



*Sunset*

---

# Travel Guide

Best of CA's Central Coast: San Luis Obispo Hotels,  
Paso Robles Wineries, and More 2010



# Sunset Travel Guide



## Savor fine wines & classic beach towns

- 3** | San Luis Obispo:  
The most Californian place in all of California
- 4** | Paso Robles:  
The West's most unpretentious and enjoyable wine region
- 7** | Cambria charms:  
Savor a weekend of ocean, pines, and pie
- 9** | Getting real on Morro Bay:  
Just outside SLO, things still feel truly authentic
- 11** | Edna Valley wines:  
Wander through this quirky, unassuming wine region just south of San Luis Obispo
- 13** | Wines 'n' waves: Avila Beach:  
Farm country meets the shore in this charming (and much overlooked) Central Coast town
- 15** | Sleep by the sea:  
Our favorite lodging on and near the coast
- 17** | Travel resources



Just another delightful day in SLO  
**RIGHT** The farmers' market scene



# San Luis Obispo

The most Californian place in all of California

A historic mission town set among rolling hills halfway between San Francisco and Los Angeles, SLO buzzes with undergraduate energy, thanks to California Polytechnic State University. The Edna Valley wine country is a few minutes south, and the coast is 10 minutes west by car or, as many in this relentlessly fit community prefer, 30 minutes by bike.

And the climate? Well, let's see, how do you describe a place that's as ideal for people

as it is for wine grapes? Where the annual average monthly highs range all the way from 62° to 74°?

Oh, that's right: Perfect.

SLO is a town of 44,359 people who live outdoors, whether on the trail that winds through the oak forests and meadows on Bishop Peak or along the shaded downtown banks of its restored creek.

Some of its best neighborhoods—where

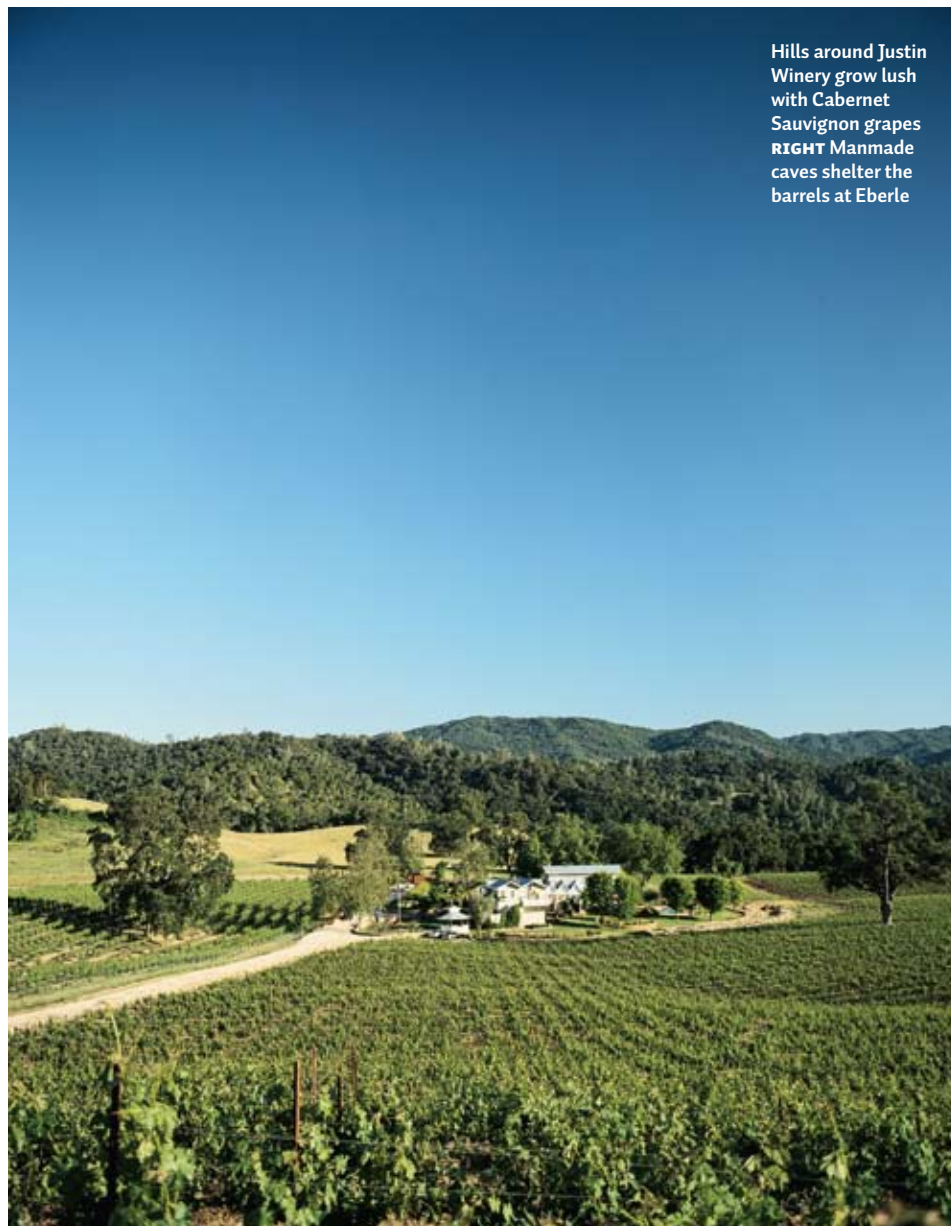
the streets are lined by a mix of Queen Annes and Spanish bungalows—sit within a few blocks of the back patio at the local coffee-house classic, Linnaea's Cafe, or the eclectic offerings of the Palm TheatRE, the only solar-powered picture show in the country.

