

March 22, 2024 · The Journal / Travel Inspiration

An Insider's Guide to Where to Eat, Stay & Play on a California Coast Road Trip

 SHARE



Travel Advisor

Gregory Rhoney

[CONTACT GREGORY](#)



Image courtesy of 1 Hotel West Hollywood

A perfect road trip requires great views and even better stops along the way. Driving down the California coast checks both boxes; it's difficult to think of a better road trip route in the U.S. There are many ways to go about this, but the following route is a tried-and-true favorite.

Start in Los Angeles. From there, you'll make your way up to Santa Barbara, through Big Sur and Carmel and end in San Francisco. The best part is that the route offers a little bit of everything: big cities and coastal villages, natural scenery and urban jungles, rustic escapes and ritzy getaways. You can certainly extend your trip. For example, start further south in San Diego. Or, take a detour to Napa Valley.

Below is a sampling of places to stay, things to do and where to eat on your road trip. This by no means is an exhaustive list, and the best part about road trips is that you get to go at your own pace. You can stop here, skip that, linger there. You are in control. When you connect with me, I'll provide a more tailored itinerary complete with suggestions specific to your preferences. But in the meantime, consider the below a little travel inspiration to get the creative juices flowing.

Need to know:

Airports: Los Angeles International Airport (LAX), San Francisco International Airport (SFO)

Transportation: Rent whichever car your heart desires. I can help you book this.

Best time to visit: The beauty of California is that virtually any time of year brings great weather. In Northern California, it does get a bit wetter and chillier in the winter, but spring and early summer, as well as fall, are particularly lovely. No matter the season, layers are always a good idea (for example, even in the summer, temperatures drop at nighttime in the desert climates).

Ideal length of stay: At a minimum, three to five days, depending on how long or far you want to go. A week is more the sweet spot: make sure you leave time for spontaneity. Now is not the time to rush.

Dress code: Comfy car clothes (if you're feeling fancy, throw in an ascot), linen overalls with Birkenstocks, ample hiking gear and some light layers for anywhere other than Southern California.

Los Angeles & Santa Monica

LA and the neighboring Santa Monica offer something for everyone. There are beaches, of course, as well as Santa Monica's whimsical pier. There are Michelin-Starred restaurants, local gems, breezy cafés and food trucks representing an impressive array of cultures. The shopping is top-notch, as is the nightlife. When you visit, it's difficult not to inhabit some of the area's laid-back vibes.



Image courtesy of Shutters on the Beach

Where to stay in LA & Santa Monica

1 Hotel West Hollywood: An eco-chic oasis that marries luxury and sustainability. For a Perks include \$100 hotel credit, \$60 daily breakfast credit, an upgrade and extended check-in/out.

Oceana Santa Monica: A luxurious Santa Monica stay comprised exclusively of suites. Book with me to snag VIP Hilton Impresario partner perks like \$100 hotel credit, breakfast daily for two and an upgrade.

Fairmont Miramar Hotels & Bungalows: A historic beachfront stay that harks back to early Hollywood glamor. Book with me to unlock Accor STEP partner perks, including hotel credit, a welcome amenity, breakfast daily for two, an upgrade and extended check-in/out.

Shutters on the Beach: Playful New-England chic with a privileged beachfront location. For a perks include \$100 food / beverage credit, breakfast daily, an upgrade and extended check-in/out.

Casa del Mar: Beachy vibes, a Mediterranean aesthetic and local art characterize this serene Santa Monica retreat. Book with me to receive \$100 food / beverage credit, \$80 daily breakfast credit, an upgrade and extended check-in/out.

Santa Monica Proper: Exceptionally chic, with an eye for breezy design and an Ayurvedic spa. When you book with me, you'll receive \$50 hotel credit, \$50 daily breakfast credit, an upgrade and extended check-in/out.

Palihouse West Hollywood: Boutique luxury in WeHo, a hip neighborhood full of energy. For a's exclusive Palisociety partner perks include a welcome amenity, an upgrade and extended check-in/out.

L'Ermitage Beverly Hills: A discreet, under-the-radar hit with sophisticated taste. For a's partner perks include \$100 food / beverage credit, daily breakfast for two, an upgrade and extended check-in/out.

The Maybourne Beverly Hills: Effortlessly Californian, with curated artwork and a west-coast Dante outpost. Book with me to unlock \$100 hotel credit, \$45 daily breakfast credit, an upgrade and extended check-in/out.

