

GET OFF THE BEATEN PATH ON THIS
NORTHERN CALIFORNIA GETAWAY.
HAVE FUN MIXING IT UP – AND PAIR FOOD,
ZINFANDELS AND ZANY THEATER WITH
BICYCLING, SAILING AND TROMPING
THROUGH REDWOOD FORESTS.

JANICE AND GEORGE MUCALOV

California Dreaming





It's an understatement to say that biking across San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge is a dramatic experience.

We certainly don't see any of the talked-about flesh at Fisherman's Wharf. And despite the wharf being on every tourist's radar, we happily while away some time there. We prefer strolling by the rows of small fish restaurants at Pier 45 to the carnival atmosphere of Pier 39, with its children's carousel, buskers and hot dog stands. But there's no denying that the California sea lions, hauled out on the dock and barking boisterously at the end of Pier 39, are worth watching (we count at least 60 flopped about).

We also use our MuniPass (entitling us to unlimited cable car rides) for free admission to the Aquarium of the Bay, home to more than 20,000 marine species. Walking through 300 feet of crystal clear tunnels under the sea, we're as mesmerized as kids at the sevengill and leopard sharks circling overhead and bat rays and giant grouper fish gliding by. In the jelly exhibit, delicate moon jellies pulse and glow in a huge glass tank. And who knew—as we discover—that the Farallon Islands (just 26 miles from San Francisco) are a winter playground for great white sharks feeding on elephant seals! You can even go cage diving with them.

But we're not seeking that kind of "edge." It's exhilarating enough sailing on a large catamaran with Adventure Cat, past the rocky prison island of Alcatraz and under the Golden Gate Bridge. This is no gentle sightseeing granny cruise. We're under sail 90 percent of the time, blasting through white caps on the bay. It's exciting and gives us a real feel for being out on the unprotected Pacific.

Of course, throughout our visit, we eat our way through some of San Fran's great restaurants. Credited with starting the "eat local, eat fresh" movement, San Fran is regularly hailed as one of the best food cities in the world. Even without going near its 23 Michelin-starred restaurants, we're in culinary heaven.

There's the big, bold gastropub of Urban Tavern, where the king salmon with pesto and avocado (served, in an interesting twist, in a broth) delights even us seafood-spoiled Vancouverites. And at SPQR on eclectic Fillmore Street, where the vibe is more fashionable local than tourist, Chef Accarrino packs them in with his inventive and exquisite pastas such as his buckwheat spaghetti with suckling pig ragu and smoked fettuccine with sea urchin, bacon and quail egg. Over at Le Colonial, where rattan furniture and lazily turning fans transport us back to 1920s Indochine, we sample tasty Vietnamese offerings.

To mix it up, we take in *Beach Blanket Babylon* one evening. Held in a 1912 cabaret-style theater, the world's longest running musical revue is a San Francisco institution. Camp, zany and full of big hats and outrageous hairdos, the show satirizes politicians, celebrities and the city—and it's lots of fun. We laugh again another night at Teatro Zinzanni, a dinner theater blending cabaret and circus, where servers dress in fishnet stockings and black lace bustiers, and guests get into the spirit sporting feather boas.

STOPPING TO LEAN AGAINST the rust orange railings, we feel the vibrations of hundreds of cars thundering by. The sharp wind blows strong at this height, and the fog, like a living beast, rolls and claws its way across the dry hilltops opposite. Far below, seemingly tiny sailboats skim across the choppy water. Too chilled to linger longer, we hop back on our bikes—and suddenly, as we roll down into the quaint seaside town of Sausalito, we enter a different microclimate, where the wind abates, the sun shines warm and we look forward to sitting with cappuccinos by the bay.

It's an understatement to say that biking across San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge is a dramatic experience. It doesn't matter how many times you've seen the city's most famous icon in pictures or on TV. Looking up from the bicycle lane at the 746-foot high twin towers anchoring the massive single suspension span, you can't help but be awed at this amazing engineering feat (which is celebrating its 75th anniversary in 2012).

If you think you've "done" San Francisco, think again. The city continues to reinvent itself, revealing new tours and experiences (like our two-wheeling daytrip with Bike and Roll) to discover its many fascinating facets. On our northern California getaway, we want to experience the best of the city, along with a side-trip to Sonoma, but with an edge—not your usual standard trip.

Turns out it's an unusual time for San Fran when we visit. Always a bit unconventional, the city seems to be going through a "naked" stage. Some locals are attracting attention strolling around the streets and going about their lives butt naked (nudity isn't banned in San Francisco). This is relayed to us as we crack whole garlic-roasted crab for dinner at Fog Harbor Fish House at Fisherman's Wharf. The waiter tells us it's probably a passing phase – the nudists will disappear when winter comes. No need to pass an ordinance requiring them to place a towel on park benches or café chairs before sitting down, we agree, soaking up the delicious buttery garlic sauce with crusty sourdough bread.

Above:

Biking across San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge.

Opposite page (clockwise from top):

An iconic cable car on Hyde Street overlooking San Francisco Bay and Alcatraz prison.

Aquarium of the Bay features 300 feet of crystal clear tunnels under the sea.

Sea lions basking on the floating docks at Fisherman's Wharf.

Browsing the fresh seafood stands along Fisherman's Wharf.