And all year long, Thursday's evening farmers' market sends the scent of barbecued tri-tip (and a soundtrack of live blues) across the tidy urban landscape.

People often talk about California as a state of mind. Well, in San Luis Obispo it's also a way of life.

## Make a visit

San Luis Obispo is 12 miles inland from the coast on U.S. 101, 190 miles north of Los Angeles and 230 miles south of San Francisco. Amtrak's Coast Starlight and Pacific Surfliner ([amtrak.com](http://amtrak.com) or 800/872-7245) both stop here. The local airport is served by American Eagle, Delta Connection, United Express, and U.S. Air-ways, with direct connections to and from Los Angeles, San Francisco, Sacramento, Phoenix, and Salt Lake City. *More visitor info:* [visitslo.com](http://visitslo.com)



Hills around Justin Winery grow lush with Cabernet Sauvignon grapes  
**RIGHT** Manmade caves shelter the barrels at Eberle



# Paso Robles

The West's most unpretentious and enjoyable wine region

Drive any Paso Robles backroad in spring, and you remember why you love California. Here are the rolling hills, deep green at this time of year with firecracker flashes of oranges and purples from poppies and lupine.

Cattle graze the hills—after all, ranching was king in this part of San Luis Obispo County for generations. And there are wide-spreading oaks—the Spanish didn't name this “oak pass” for nothing. But in between

the oaks and the pastures are vineyards, just leafing out, running with geometric precision across the sinuously curving landscape.

Paso Robles has become one of California's most exciting wine regions. Twelve years ago, there were perhaps 35 wineries here. Today there are more than 200. And the wines they make are garnering increasing acclaim.

But Paso Robles—call it simply “Paso” if you want to sound like a local—is also a wine

region that holds to its own particular style. Paso Robles is the wine country for people who like great dining and welcoming inns, but also like open roads and no crowds, who want to talk with the winemaker in the tasting room, who still—and we know who we are—have to practice a couple of times before asking for “Viognier.” A wine region for the rest of us.

## The biggest wine country

The strategy for the perfect day of wine tasting in Paso Robles is that you don't need a strategy. But you do need to make one decision, and it is this: east from the town of Paso Robles or west, because the region's wineries divide themselves pretty neatly that way.

Head east first, following State 46 as it crosses the Salinas River to lope toward the San Joaquin Valley. It won't take more than a mile before you understand one thing that makes Paso different: This is the most spacious of California wine regions. It's partly a matter of sheer size—the Paso Robles appellation takes in 610,000 acres—and partly a matter of topography. Most other wine regions, it dawns on you, are tidy little valleys. Paso is not. This wine country extends from the Santa Lucia Mountains on the west to the Temblor Range on the east, and stretches north and south with only the horizon to stop it.

There are a lot of good east-side wineries to choose from. You'll want to try a Syrah at Eberle Winery—its founder, Gary Eberle, is more or less responsible for introducing the grape to California. One of our favorite big players is J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines, which occupies gracefully rolling terrain not far from Paso Robles' tiny airport. The “J.” of J. Lohr, Jerry Lohr began planting vineyards here in the 1980s and has seen the region go from unknown to underappreciated to applauded.

Jason Haas at Tablas Creek  
**RIGHT** The wine library at  
Justin Winery



The east side of Paso, Lohr explains, is known for its hot days and cold nights—the 40° temperature swings here are some of the biggest in California. This climate shapes the east side’s richly red Zinfandels, Cabs, and Syrahs. Ideally, Lohr says, Paso wines “have a really full, rich fruit flavor without an oversupply of tannins.”

### A small town going upscale

As for the town of Paso Robles, for generations it was one of California’s classic ranch towns, a dependably laid-back outpost of saddleries, feed stores, and John Deere dealerships. “I remember when we first got here,” says Justin Baldwin, an L.A. expatriate who with his wife, Deborah, operates Justin Vineyards & Winery. “Fine dining was the bowling alley. Specifically, the tuna melt.”

