. See p. 455.
- **Shutters on the Beach** (Santa Monica; ☎ 800/334-9000) and **Casa del Mar** (Santa Monica; ☎ 800/898-6999): If an oceanfront room at either of these hotels doesn’t put a spring in your love life, we don’t know what will. Shutters is dressed up like a rich friend’s contemporary-chic beach house, while glamorous Casa del Mar is an impeccably restored Art Deco-era delight. See p. 493 and 492.
- **Beverly Hills Hotel and Bungalows** (Beverly Hills; ☎ 800/283-8885): A deep dent in your credit card is a small price to pay for the chance to take afternoon tea next to Ozzy Osbourne, swim laps in the same pool Katharine

Hepburn once dove into fully clothed, and eat pancakes in the fabled Fountain Coffee Shop. See p. 497.

- **La Quinta Resort & Club** (La Quinta; ☎ 800/598-3828): This mecca for serious golfers has morphed into an upscale family hotel without disturbing the quality of service. While Dad is putting away, Mom can luxuriate in one of more than 35 spa treatment rooms, and the kids can splash in one of the 41 outdoor pools and Jacuzzis or exercise on one of the 23 tennis courts. The property is designed to reduce the feeling of a mega resort, and the service exceeds expectations. Fido is welcome also, for a fee (\$100 a night). See p. 666.
- **The Grand Del Mar** (Del Mar; ☎ 888/314-2030): This new resort nestled in the foothills of San Diego’s North County is a faux Tuscan villa padded with ornate, Vegas-style luxury. Liberally accented with fountains, courtyards, sweeping staircases, and outdoor fireplaces, it’s so grandly European that you’ll feel as if you are visiting the *doge* at his country estate. Its signature restaurant, Addison, is one of the city’s most sumptuous dining rooms, with cuisine to match. See p. 754.

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## 10 THE BEST AFFORDABLE SMALL HOTELS & INNS

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- **Hotel Bohème** (San Francisco; ☎ 415/433-9111): This hotel is the perfect mixture of art, style, class, romance, and location—just steps from the sidewalk cafes of North Beach. If Bette Davis were alive today, this is where she’d stay. See p. 80.
- **St. Orres** (Gualala; ☎ 707/884-3303): Designed in a Russian style—complete with two Kremlinesque, onion-domed towers—St. Orres offers secluded accommodations constructed from century-old timbers salvaged from a

nearby mill. One of the most eye-catching inns on California’s North Coast. See p. 223.

- **Albion River Inn** (Albion; ☎ 800/479-7944): One of the best rooms with a view on the coast, the Albion River Inn is on a cliff overlooking a rugged stretch of shoreline. Most of the luxuriously appointed rooms have Jacuzzi tubs for two, elevated to window level. Add champagne and you’re guaranteed to have a night you won’t soon forget. See p. 231.

- **River Ranch Lodge** (Lake Tahoe; ☎ 866/991-9912): Alongside the Truckee River, the River Ranch has long been one of our favorite affordable inns around Lake Tahoe. It has everything you'd want in a mountain lodge: rustic decor, a great bar and outdoor deck overlooking the river, and a restaurant serving wood-oven-roasted Montana elk loin and other hearty dishes. See p. 273.
- **Gunn House Hotel** (Sonora; ☎ 209/532-3421): Built in 1850 by Dr. Lewis C. Gunn, this was the first two-story adobe structure in Sonora and is now one of the best moderately priced hotels in the Gold Country. It's easy to catch the forty-niner spirit here, as the entire hotel and grounds are brimming with quality antiques and turn-of-the-20th-century artifacts. But what really makes the Gunn House one of our favorites is the hotel's beautiful pool and patio, surrounded by lush vegetation and admirable stonework. See p. 364.
- **Mount Shasta Ranch B&B** (Mount Shasta; ☎ 530/926-3870): Built in 1923 as a private retreat and thoroughbred horse ranch for one of the country's most famous horse trainers and racing tycoons, this B&B offers one of the best deals anywhere. Rates start at \$60 a night and include a full country breakfast. See p. 287.
- **Evergreen Lodge** (Yosemite; ☎ 800/935-6343): Scattered through a grove of towering pines near the entrance to Yosemite, Evergreen's rustic cabins, with a beautiful old bar and restaurant, afford easy access to dozens of outdoor adventures. Enjoy a pitcher of beer and a game of Ping-Pong on the patio, or sit around the campfire telling stories and roasting marshmallows. See p. 299.
- **The Mosaic** (Beverly Hills; ☎ 800/463-4466): This Beverly Hills boutique is an ideal blend of art, luxury, service, location, and value. Huge rainforest shower heads, Frette linens, Bulgari bath products, Wolfgang Puck refreshments, and piles of pillows will leave you wondering if you checked in at the pearly gates. See p. 501.
- **Huntley Santa Monica Beach** (Santa Monica; ☎ 310/394-5454): Tucked away on the edge of a quiet Santa Monica neighborhood is my favorite Santa Monica hotel, one that combines a superb location with excellent service and strikingly stylish decor. The Huntley's 18th-floor **Penthouse** restaurant, bar, and lounge has the best nightlife scene in Santa Monica. See p. 494.
- **Casa Malibu** (Malibu; ☎ 800/831-0858): This beachfront motel will fool you from the front; its humble entrance on Pacific Coast Highway belies the quiet, restful haven within. Bougainvillea vines festoon the rooftops and balconies of the motel's 21 rooms around a courtyard garden. Many rooms have private decks above the sand, and one suite was reportedly Lana Turner's favorite. See p. 496.
- **Olallieberry Inn** (Cambria; ☎ 888/927-3222): This 1873 Greek Revival house, furnished in Victorian style, is an ideal base for exploring Hearst Castle. The gracious innkeepers will provide directions to Moonstone Beach, restaurant recommendations, a scrumptious breakfast, and more. See p. 424.
- **Casa Cody** (Palm Springs; ☎ 800/231-2639): You'll feel more like a houseguest than a client at this 1920s Spanish-style *casa*, blessed with peaceful, blossoming grounds and two pools. The southwestern-style rooms are large and equipped for extended stays, and the hotel is just a couple of easy blocks from the heart of the action. See p. 664.
- **La Pensione Hotel** (San Diego; ☎ 800/232-4683): In Little Italy, on the fringe of downtown San Diego, this find feels like a small, modern European hotel, with tidy lodgings at bargain prices.