Beverly Wilshire, A Four Seasons Hotel: A luxury icon with an ideal location. When you book Four Seasons with me, you'll enjoy exclusive Four Seasons Preferred Partner amenities. I'll be pleased to give you more details.

The Peninsula Beverly Hills: An elegant stay with a rooftop garden and afternoon tea. For a's VIP PenClub partner perks include \$100 hotel credit, a welcome amenity, breakfast daily for two, a guaranteed upgrade and check-in/out anytime (as early as 6 am and as late as 10 pm).

The Beverly Hills Hotel: A classic for a reason; the neighborhood was named after the hotel. For a's exclusive Dorchester Diamond Club perks include \$100 hotel credit, daily breakfast for two, an upgrade and extended check-in/out.

What to do in LA & Santa Monica

When in Santa Monica, its famed pier is a must, if only to stroll along the nearby stretch of beach. Window shop along Rodeo Drive, rent a bike and ride along the coast ([Boardwalk Bike Rentals](#) is right off the pier) or embark on any one of the numerous hikes in the area, which always afford stunning views. If you're into art, [The Getty](#), [Hammer Museum](#), the [Museum of Contemporary Art](#) (MOCA), [The Broad](#) and the [Gagosian](#) do not disappoint.

Where to eat in LA & Santa Monica

Get your matcha or coffee fix at [La La Land Café](#), your wellness fix at the famed organic mecca [Erewhon Market](#) and your traditional-Italian-deli fix at [Bay Cities Italian Deli & Bakery](#). Locals love [SUGARFISH](#) for fresh sushi that adheres strictly to Nozawa tradition (no rolls here) and [Huckleberry Café](#) for pastries and satisfying (and fresh) deli fare. Head to the [Cheese Store](#), in Beverly Hills, for curated cheese boards and tasty bites. [Funke](#) is a foodie's paradise offering hand-made pasta, while [Sushi Note Omakase](#) is a new 14-seat restaurant serving a 20-course meal highlighting the finest Japanese ingredients. Other top picks include [Capo](#), an intimate, art-filled Italian gem; [Cassia](#), a stylish French-Asian brasserie; [Felix](#), which serves California-fresh pizza, pasta and verdure; and [Gjusta](#), a beloved Venice deli the baklava croissants are mandatory. (And don't miss Venice's casual sister restaurant [Gjelina](#), for market-driven cuisine served morning 'til night.)

Santa Barbara

The drive from LA to Santa Barbara, on a decent travel day, can take just under two hours (but always allow an LA-traffic buffer). Santa Barbara offers the best of both worlds: mountains and beach. Nature lovers will be especially happy here. The natural landscape is stunning (and perfect for hikes). It's no surprise the area, especially Montecito, is such a celebrity magnet. Expect rolling vineyards, luxury everything, farm-to-table cuisine and a glamorous vibe.