But the town of Paso Robles is changing too. Downtown Paso retains the stolid look

of a successful small town. Arranged around a handsome central square, it holds blocks of historic buildings. If you’re looking for a classic dining experience, the old Paso Robles Inn has been spruced up, with a good steakhouse and a cheerful coffee shop.

But there are more urbane options too. Vinoteca is a chic wine bar that wouldn’t be out of place in Napa. With an exemplary list of local wines, Villa Creek is a hangout for vintners. Not far away is a good French restaurant, Bistro Laurent. Proof that in today’s Paso Robles, *joie de vivre* extends beyond the tuna melt.

### Into the west

On your second day, you can head west from Paso Robles on Chimney Rock Road into the cooler, steeper reaches of the Santa Lucia Mountains and the vineyards that call themselves the Far Out Wineries of Paso Robles.

The name somehow echoes Tolkien, and you feel you’ve entered Middle Earth as you twist and turn past hillside vineyards.

This is a world of smaller producers, crafting Cabs, Syrahs, and white Rhône varieties that are among the best in the state. One of the pioneers is Justin Winery. The first Paso winery to break into *Wine Spectator* magazine’s Top 100 list, it has acquired a cult following for “Isosceles,” an outside Bordeaux-style blend. Outside, too, are Justin’s luxuries: The winery compound includes a European-inspired inn and a first-rate restaurant, Deborah’s Room.

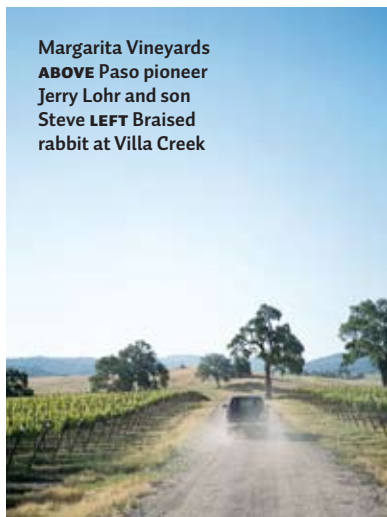
A few bends of the road away is Tablas Creek Vineyard. Many Paso vintners are working with Rhône grapes, but only Tablas Creek is co-owned by a real Rhône wine family—the Perrins, who own the famous Château de Beaucastel in Châteauneuf-du-Pape. With their partners the Haas family, they landed in Paso after scouring much of California for the chalky soil they needed for their red and white blends.

Jason Haas joined the winery about eight years back, after graduate school in classical archeology. Moving with his wife from Washington, D.C., to Paso Robles stirred some culture shock, he says, but not for long. “I love what I’m doing,” Haas says, “and I couldn’t do it anywhere else. We arrived in April and we were amazed. By the sense of space. The air. The light.”

Space. Air. Light. Those are, again, what differentiate Paso from other regions. And what may keep it special. European inns, French bistros—they’re enticing, but they



**Margarita Vineyards**  
**ABOVE** Paso pioneer  
 Jerry Lohr and son  
 Steve **LEFT** Braised  
 rabbit at Villa Creek



make you worry. Part of what makes Paso Robles so much fun is that it isn't too fancy, too precious, too perfect.

But talk to the locals and those worries mostly melt away. "Most of the people you ask think the wineries are a good thing," says Doug Filipponi, a third-generation county rancher who now doubles as grower and winemaker. "It's brought a lot into the community."

So maybe Paso is onto something. Drive out State 46, or up Chimney Rock Road, and you'll see the vineyards and also the grazing cows, the future and still the past, sophistication and simplicity. For now, in Paso, anything is possible. Like spring, it's all just beginning.

### Wining

For more information on wine touring, contact the **Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance** ([www.pasowine.com](http://www.pasowine.com) or 800/549-9463).

**Eberle Winery.** Syrah king Gary Eberle's east-side winery has 16,000 square feet of caves and a sweeping view from the deck—perfect for a picnic. *No tasting fee, free tours*; 3810 State 46 E.; [www.eberlewinery.com](http://www.eberlewinery.com) or 805/238-9607.

**J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines.** Make a point to taste from the family's Hilltop Vineyard, viewable from the light-filled tasting room. *\$.50 tasting fee for Cuvée wines; other tastings free*; 6169 Airport Rd.; [www.jlohr.com](http://www.jlohr.com) or 805/239-8900.

**Justin Vineyards & Winery.** It's famous for its "Isosceles" blend, but don't neglect the

other offerings. (Also see *Sleep by the sea*, page 15). *Tours and tastings from \$10*; 11680 Chimney Rock Rd.; [www.justinwine.com](http://www.justinwine.com) or 805/238-6932.