Great dining options abound in the surrounding blocks, and you'll be perfectly situated to explore the rest of the city and region by car or trolley.

The immediate neighborhood is filled with boutiques and some of the city's most dashing new architecture. See p. 703.

## 11 THE BEST PLACES TO STAY WITH THE KIDS

- **KOA Kamping Kabins** (Point Arena; ☎ 800/562-4188): Once you see the adorable log cabins at this KOA campground, you'll have to admit that this is one cool way to spend the weekend on the coast. Primitive is the key word: mattresses, a heater, and a light bulb are the standard amenities. All you need is some bedding (or sleeping bags), cooking and eating utensils, and charcoal for the barbecue. See p. 225.
- **City Hotel** and **Fallon Hotel** (Columbia; ☎ 800/532-1479): Some parents may roll their eyes at this preserved Gold Rush town, but it's a dream come true for rambunctious kids. Visitors can ride a 100-year-old stagecoach, visit a blacksmith shop, and view lots of mining artifacts. And the reasonably priced Victorian hotels serve a great buffet breakfast. Cars are barred from the dusty main street. See p. 363.
- **Camping at Yosemite's Tuolumne Meadows** (☎ 800/436-7275): At an elevation of 8,600 feet, this is the largest alpine meadow in the High Sierra. A gateway to the "high country," it's especially memorable in late spring, when it's carpeted with wildflowers. Park authorities run the large campground and a full-scale naturalist program, but hardcore adventurers can backpack into the wilderness. See p. 314.
- **Disneyland Resort Hotels** (Anaheim; ☎ 714/956-MICKEY): The Holy Grail of Disney lovers has always been the "Official Hotel of the Magic Kingdom," the original **Disneyland Hotel** (p. 623). The newer **Paradise Pier Hotel** (p. 623) and **Grand Californian** (p. 622) are also an easy monorail or tram ride to Disneyland's gates (the Grand Californian opens directly into California Adventure). See p. 620.
- **Marriott's Desert Springs Spa & Resort** (Palm Desert; ☎ 800/331-3112): In the spirit of Disney-esque resorts, this oasis welcomes guests with a lobby featuring a 60-foot bar, tropical birds, and gondolas that tour the fairways and gardens. Once settled, kids will revel in the lagoonlike pools and play areas (with supervised children's programs). And grown-ups can luxuriate on the golf course, tennis court, or in the 30,000-square-foot day spa. See p. 665.
- **Paradise Point Resort & Spa** (San Diego; ☎ 800/344-2626): Right in the middle of Mission Bay, this resort is almost as much a theme park as its closest neighbor, SeaWorld. The 44-acre, tropically landscaped property can supply a seemingly endless variety of recreational toys for activities in, on, or around the bay. Adults can enjoy the fabulous spa and the excellent (kid-friendly) restaurant, Baleen. See p. 707.

