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T H E
SEARCH
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JEWELS
A N D
G E M S

FROM ABANDONED MINES
TO THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA
THE QUEST CONTINUES

weekend Getaway

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Hotel Cheval in Horse Country

El Paso de Robles (“The pass of the oaks” in Spanish, “Paso” to residents) is not only a convenient midpoint between San Francisco and Santa Barbara, but its original cowboy district has been restored to wine country refinement, largely through the vision of a Montecito couple: **Sherry** and **Robert Gilson**. About eight years ago, they began buying historic buildings in downtown Paso Robles and renovating them, including the elegant Hotel Cheval on Pine Street. “We adopt old buildings and rescue them,” Robert explains.

The Big Sur coastline, as enjoyed from the vantage of Rocky Point Restaurant

For the hotel, Sherry scoured the Provencal countryside in France for antiques, in some cases, snapping up items just ahead of Ralph Lauren, who was also in pursuit of similar items. Artisans from Paso and Santa Barbara were engaged to recreate original designs as needed. In our suite, we found wrought iron lamps adapted from vintage stable-door handles. An arresting articulated horse from France dominates a table in the library, and antique coach-lights illuminate gents' and ladies' rooms.



The cobblestone courtyard off the lobby suggests a small French equestrian village. Cozy areas include three stone hearths with wood-burning fireplaces. Each room is named for a celebrated racehorse. We learn that Highflyer, the 1774 steed after which our room is named, was the greatest stallion of his era.

At four o'clock, local denizens and travelers alike drift into the Pony Club Bar, with its horseshoe-shaped French zinc bar, to share convivial conversation over a bottle of Zinfandel and small bites. As one would expect,

the bar's wine list strongly champions Paso's premium wines. Thursday evenings, the hotel offers a chance to click goblets with area wine-makers.

Contributing to the romance of the hostelry is the hotel's horse, Chester, who ferries guests to and from local restaurants. The horse has become something of a beloved town character. Adding to the hotel's attractions is Paso's proximity to Hearst Castle, just 45 minutes away, offering one the perfect beginning (or ending) to a Euro-styled getaway.

Views from an Urban Yacht

Our base for exploring San Francisco is a few minutes across the bay at Inn Above Tide in Sausalito. Smart, urbane and comfortable, the hotel offers water views from each of its twenty-nine small suites. We could easily be in a small hotel in Amsterdam, or off the Grande Place in Brussels, particularly after a fireside continental breakfast that includes a croissant that could have come directly from a bakery on the Left Bank of Paris.

A pleasant bike ride (or short drive) across the Golden Gate Bridge leads to a stunning municipal golf course or, as in our case, a visit to the imposing Legion of Honor Art Museum. On view through June is "Artistic Luxury," a rare collection of original designs from Tiffany, Lalique, and Fabergé.

In Sausalito, we dined at Piccolo Teatro, a low-key place that features small plates and good wine. No worries about the evening chill. Heaters and warm lap blankets are cheerfully provided at outside tables.

Hotel Cheval in Paso Robles was carefully restored by Sherry and Robert Gilson, a Montecito couple

Dominating the Sausalito headlands is the Inn at Cavallo Point, the former 1940's Army barracks that has been transformed into an upscale inn and restaurant. Here, Chef **Joseph Humphrey**, formerly of Meadowood's elegantly rustic restaurant in Napa, attracts the cognoscenti.

L'Auberge Carmel

It is now Sunday morning, and intermittent rain makes us reluctant to leave our cozy European inn, but we were looking forward to the dramatic seascapes to be found in Carmel and Big Sur, just two-and-a-half hours south.



In 1929, it is said, a Carmel resident fell in love with a stylish small apartment building in Prague. Determined to replicate it, he acquired the plans and hired a local architect and builder. The result is L'Auberge Carmel, a 20-room Chateaux & Relais inn, blocks from the silver surf of Carmel Beach, and a few quiet streets away from village shops and boutiques.

Christophe Grosjean is the hotel's chef and **Thomas Perez** the engaging and gifted sommelier. Until recently, the pair wowed the elite at Bernardus, another charming inn in Carmel Valley. Although an alluring à la carte dinner menu is offered, when Thomas asked if we would like the chef to cook for us, and for Thomas to pair wines with each course, our answer was a quick "Yes!"

Among our favorites were:

Red abalone and green garlic risotto with bergamot and toasted almond milk, paired with 2007 King Estate Pinot Gris;

Braised cardoons (a thistle-like cousin to the artichoke) and duck, with Brussels sprouts and chanterelles, paired with Santa Barbara County 2006 Tantara Solomon Vineyard Pinot Noir;

Sparkling carrot consommé and Dungeness crab, which prompted Thomas to confess that he had "struggled a week to find the right wine." His choice: a lovely 2007 Vouvray from the Loire region.

Rocky Point Restaurant at Big Sur is an excellent place from which to watch for whales and otters frolicking just off the shore

The Big Sur Coast

The drive from Carmel to Big Sur is only forty minutes or so. But among the iconic sights to pull off for are Big Sur Lighthouse, Pfeiffer Big Sur Beach and the haunting Bixby Bridge, built by convicts in 1932.

Before you pity the poor convicts, reflect that for each day of labor their sentence was commuted by three days.

Just north of the bridge, the sign for Rocky Point Restaurant calls us, as it has on past journeys. For whale and otter sightings, you can't beat the dining room with full windows on the surf. A bowl of homemade chowder and a short hike over its headlands is a welcome break.

A unique blend of Zen – California style – and rustic sophistication awaits us at Ventana Inn & Spa. Our spacious and luxurious "cot-

The cottages at Ventana Inn provide every modern amenity while offering the peace and tranquility of Big Sur

tage" has its own in-deck hot tub. We immediately scramble into our swimsuits and robes, pop a half-bottle of champagne and head for the deck. Looking out over tranquil meadows and ocean, we are uncertain who are the more curious onlookers: us, or the keen-eyed wild turkeys grazing below.

The resort's Allegria spa promotes sensory relaxation before a cozy fire. We were seduced by such treatments as "Gentlemen's Destresser" and "Santa Lucia Grape Veil." Don't try this at home!

Dinner is a positive surprise. Until the formal restaurant re-opens in July 2009, dinner is served in the cozy bistro off the lobby. But there is no compromise. Anticipating the Pinot Noir we selected might overpower our first course of smoked quail and lobster salad, our waiter brings us a lively unfiltered local Viognier. He is right. Wine and dish are perfect.

Returning to Montecito after only five days and a little over a thousand "kilometers," we felt our spirits restored and our senses revived by getting to know some of the coast's small inns and emerging cuisine. Such are the benefits of European travel, California style.