**L'Aventure Winery.** The "adventurer" here is Frenchman Stephan Asseo, whose Cabernet and Syrah blends have become cult wines in these parts. *Closed Mon–Wed; \$10 tasting fee*; 2815 Live Oak Rd.; [www.aventurewine.com](http://www.aventurewine.com) or 805/227-1588.

**Paso Wine Centre.** Here, each sip comes with a bonus for your conscience: All tasting proceeds go to Wine for Wells ([wineforwells.org](http://wineforwells.org)), a nonprofit dedicated to providing clean drinking water to the billion people worldwide who currently go without. 1240 Park St.; 805/239-9156.

**Tablas Creek Vineyard.** The white and red Rhône blends at the sleek tasting room are divine. *\$10 tasting fee, free tours*; 9339 Adelaida Rd.; [www.tablascreek.com](http://www.tablascreek.com) or 805/237-1231.

### Dining

**Bistro Laurent.** Hearty French in downtown Paso Robles. *\$\$\$-\$\$\$\$; closed Sun*; 1202 Pine St.; 805/226-8191.

**Deborah's Room.** The excellent restaurant at Justin Winery's inn. *\$\$\$\$*; 11680 Chimney Rock Rd.; 800/726-0049.

**McPhee's Grill.** In Templeton, a first-rate restaurant featuring local ingredients and local wines. *\$\$\$*; 416 S. Main St., Templeton; 805/434-3204.

**Thomas Hill Organics Market Bistro & Wine Bar.** Every dish here goes with the region's barnone rosé, but the barbecued pork-belly sandwich is made for pink. *\$\$\$; closed Tue*; 1305 Park St.; 805/226-5888.

**Villa Creek.** California cuisine and a soothing courtyard. *\$\$\$\$*; 1144 Pine; 805/238-3000.

**Vinoteca Wine Bar.** Cozy spot with a great selection of local wines. *\$\$; closed Mon*; 835 12th St.; 805/227-7154.

**Vivant Fine Cheese.** For a primer on the world of cheeses, nibble at Vivant Fine Cheese, where you can choose from more than 200 types in tastings paired with Paso Robles wines. Forget factory-style cheddar; the focus is on handcrafted, small-production cheeses. Sample such local specialties as Rinconada Dairy's sheep's-milk Pozo Tomme (nutty and rich). *Cheese plates with a trio of cheeses from \$10, not including wine*; 840 11th St.; [vivantfinecheese.com](http://vivantfinecheese.com) or 805/226-5530.

The trail at East West Ranch **RIGHT** Linn's famous pie



# Cambria charms

Savor a weekend of ocean, pines, and pie

Rising from a rocky shoreline into hills covered by Monterey pines, Cambria has a spirit shaped equally by ocean and forest.

Midway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, the town boasts several miles of coastline and, especially in spring, is bordered by rolling hills green enough to evoke the Welsh origins of its name. The village itself sits deep in a knoll between wooded slopes. Quaint but not cloyingly so,

it has 19th-century cottages set in lush gardens while a lawn-bowling green commands a prominent place on a main street named Main Street.

Back when this area was busy with whaling, mining, and logging, Cambria was known as Slabtown. Rugged as the town was, the name referred not to tombstones but to the slabs of rough wood used in building construction. These days Cambria's trees

and mountains are cherished rather than bought and sold, and the town makes an ideal base for a weekend filled with long beach walks or hikes into the hills. Browsing, not brawling, is the main village pursuit, and shops and galleries feature many of the local artists and craftspeople who have settled here. It's no wonder they chose Cambria—a place where beauty and inspiration are never very far away.

## Day one: Stroll the beach, art shop, eat some great olallieberry pie

The ideal start to a Cambria day is a walk at **Moonstone Beach** (along Moonstone Beach Dr. off Windsor Blvd.). You can take the boardwalk that follows the bluffs or walk along the beach, named for the white agates sometimes found here.

Head into the village for breakfast, where, on Saturdays, **Lily's Coffeehouse** (\$; closed Tue; crêpes 11–4 Sat only; 2028 Main St.; 805/927-725) serves crêpes on its patio. Then browse for art. The **Vault Gallery** (2289 Main; [www.vaultgallery.com](http://www.vaultgallery.com) or 805/927-0300) is located in a 1920s bank building. Next door, **Sunfire Gallery** (2289 Main; [www.sunfirearts.com](http://www.sunfirearts.com) or 805/927-1800) spotlights glass art by owner Larry E. Newsum III, while the collection at **Seekers Glass Gallery** (4090 Burton Dr.; [www.seekersglass.com](http://www.seekersglass.com) or 805/927-4352) includes pieces by artists from around the country.