## 12 THE BEST RESTAURANTS

- **San Francisco's Finest:** Restaurant **Michael Mina**, 335 Powell St., Union Square (☎ 415/397-9222), is the place to go for Union Square fine dining. Dozens of fancifully presented small portions add up to a delightfully long, lavish meal. And then there's **Restaurant Gary Danko**, 800 North Point St., Fisherman's Wharf (☎ 415/749-2060), always a sure bet for a perfect contemporary French meal complete with polished service and flambéed finales. See p. 84 and 97, respectively.
- **Chez Panisse** (Berkeley; ☎ 510/548-5525): This is the domain of Alice Waters, "the queen of California cuisine." Originally inspired by the Mediterranean, her kitchen has found its own style, captivating the imagination as well as the senses. Chez Panisse's delicacies include grilled fish wrapped in fig leaves with red-wine sauce, and Seckel pears poached in red wine with burnt caramel. See p. 146.
- **Bistro Don Giovanni** (Napa; ☎ 707/224-3300): In this large, cheery Napa Valley dining room, you can get an incredible Italian meal without a reservation. Just drop in and wait at the bar for a seat. See p. 188.
- **Restaurant 301** (Eureka; ☎ 800/404-1390): A recipient of *Wine Spectator's* Grand Award, Mark Carter is passionate about food and wine, and it shows: His hotel restaurant is considered the best on the Northern Coast. Most of the herbs and many vegetables come fresh from the hotel's organic gardens. Indulge in the five-course fixed-price dinner menu; Carter pairs each course with an excellent wine, available by the glass, or as part of a wine flight. See p. 242.
- **Erna's Elderberry House** (Oakhurst; ☎ 559/683-6800): Erna's shines like a beacon across the culinary wasteland around Yosemite. The six-course menu, which changes nightly, is an ideal blend of Continental and California cuisine. Portions are bountiful, served in an elegant European setting. See p. 302.
- **bouchon** (Santa Barbara; ☎ 805/730-1160): With an intriguing seasonal menu derived from Santa Barbara County's wine country, this intimate restaurant (whose name means "wine cork") is hidden behind a shrubby portal in the heart of downtown. The food and service are impeccable, and an experienced staff stands ready to help coordinate by-the-glass (or even half-glass) wines for each course. See p. 458.
- **Grace** (Los Angeles; ☎ 323/934-4400): The best overall dining experience in Los Angeles. Iron Chef Neal Fraser was trained by America's finest chefs, and it shows (the foie gras served two ways is worth the trip alone). Sophisticated yet unpretentious, Grace is a splurge worth making. See p. 522.
- **The Hump** (Santa Monica; ☎ 310/313-0977): The chefs here are deadly serious about their sushi. Flown in daily from Tokyo's Tsukiji and Fukuoka fish markets in oxygen-filled containers, it's so fresh that a sign at the entrance warns that the meat's still moving. See p. 512.
- **Koi** (West Hollywood; ☎ 310/659-9449): One of L.A.'s hottest restaurants has celebrities arriving nightly for addictive dishes such as baked crab rolls with edible rice paper. Koi is a killer combo of good feng shui and superb Asian fusion cuisine. See p. 521.

- **The Marine Room** (La Jolla; ☎ 866/644-2351): It has been around for 60-plus years, but chef Bernard Guillas takes this senior citizen in tip-top shape. Those who come for the smashing

beachside view (waves sometimes slam into the windows) may be surprised by the inventive, French-inspired food. See p. 724.

## 13 THE BEST CULINARY EXPERIENCES

- **Grazing at San Francisco's Farmers' Market:** In 2003, San Francisco's favorite outdoor culinary fair moved to the Ferry Building Marketplace, where some of the best artisan food producers and restaurants have storefronts. Stop by to peruse the exceptional, abundant selection of gourmet shops and restaurants, or join the locals during open-air market days to feast on the freshest vegetables, fruits, and prepared foods from beloved restaurants. See "The Top Attractions," in chapter 5.
- **Dining on Dungeness Crab at San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf:** Eating fresh Dungeness crabmeat straight from the seafood vendors' boiling pots at the corner of Jefferson and Taylor streets is a classic San Francisco culinary experience. See p. 113.
- **A San Francisco Dim Sum Feast:** No place this side of China does dim sum as well as San Francisco. Experience a taste of Hong Kong right at your table with a myriad of mysterious and exotic little dishes—from dumplings and potstickers to salt-fried shrimp and ducks' feet. At the city's best dim sum house, **Ton Kiang** (☎ 415/387-8273), you'll be wowed by the variety of mysterious dishes. For downtown dim sum, the venerable **Yank Sing** (☎ 415/957-9300), offers an exotic edible surprise on every cart that's wheeled to your table. See p. 105 and p. 91, respectively.
- **Point Reyes Oysters: Drake's Bay Oyster Farm** (☎ 415/669-1149) sells its farm-fresh oysters—by the dozen or

the hundreds—for a fraction of the price you'd pay at a restaurant. See "Point Reyes National Seashore," in chapter 8.