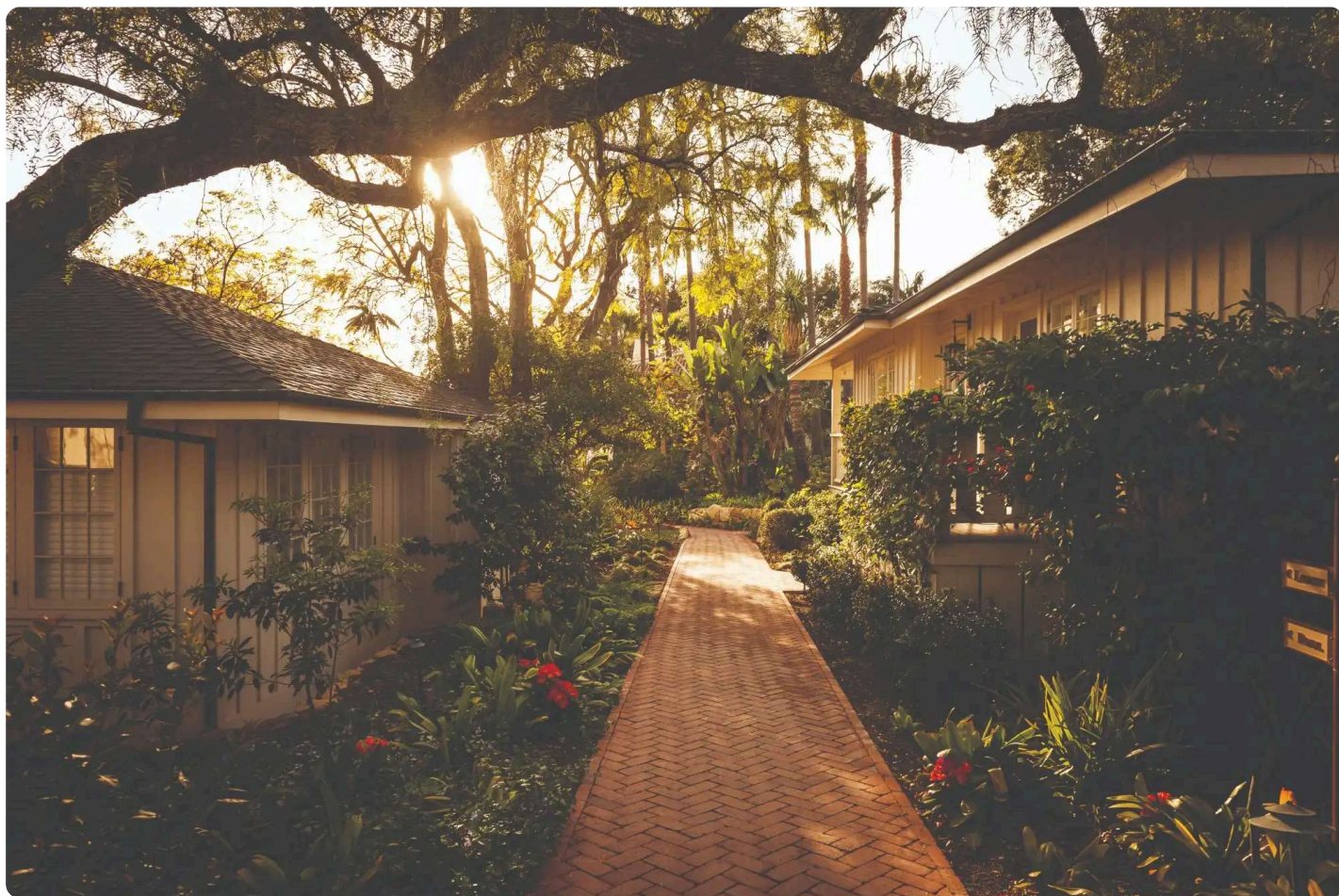


Image courtesy of El Encanto, A Belmond Hotel, Santa Barbara

Where to stay in Santa Barbara

El Encanto, A Belmond Hotel, Santa Barbara: Elegant, Spanish-inspired accommodations, five-star service and farm-to-table dining make this hillside retreat one of Santa Barbara's chicest escapes. Fora's VIP Belmond Bellini perks include \$90 hotel credit, welcome amenities, daily breakfast for two and an upgrade.

Rosewood Miramar Beach: An airy, sophisticated beachfront stay with locally sourced dining, a spa and bicycles for rent. Book with me to unlock Rosewood Elite perks.

San Ysidro Ranch: An exclusive stay comprised of 38 cottages among citrus and olive groves. Book with me to snag \$100 hotel credit, breakfast daily, an upgrade and extended check-in/out.

Palihouse Santa Barbara: A charming 24-room getaway with a garden café and cocktail bar. Fora's exclusive Palisociety partner perks include a welcome amenity, an upgrade and extended check-in/out.

Four Seasons Resort The Biltmore Santa Barbara (reopening fall 2024): Laid-back luxury in a nature-filled enclave. When you book Four Seasons with me, you'll enjoy exclusive Four Seasons Preferred Partner amenities. I'll be pleased to give you more details.

What to do in Santa Barbara

Santa Barbara is a hiker's paradise. The combination of beaches and mountains here is unmatched, and makes for the perfect active environment. The famed Funk Zone is a hip area marked by contemporary galleries, boutiques, tasting rooms and graffiti murals. The [Santa Barbara Museum Of Art](#) shows work spanning five centuries, from numerous cultures. For an extra dose of nature, head to [Lotusland](#) and the [Santa Barbara Botanic Garden](#), which are brimming with exotic plants and native flora, respectively.