For lunch, **Robin's Restaurant** (\$\$; lunch Mon–Sat, brunch Sun, dinner daily; 4095 Burton; 805/927-5007) has an eclectic menu that features daily salad specials and flavorful sandwiches. Its vine-covered patio is one of Cambria's most appealing dining spots. Save room for dessert and drive up Santa Rosa Creek Road to **Linn's of Cambria** (\$; 10–5 daily; 5 miles east of town on Santa Rosa Creek Rd.; 805/927-8134) for its country setting and famous olallieberry pie. From here, double



Browsing the goods at Home Arts RIGHT Cambria's Main Street



prime garden territory. The **Garden Shed** (2024 Main; 805/927-7654) has a nice selection of pots and accessories, while **Cambria Nursery and Florist** (2801 Eton Rd.; 805/927-4747) offers monthly demonstrations and workshops at its rambling facility above town.

A good choice for dinner is **Black Cat Bistro** (\$\$\$; 1602 Main St.; 805/927-1600), serving new American cuisine alongside an excellent wine list.

**Day three: Tour two castles, dine Pan-Asian-style, savor a sunset**

For all of Cambria's simple charms, the Central Coast's biggest attraction remains **Hearst Castle** (tours from \$24, reservations required; www.hearstcastle.com or 800/444-4445), the grand vision of William Randolph Hearst. Designed by Julia Morgan, it holds Hearst's assemblage of rare antiquities and art. Nearby, at William Randolph Hearst Memorial State Beach, you can walk the pier at San Simeon Bay. Head back to Cambria for another architectural obsession, albeit more humble than Hearst's. In the hills above the village, the late Art Beal constructed the ramshackle folk-art castle **Nitt Witt Ridge** (\$10; 881 Hillcrest Dr.; 805/927-2690) out of abalone shells, lumber that washed up from the ocean, and pretty much whatever else he could find.

Most of us live in houses between Beal's and Hearst's extremes, and Cambria's home decor stores cover a range of tastes. The **Shop Next Door** (4063 Burton; 805/927-9600) offers traditional Amish, Shaker, and Mission designs. The items at **Home Arts** (727 Main; 805/927-2781) items include Oaxacan weavings.

For lunch, the **Wild Ginger Cafe** (\$\$; closed Thu; 2380 Main; 805/927-1001) is a good bet for its Pan-Asian cuisine. End your visit with a sunset walk at **East West Ranch** (trailhead at Windsor Blvd. past Wallbridge Dr.; www.cambria-acsd.org or 805/927-6223), where trails explore the natural essence of Cambria: wave-splashed coves, flower-dappled grasslands, and forests where fog drifts amid the pines.

back to State 1, then head south a short distance to Harmony. While the old dairy town has seen busier times, you can watch glassblowing demonstrations, visit a pottery studio, and end your afternoon with wine tasting at **Harmony Cellars** (tasting \$4; 3255 Harmony Valley Rd., Harmony; www.harmonycellars.com or 805/927-1625). Then join the locals for oysters, clams, and other seafood at the **Sea Chest** (\$\$\$, no credit cards accepted; 6216 Moonstone Beach Dr.; 805/927-4514) on Moonstone Beach.

**Day two: Take a hike, meet an elephant seal, shop for your garden**

With bread bins and a Parisian street mural, the **French Corner Bakery** (\$) (2214 Main; 805/927-8227) lives up to its name and is a good bet for a light breakfast, or for sandwiches at lunch.

Take some time to explore beyond the

town. One of the best day-hikes starts along the boardwalk at **San Simeon State Park** (www.parks.ca.gov or 805/927-2068) and heads into forests of Monterey pines and onetime ranchland. The 3- to 4-mile loop begins at a trailhead located just north of Cambria at Washburn Day Use Area. While you're north of Cambria, visit the elephant seal viewing area at **Piedras Blancas** (parking and docents on site; 12 miles north of Cambria on State 1; www.elephantseal.org or 805/924-1628). Prime viewing season lasts from April through September. Nearby you'll find **Sebastian's Store** (closed Wed–Thu; 442 SLO San Simeon Rd., San Simeon; 805/927-4217), which dates to 1852 and the area's whaling days.

Back in Cambria, begin an afternoon of shopping with a casual lunch at **Indigo Moon** (1940 Main; 805/927-2911), a gourmet shop offering a wide selection of artisan cheeses. As Cambria's landscaping suggests, this is



Fishing boats and sailboats bob on the water facing Morro Rock as the fog clears

# Getting real on Morro Bay

Just outside SLO, things still feel truly authentic

## Kayaking & coastal beauty

Morro Bay has that magical away-from-it-all feeling without even trying. Maybe it's the fishing boats and the long miles of beaches, an atmosphere more hardworking than precious, with just enough distance from the San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles to stay out of either orbit. In Morro Bay, you feel as though you've gone to a place a bit more authentic than much of the coast. Maybe it's that here, you have a front-row seat to wild-

life. Harbor seals swim by in a nearby channel. An otter cracks open a shell, and a great blue heron is on the wing. A white pelican tosses back its bill to swallow a fish.