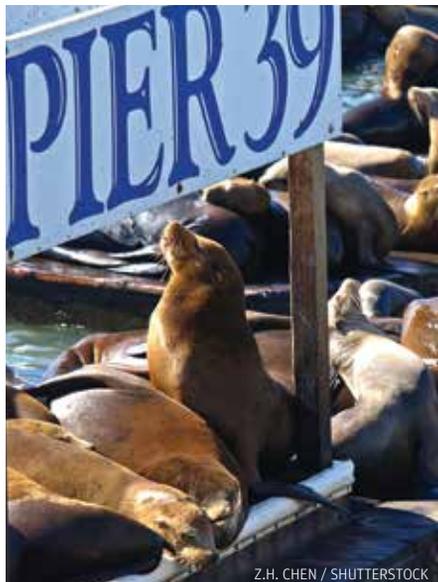


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THEN, BEFORE WE KNOW IT, we're in Sonoma.

About an hour north of San Fran, the Sonoma wine-growing region is more laid-back and less visited than neighboring Napa (where you rub shoulders with up to 25 people at a time, compared to only six to ten visitors in Sonoma's wine tasting rooms). Still, Sonoma's more than 350 wineries pack an intoxicating punch.

Up first? A sip-n-cycle tour with Getaway Adventures up the long finger of Sonoma's bucolic Dry Creek Valley, where the sun-baked hills are reminiscent of Tuscany. Bike intensive or wine intensive? We opt for wine intensive. So on our ten-mile pedal on quiet country roads, we stop often. In red-earth vineyards, our guide explains how the small bonsai-style tree vines, which produce the rich jammy Zinfandel wines for which Dry Creek is famous, are from 30 to 100 years old. They'll yield fewer grapes than young vines, but the wine will be finer and more focused.

We taste test this and other varietals at several wineries. At Zichichi Family Winery, we love the mouthburst explosion of red currants and wild cherries of their 2009 Old Vine Zinfandel (from vines planted in the 1920s). Bella Winery enchants us with its tasting room in a cool, candlelit, cave cellar. Preston Winery has an organic farm and country store too – we sample sourdough bread, which the proprietor bakes fresh each morning in a wood-fired oven, while sipping their flagship Sauvignon Blanc in a farmhouse tasting room filled with antique farming implements.

After all that hard "bicycling," a spa treatment is in order. The Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn & Spa boasts the grande dame of all Sonoma spas. Its swank 40,000 sq. ft. spa has a set of cold and hot mineral pools for a bathing ritual that's included with any treatment. What to have? Lavender facial? Rapeseed body scrub? Chardonnay, olive oil and sugar polish? Too many choices – we settle for a massage.

Another day, we explore by car. We cruise down into the lush Russian River Valley, where vineyard fields flourish below pine-covered hills. At Armstrong Woods State Park, we venture on a short hike through a magnificent forest of ancient coastal redwoods, the world's tallest and oldest living things. Just imagine. The "Colonel Armstrong" tree – named after the early logger who recognized the value of these primordial trees and made it his personal mission to preserve them – is 1,400 years old.

We continue to the Pacific coast. Here, the surf crashes over gigantic black boulders through thick fog, and gnarled wind-slanted trees grow at a 45 degree angle. A totally different, permanently misty world, and only 45 minutes from wine country!

Looping back, we hit Coleman Valley Road. Truly a road less traveled, it must be one of the world's most beautiful drives. While paved, its one lonely lane is more a goat track snaking past arbutus trees, shaggy cows and a magical palette of sunlight-diffused colors. It connects with the Bohemian Wine Trail, 11 miles of asphalt meandering by the pastoral hamlets of Occidental and Monte Rio, with their organic markets, cheese boutiques and funky wine shops.

Sadly, one thing we notice on this trip is our expanding waistlines. Can't be helped though. Sonoma's restaurants rival those in San Fran. Lovely Healdsburg – awash in magnolia trees, high-end boutiques and art galleries – is particularly well-known for its top-notch eateries. There's Dry Creek Kitchen, where celebrity chef owner Charlie Palmer serves curry-spiced, purple cauliflower soup poured over plump deep-fried shrimp. Zin's fried green tomato salad uses veggies pulled from their garden, and their hot peach-and-pear crisp gets rave reviews.

Our last night is saved for Santé, the Fairmont's fine dining restaurant. It's won a coveted Michelin star for the past two years. Devouring the OMG mac-and-cheese with succulent lobster and black truffles, we understand why. Mixing up the tried-and-true with the unexpected is a genuine pleasure, just like our northern California getaway. ■



Above: Old vine Zinfandel grapes.

Right: Succulent fare at Santé, the Fairmont Sonoma's fine dining restaurant.

Opposite page (clockwise from top):

Scenic driving through the vineyards and hills of the Sonoma Valley.

Browsing the charming art galleries and boutiques of Healdsburg.

The rugged Sonoma Coast at the mouth of the Russian River.

Wine tasting at one of Sonoma's 350 wineries.



SONOMA

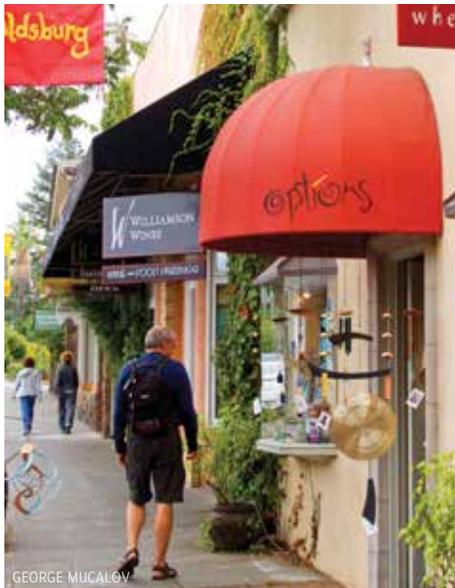
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