Where to eat in Santa Barbara

Satisfy your sweet tooth at [Rori's Artisanal Creamery](#), where everything — cones, cookies, candies — is homemade. Caruso's, at the Rosewood, serves locally sourced, Michelin-Starred cuisine inspired by Italy and California's bounty. The vegetarian hotspot [Oliver's](#) offers gourmet fare like wild mushroom tostadas and heirloom tomatoes paired with macadamia ricotta, while [Bettina's](#) is a fun neighborhood joint known for their naturally leavened pizzas. Santa Barbara boasts some excellent Mexican food. The hip, buzzy [Santo Mezcal](#) and the no-frills [La Super-Rica Taqueria](#) are great options. Try the farm-to-table Spanish cuisine at [Loquita](#), and the flavorful mix of French and Ethiopian food at [Petit Valentin](#). Head to [Convivo Restaurant & Bar](#) for an elevated Italian dinner with a view. For Southeast Asian cuisine served in a warm, inviting space, [SamaSama](#) is a must. And for well-sourced seafood, you can't go wrong with [Boathouse at Hendry's Beach](#).

Big Sur & Carmel

About five hours up the coast from Santa Barbara is Big Sur, which stretches from Carmel to San Simeon. Big Sur is known for its rugged coastline and sublime ocean views. It's a must on any Californian road trip. In fact, its winding road that lines the coast is a landmark in and of itself. State parks and lush mountains call for hiking and camping, while charming coastal towns offer inviting boutique shops and cozy restaurants. Exploring this area of the Californian coast provides a lovely, more low-key contrast to your previous urban stops.



Image courtesy of Post Ranch Inn

Where to stay in Big Sur & Carmel

Post Ranch Inn: An adults-only cliffside resort where sprawling suites come *sans* television and with giant windows framing the stunning natural surroundings. Book with me to unlock \$100 resort credit, breakfast daily for two, an upgrade and extended check-in/out.

Alila Ventana Big Sur: An all-inclusive retreat that helps guests get in touch with nature and themselves. Fora's VIP Hyatt Privé perks include \$100 resort credit, a welcome amenity, breakfast daily for two, an upgrade and extended check-in/out.

Carmel Valley Ranch: 500 acres with activities galore. Fora's VIP Hyatt Privé perks include \$100 resort credit, a welcome amenity, breakfast daily for two, an upgrade and early check-in.

Villa Mara Carmel: Boutique luxury with 16 rooms and a minimalist-chic aesthetic. Connect with me to see how I can level up your stay here.

What to do in Big Sur & Carmel

Big Sur is a natural playground. Hike, go for a jog, forest bathe and marvel at the region's beauty. If you don't know where to start, Point Lobos State Natural Reserve is a fool-proof option. Photographers Edward Weston and Ansel Adams favored the area. In Carmel, wander among the town's numerous art galleries, boutiques and wine-tasting rooms. History buffs will enjoy the [Carmel Mission](#), a restored 18th-century church, while outdoors enthusiasts will want to explore the various jogging routes, perfect for a run by the coast. After a day of activity, unwind at the heavenly [Refuge Spa](#).

Where to eat in Big Sur & Carmel

The rustic [Big Sur Bakery](#) serves wood-fired sourdough and locally sourced nourishment out of an intimate ranch-style home. The stylish Sierra Mar, Post Ranch Inn's cliffside restaurant, is ideal for a romantic evening accompanied by gourmet farm-to-table fare and an extensive wine list. The tasting-menu gem [Aubergine](#) is cozy and stylish, and their dessert game is strong. At the family-run [Cultura Carmel](#), Oaxaca's rich culinary tradition takes center stage, complete with meticulously sourced ingredients. And at the quaint, rustic-chic [Casanova](#), you'll be treated to French-Italian cuisine served by an incredibly warm, inviting staff.

San Francisco

Depending on traffic, the drive from Carmel to San Francisco will likely take anywhere from two to four hours. But it will be worth it: San Francisco's eclectic personality and dynamism cannot be matched. The city is a technological hub, but also boasts a slate of unique neighborhoods — from the historic Haight-Ashbury to the posh Pacific Heights and so much more — whose restaurants, boutiques and bars confer a distinct local feel. Here, you can get both your big-city fix and encounter that small-town, neighborhoody feel that makes SF so special.