Skip a side trip to Hearst Castle, 30 miles north, and tastings in the always-expanding Paso Robles wine country on the other side of the hills. Instead, take pleasure in California's best autumn wildlife-viewing on a back-to-nature weekend of beach hikes, as well as paddling on a big blue bay.

Black Hill is the place to get your bearings. The scent of sunbaked sage fills the air as you gaze down at channels braiding a delta of marshes and mudflats that looked like something that original danger-loving dude Huck Finn would light out for. Instead of Big Sur's epic clash of rock and waves, on Morro Bay there's a mutual surrender: Land melts into water, and water gets slurped up by land.

From Black Hill, head over to one of the estuary's hidden spots. At the Elfin Forest, poor soil, salt air, and ocean winds have stunted the growth of California live oak stands. Some no more than 4 feet tall, these natural bonsai spread along the ground, all coiling limbs washed in broken, golden light. From there, go back to the Embarcadero, Morro Bay's harborfront strand of shops and seafood joints for seasonal sand dabs and Morro Rock views from the balcony of a

The beautiful bay  
**BELOW** A moment of  
inspiration in nearby  
Los Osos facing Black  
Hill **LEFT** Kayakers set  
out on an adventure



boutique hotel. Gritty authenticity is great, but so too are high thread counts.

### Mudflats & serenity

If you want to know what the village of Baywood Park is like, just think of a fishing village—without the fishing.

Baywood Park is quaint but not cute—a little town just far enough off the beaten track. The town sits on Morro Bay, looking west across the water to a 3-mile sand spit that ends in the craggy exclamation point of Morro Rock. To the north is Morro Bay State Park. To the south is Montaña de Oro—8,400 acres of sheltered coves, dark, scalloped marine terraces, and eucalyptus-shaded canyons.

There are also smaller-scale natural preserves: the eucalyptus and Monterey cypress forest of the Sweet Springs Nature Preserve, the strangely crimped oaks of El Moro Elfin Forest. In short, this is a pretty spot.

Unlike many pretty spots on the California coast, Baywood Park isn't overrun with tourists. There's a lazy quality to the town that lets you take in the rhythms of the day, from the comings and goings of the fog to the back bay's dramatic tidal fluctuations. At high tide, the little bay looks deep and blue and can even develop some modest whitecaps.

Come back a few hours later, and it's all mudflats, busily worked by an assortment of seabirds.

## Weekend fun

**FRIDAY** Drop your bags at the **Ander-son Inn** (see *Sleep by the sea*, page 15) and check out views of Morro Rock from your private balcony. Build a sand dune at **Morro Bay Museum of Natural History** (\$3, ages 16 and under free; 20 State Park Rd.; [ccnha.org](http://ccnha.org) or 805/772-2694), or brag that you hiked a volcano and walk up Black Hill. Try the “naked fish” at the restaurant below the hotel, the **Galley Seafood Grill & Bar** (\$\$\$; 899 Embarcadero; 805/772-7777).

**SATURDAY** Pick up a free map at the **Morro Bay Estuary Nature Center** (601 Embarcadero, Ste. 11; [mbnep.org](http://mbnep.org) or 805/772-3834), then head out for a paddle on the bay through **Kayak Horizons** (rentals from \$9 per hour; 551 Embarcadero; [kayakhorizons.com](http://kayakhorizons.com) or 805/772-6444). Picnic at the sand spit, or grab a fish sandwich at the **Bayside Cafe** (\$\$; 10 State Park Rd.; 805/772-1465).

**SUNDAY** Breakfast with locals at **Top Dog Coffee Bar** (844 Main St.; 805/772-9225), then walk along the boardwalk and catch a glimpse of a “pygmy oak” at the **El Moro Elfin Forest Natural Area** (at the northern end of 16th St., Los Osos; [www.slstateparks.com/morro\\_bay/mb\\_elfin.asp](http://www.slstateparks.com/morro_bay/mb_elfin.asp) or 805/781-5200). Catch a winged migration at **Sweet Springs Nature Preserve** (free; Fourth St. at Ramona Ave., Los Osos; [morrocoast.audubon.org/sweet.htm](http://morrocoast.audubon.org/sweet.htm) or 805/772-1991).

While the mudflats are a source of food for the foraging birds, they're also a source of a sometimes bemused pride for the locals. They tell stories of baffled visitors asking where all the water went. The Baywood Navy, a local volunteer organization that maintains the pier and monitors the bay environment, sells T-shirts that read, “We don't sail in water deeper than we can stand in.”