- **Samoa Cookhouse** (Samoa; ☎ 707/442-1659): When lumber was king in Northern California, cookhouses were the hub of Eureka. Here the mill men and longshoremen came to chow down on three hot meals before, during, and after their 12-hour workday. The Samoa is the last of the great cookhouses, and the food is still hearty, served up family style at long red-checked tables; nobody leaves hungry. See chapter 8.
- **A Gourmet Picnic at the Hollywood Bowl:** What better way to spend a typically warm L.A. evening than under the stars with a picnic basket, bottle of wine, and some naturally amplified entertainment. Home of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Bowl hosts visiting performers, ranging from chamber music quartets to jazz greats to folk humorists. The imposing white Frank Lloyd Wright-designed band shell always elicits appreciative gasps from first-time Bowl-goers. See chapter 14.
- **Grand Central Market** (Los Angeles; ☎ 213/624-2378): Fresh-produce stands, exotic-spice-and-condiment vendors, butchers and fishmongers, and prepared-food counters create a noisy, fragrant, vaguely comforting atmosphere in this L.A. mainstay. Prepared foods of every ethnicity are served at counters throughout the market, from chilies rellenos burritos (around \$2) to

a complete Thai plate for under \$5. See chapter 14.

- **A Date with the Coachella Valley:** Some 95% of the world's dates are farmed here. While the groves of date palms make evocative scenery, it's their fruit that draws visitors to the National Date Festival in Indio each February. Amid the Arabian Nights Parade and camel races, you can feast on an array of plump Medjool, amber Deglet Noor, caramel-like Halawy, and buttery Empress dates. The rest of the year, date farms and markets sell dates from the season's harvest, as well as

date milkshakes, date coconut rolls, and more. See "Sweet Desert Treat: The Coachella Valley Date Gardens," in chapter 16.

- **Fish Tacos:** These tasty treats migrated north from Baja California and were popularized in San Diego some 25 years ago by **Rubio's Baja Grill**. Now a sizable chain, Rubio's is still a reliable choice, but better yet are casual fish market/eteries such as **Point Loma Seafoods** (☎ 619/223-1109), **Blue Water Seafood Market and Grill** (☎ 619/497-0914), and **Bay Park Fish Co.** (☎ 619/276-3474). See p. 722.

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## 14 THE BEST PERFORMING ARTS & SPECIAL EVENTS

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- **The San Francisco Opera** (☎ 415/864-3330): The first municipal opera in the U.S., with world-renowned productions and members, performs at the War Memorial Opera House, modeled after the Opéra Garnier in Paris. The season opens with a gala in September and runs through December. See p. 132.
- **The San Francisco Symphony** (☎ 415/864-6000): The symphony is such a hot ticket, it's hard to get a seat in advance. If your concierge doesn't have any tricks up his sleeve, you can try to buy tickets at the door or from someone attempting to sell his at the last second. See p. 132.
- **The American Conservatory Theater** (San Francisco; ☎ 415/749-2-ACT): The A.C.T. is one of the nation's leading regional theaters—the American equivalent of the British National Theatre, the Berliner Ensemble, or the Comédie Française in Paris. See p. 131.
- **The Monterey Jazz Festival** (☎ 831/373-3366): The third weekend of September, the Monterey Fairgrounds

draws jazz fans from around the world. The 3-day festival, known for the sweetest jazz west of the Mississippi, usually sells out a month in advance. See "Calendar of Events," in chapter 3.

- **The Hollywood Bowl** (Los Angeles; ☎ 323/850-2000): This iconic outdoor amphitheater is the summer home of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, a stage for visiting virtuosos—including the occasional pop star—and the setting for splendid fireworks shows. See p. 584.
- **Festival of Arts/Pageant of the Masters** (Laguna Beach): These events draw crowds to the Orange County coast every July and August. Begun in 1932 by a handful of painters, the festival has grown to showcase hundreds of artists. In the evening, crowds marvel at the Pageant of the Masters' *tableaux vivants*, in which costumed townsfolk pose inside a giant frame and depict famous works of art, accompanied by music. See "The South Coast," in chapter 15.

- **The Old Globe Theatre** (San Diego; ☎ 619/234-5623): This Tony Award-winning complex of three theaters has launched Broadway hits such as *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*, *The Full Monty*, and *Into the Woods*, and regularly features major film and TV actors in its casts.

Since its founding more than 70 years ago, the Globe has been associated with the works of William Shakespeare; the outdoor summer Shakespeare Festival features three of the Bard's plays in nightly rotation. See p. 750.