Image courtesy of San Francisco Proper

Where to stay in San Francisco

1 Hotel San Francisco: Nature-inspired serenity in the heart of the Embarcadero. Fora's VIP partner perks include \$100 food / beverage or spa credit, \$30 daily breakfast credit, an upgrade and extended check-in/out.

Palihotel San Francisco: A hip spot with a cool local vibe. Fora's exclusive partner perks include a welcome amenity, an upgrade and extended check-in/out.

Four Seasons Hotel San Francisco: Centrally located sophistication with a top-tier concierge team. When you book Four Seasons with me, you'll enjoy exclusive Four Seasons Preferred Partner amenities. I'll be pleased to give you more details.

San Francisco Proper: The Proper's flagship property, punctuated with tastefully vibrant textures and colors. Book with me to receive \$25 food / beverage credit, welcome treats, an upgrade and late check-out.

What to do in San Francisco

Kids and anyone looking to indulge their curiosity will love San Francisco's [Exploratorium](#), an interactive museum that allows visitors to probe everything from astronomy and chemistry to perception and physics. The [Yerba Buena Center for the Arts](#) displays contemporary work and champions community, while the [de Young Museum](#), in Golden Gate Park, shows art from the 17th century up to the present. View the Golden Gate Bridge from [Presidio National Park](#), and explore the area's hiking trails and walking paths. Unwind with a well-deserved [Tata Harper facial](#) at Credo Beauty, or with a massage at the zen [SenSpa](#).

Where to eat in San Francisco

If San Francisco is known for anything, it's food. The city is blessed by fresh Californian produce and vibrant global influences. Head to the stylish mainstay [Flour + Water](#) for delectable pastas and wood-fired pizza. If you're craving more pasta, [SPQR](#), a gem of a space with a well-curated menu, more than delivers. The beloved [Nopa](#) is a farm-to-table classic. (Its sister restaurant [Nopalita](#) is great for nourishing Mexican food in casual digs.) [Quince](#), with its three Michelin Stars, is a destination in and of itself, as is [Mister Jiu's](#), whose contemporary Chinese tasting menu reflects the region's seasonal bounty. Head to the Michelin-Starred [State Bird Provisions](#) for a dim-sum-style cuisine served in a sleek, laid-back space. [Kokkari Estiatorio](#) makes you feel as though you've been transported to Greece. And the sexy [mourad](#) puts a refined spin on Moroccan cuisine.

This may be information overload, but that's where I come in. Above is just a taste of all that the California coast offers. Connect with me for a tailored trip. I'll work to understand your vibe and what you're after, and design your dream California road trip, complete with VIP perks and priority status at the state's best hotels. Cali's calling, and I've got your back.

Get in touch with Gregory

Reach out for travel inspiration, hotel bookings or customized itineraries.

Please provide some details about your trip.

You can expect a response from Gregory within 1–2 business days. You'll also be subscribed to our traveler newsletter (you can unsubscribe at any time).

CONTACT GREGORY



FOR TRAVEL ADVISORS

BECOME AN ADVISOR

TRAVEL ADVISOR RESOURCES

TRAVEL ADVISOR FAQ

COMMUNITY STORIES

ADVISOR PORTAL [↗](#)

FOR TRAVELERS

HOT LIST 2026

WHY BOOK WITH FORA

OUR COMPANY

ABOUT US

THE JOURNAL

GROUPS

ADVISOR RESOURCES

TRAVEL DESTINATIONS

NEWSROOM

TRAVEL GUIDES & TRIP REPORTS

PRESS

TRAVEL CATEGORIES

CAREERS

ALL TRAVEL ADVISORS

CONTACT US

CENTUM

PARTNER WITH US

PARTNERS

FORA MEXICO

REVIEWS

FORA CANADA

FAQ

NEWSLETTER

Stay in-the-know with travel recs, hotel features & travel advisor news.

SUBSCRIBE TO OUR NEWSLETTER

FOLLOW US



© 2026 Fora Travel, Inc. All Rights Reserved

Fora Travel, Inc. is registered with the following state licenses:

California - Seller of Travel Registration No. 2151995-50

Florida - Seller of Travel Registration No. ST43973

Washington - Seller of Travel Unified Business ID (UBI) # 605329242

British Columbia - CPBC License No. 88694

Ontario - TICO Registration No. 50027942

PRIVACY POLICY • TERMS OF USE • SITE OVERVIEW

Travel
by Foran