

TRAVEL BOARD

YOUR PASSPORT TO HOLIDAY NIRVANA FROM OUR EXPERTS

Q I'm off to northern California. Obviously, San Fran and LA are on my must-see list, but where else should be on my radar?



HIKE THE BIG SUR

Jamie says:

Sandwiched between mountains and the Pacific, Big Sur is home to some of the most stunning landscapes in North America. The coastal redwoods are among the tallest trees on Earth and, when you gaze up, you'll see huge Californian condors and peregrine falcons (aka the world's fastest bird). Andrew Molera State Park at the mouth of the Big Sur River offers 3-5km hikes through meadows, beaches and sweeping coastal paths (keep your eyes out for a glimpse of blue whales late April to early December). For a more leisurely hike, head to McWay Falls in nearby Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park. This vertiginous waterfall cascades on to the beach, and you can also see the remains of an original homestead.

GO GLAMPING AMONG THE REDWOODS

Lizzie says:

Listen out for owls, bats and other critters when you bed down in the glampsite at Ventana Big Sur (tents from £232pn; alilahotels.com/ventana). Surrounded by towering redwoods, my safari-style tent came with a double bed, electric blankets, bedside lamps and a fire pit for toasting s'mores by moonlight. If that all feels a bit too 'outdoorsy', the suites in Ventana's main buildings (from £483pn) offer roaring fires, huge marble baths and sprawling views of the pounding Big Sur surf.

Dine on delicious Pacific Coast cuisine in The Sur House restaurant, where dishes such as Monterey Bay abalone come with terrific views. The hotel has a great spa and you can also relax in the steamy al fresco pools while marvelling at the twinkling Milky Way.

Nearby Carmel Valley Ranch (from £260pn, carmelvalleyranch.com) is surrounded by lush lavender fields and Pinot Noir vines and has a lovely farmy feel; while Nick's Cove in Marin County (from £260pn; nicks-cove.com) is a quaint collection of old fishermen's cottages clustered around a marooned, rusting ship. Go sea-kayaking in Tomales Bay and you'll glide past seabirds, rare elk and gaggles of rambunctious harbour seals.



Glamping in Ventana Big Sur



FEAST ON SEAFOOD IN MARIN COUNTY

Lizzie says:

Seafood is the order of the day in northern California and you'll find hauls of fresh oysters and shellfish at almost every turn. In Marin County (just north of San Fran) the Hog Island Oyster Company serves up the freshest, most delicious plates accompanied by their moreish 'hog wash' sauce (£13.50 for six; hogislandoysters.com). In Big Sur, you must bag an outside table at Nepenthe (nepenthe.com), which has special burgers and staggering views of condors soaring around the craggy cliffs, while Deetjen's (deetjens.com) is a wonderful nook-and-cranny sort of place serving up hearty risottos, pastas and paella. My very favourite lunch spot, however, is Cultura in nearby Carmel-By-The-Sea on Monterey Peninsula – an authentic Mexican and Mezcal joint decorated with cow skulls, haunting paintings and 'vertebrae art' and known for its queso fondito and kick-ass tacos (culturacarmel.com). ▶



Oysters with 'hog wash' sauce



Incredible views at Nepenthe



Authentic tacos at Cultura



OUR EXPERTS



The naturalist
Jamie Siebold is a naturalist and wilderness guide based at Ventana Big Sur



The writer
Lizzie Pook is a journalist and travel writer. Follow her on Instagram @LizziePook



The local
Emma Westman is PR director at Visit California; visitcalifornia.co.uk

PLAYLIST



Buena Vista is a Cali institution



Discover mindful movement at Hamsa Studio

SELF-CARE IN THE TOPATOPA MOUNTAINS

Emma says:

TEST THE TIPPLES IN WINE COUNTRY

Emma says:

Just north of San Francisco, Sonoma's appeal is its laid-back vibe, which means wine tasting here is totally approachable and relaxed. There's no way you'll feel intimidated talking to the wine-makers here and, more often than not, you'll find your pourer is actually the vineyard owner themselves (as I found at nicholsonranch.com). The first winery I ever went to, Buena Vista, is actually a bit of a must-do as it's one of the oldest wineries in California, set in gorgeous old grounds and you can blend your own wine there too (buenavistawinery.com).

When in Sonoma, I always go to The Barlow in the city of Sebastopol. It's full of local producers and amazing food and drink. My favourite place there is Spirit Works Distillery, a group of badass ladies (an all-female distilling team) who use locally sourced, all-natural ingredients to make gin, vodka and whisky (spiritworksdistillery.com).

For places to stay, Autocamp is a very cool collection of Airstream trailers nestled among the towering redwoods at Russian River (from £120pn; autocamp.com/guides/location/russian-river). Do eat at the restaurant at Farmhouse Inn – for fine dining it does the best food and wine pairing I've ever had (£60pp for a three-course wine pairing; farmhouseinn.com). Just sensational!



Fine dining at the Farmhouse Inn



The Spirit Works Distillery



Ojai, a town in the Topatopa Mountains about 30 minutes' drive inland from Santa Barbara, is known as a 'spiritual vortex'. Here, Ojai Yoga Shala (ojaiyogashala.com) offers yoga classes in different styles, while Soul Body Ojai offers workshops such as New Moon Breathwork and Gong Healing (from about £20pp; soulbodyojai.com). A little further out in the valley is Hamsa Studio, an inspired movement studio with mindfulness-focused events and classes such as soulful yoga, Satsang and meditation and holistic aerobics (£20 for a tourist pass of one week; hamsaojai.com).

For me, a must-visit is always the Integratron, a huge sound-bath therapy dome in the town of Landers that looks a bit like a spaceship. Here, quartz crystal singing bowls are played, each one keyed to the energy centres or chakras of the body. When I went for an hour-long therapy session I fell asleep to the harmonious ringing within minutes. Wonderfully weird (from £26pp; integratron.com).



Rebalance mind and body in Ojai Valley

THE LOWDOWN

Virgin Atlantic flies twice daily from London Heathrow and three times a week from Manchester to San Francisco, with return fares from £518 per person; virginatlantic.com; 0344 8747 747.