Norm Tiber joined the Baywood Navy a few years ago, after he moved to Baywood Park. He proudly points out the navy's flagship, an abandoned boat dubbed the *Priscilla*. It belongs to 11 members who each own 51 percent.

Such eccentricity and community spirit add to the area's appeal, says Tiber—that, and the opportunity to be in touch with the environment. “You live by the tides here,” he says. “My wife is from Vermont, and she says she feels as close to nature here as she did there. But here, it's a more gentle nature.”

Edna Valley Vineyard extends with lush geometry toward Islay Peak **BELOW** Baileyana's tasting room



# Edna Valley wines

Wander through this quirky, unassuming wine region just south of San Luis Obispo



Winemakers probably don't time their wine racking to the phases of the moon in the Napa Valley. But not being Napa is a big part of the Edna Valley's appeal. The nascent wine region is located in a triangle bordered by Arroyo Grande, Pismo Beach, and San Luis Obispo, and it still retains a distinctive, back-road California charm. Vineyards were first planted here in the 1970s. Today it's home to more than 3,000 acres of vineyards and 30 wine labels, including 17 tasting rooms that

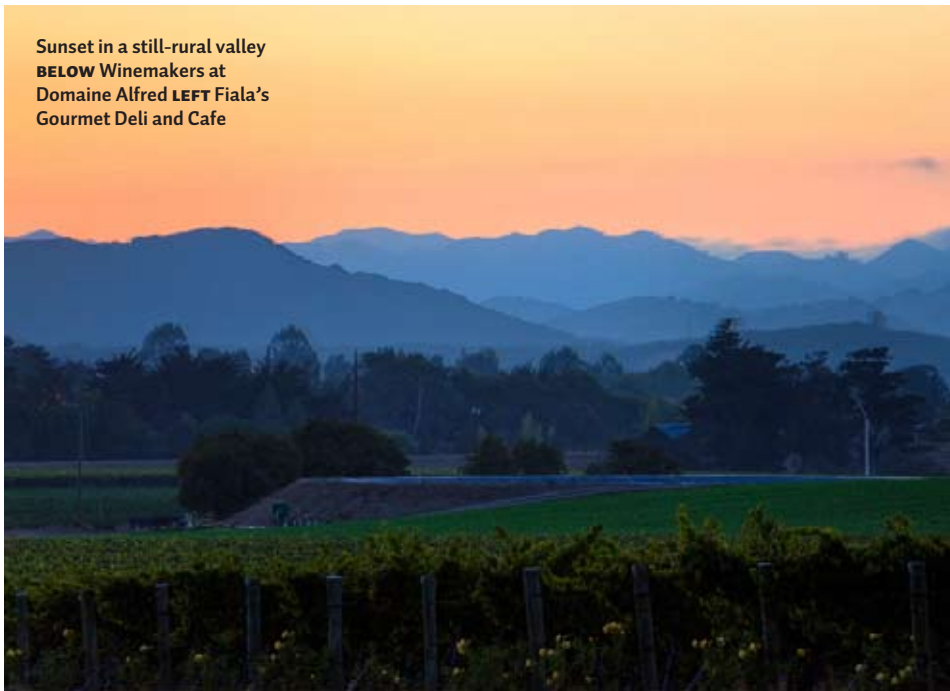
run the gamut from a former one-room schoolhouse to the stylish Jack Niven Hospitality Center at Edna Valley Vineyard. At the latter, you can sample Chardonnays in front of picture windows with views of the valley's most distinctive icon, Islay Peak, an ancient volcanic plug that rose from the ocean floor.

## Wines shaped by the sea

And it is the ocean—a little more than 5 miles away—that accounts for both the cool weather, perfect for the Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs that the valley is known for, and the minerality that comes through in the wines' flavors. "This is an old estuary," says Edna Valley Vineyard's winemaker, Harry Hansen, as he walks the rolling hills planted in Chardonnay grapes, some on vines dating back to 1973. "When they built the winery, they unearthed fossil shells."

NIK WHEELER (2)

Sunset in a still-rural valley  
**BELOW** Winemakers at  
 Domaine Alfred **LEFT** Fiala's  
 Gourmet Deli and Cafe



While cool weather-loving Chardonnays with lots of pear, lemon, and mineral flavors are what originally brought fame and accolades to the Edna Valley, it's Pinot Noir and Rhône varieties—Viognier, Roussanne, Grenache, and Syrah—that are getting the most attention these days.

Winemakers will tell you there is no more difficult or fickle wine to produce than Pinot Noir. Says Hansen, "Pinot Noir is the Holy Grail to winemakers. She's the woman you fell in love with but who got away."

Stephen Ross Dooley, a former Edna Valley Vineyard winemaker who now runs Stephen Ross Wine Cellars, recalls tasting one of the region's earliest Pinot Noir vintages and

saying, "My god, they did it." Now the valley has several wineries—Edna Valley, Baileyana, Stephen Ross, and Tolosa, among others—that are doing Pinot and doing it well.

### The Rhône meets the Central Coast

While the Edna Valley's Pinot Noirs are a shared success story, interest in the area's Rhône varieties can largely be attributed to the success of boutique winemaker John Alban, of Alban Vineyards.

"I started a winery because I fell in love with Viognier," says Alban, who, when he planted his first 30 acres of the grape in 1993, practically doubled the worldwide acreage of the almost-forgotten varietal. Alban's Viog-

nier, as well as his Syrahs, have gained international attention ever since critic Robert M. Parker Jr. wrote a few years ago that the wines are "a reference point for what Rhône varieties can achieve in California."

Though the quality of Edna Valley wines has matched and sometimes exceeded those of the Napa or Russian River Valleys, the crowds have not. "We're sort of a mellow appellation, reminiscent of the Napa Valley 30 years ago," says Baileyana's winemaker, Christian Roguenant. Tasting rooms like the historic schoolhouse used by Baileyana might have only one or two couples leisurely tasting wines. Drive the two-lane roads midweek, and you'll pass only a few other cars. When you're in a tasting room, there's a good chance you'll actually meet the winemaker or owner.

### Our favorite Edna Valley wineries

**Alban Vineyards.** John Alban's winery isn't open for tours or tastings, but his wines are well worth searching out at local wine merchants.

**Baileyana.** Winemaker Christian Roguenant's soft, silky Pinot Noirs are laced with lots of black cherry and a touch of sage. The Chardonnay always has hints of pear and, in warmer years, pineapple and tropical fruit. 10–5 daily; \$5 tasting fee. 5828 Orcutt, San Luis Obispo; 805/269-8200.

**Edna Valley Vineyard.** Best known for Chardonnays with a peachy character and sea-salt finish, but the Pinot Noirs, with dark characters and meaty fruit flavors, are also strong. Jack Niven Hospitality Center has an extensive selection of wine-related books, clothing, and gourmet foods. 10–5 daily; \$5 tasting fee. 2585 Biddle Ranch Rd., San Luis Obispo; 888/390-9463 or 805/544-5855.

**Stephen Ross Wine Cellars.** Visit the tasting room of this vineyard exclusively dedicated to Pinot Noirs. 11–5 Thu–Sun. 178 Suburban Rd., San Luis Obispo; 805/594-1318.

**Talley Vineyards.** Drive through a third-generation farm producing fields of cilantro and bell peppers to get to this winery, known for its Rincon and Rosemary's Vineyard Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. 10:30–4:30 daily; \$8 tasting fee. 3031 Lopez Dr., Arroyo Grande; 805/489-0446.

**Tolosa Winery.** Garnet-colored Pinot Noirs with plush, spiced berries and flinty Chardonnays are typical of the valley's taste profiles. 11–4:45 daily; \$8 tasting fee. 4910 Edna Rd., San Luis Obispo; 866/782-0300 or 805/782-0300.



Avila's classic pier  
**BELOW** Vineyards just  
inland from the shore

# Wines 'n' waves: Avila Beach

Farm country meets the shore in a charming (and much overlooked) Central Coast town



The central coast doesn't always fit nicely into one of the classic California archetypes. Is it *Gidget* and surfers and sunsets? Or is it great rolling vineyards and striped green fields?

The answer, of course, is that it's both. And tiny, out-of-the-way Avila Beach—with its sunny microclimate, beachfront promenade, and down-to-earth vibe—might be the ultimate sampler platter of all things classically Californian. It's where the fertile valley meets the mighty Pacific, and where surfers know a good Pinot when they taste one.

Longtime resident Micheal Kidd calls Avila “the last great place left,” and it does have a certain celluloid perfection, like a Disney set of a California beach town. (This is due in no small part to a late-'90s rebuild after an oil leak pretty much shut down the town.)

The best way to explore these 3 perfect square miles is to create your own mix-and-match surf-and-turf adventure, bouncing back and forth from beach to valley—from sunsets and sandy feet to berries and barrel tastings.



A tasty treat at Pete's Pierside Café  
**ABOVE** A private tub at Sycamore  
**LEFT** Avila Valley Barn

**Turf**

**BIKE TO A FARM** The beach cruiser bikes at **Joe Momma's Beachstay Bike Rentals** come fully loaded with helmet, basket, and total adorableness (\$19 for 4 hours; 805/627-1500). Pedal inland to the **Avila Valley Barn** on the mellow 2.5-mile **Bob Jones Trail**. The Barn is a petting zoo, old-timey sweetshop, U-pick (look for raspberries and peaches this month), and farmstand, all rolled into one. And that's before we get to the roasted corn on the cob or the famous pies (which fit nicely into those bike baskets). 560 Avila Beach Dr.; [avilavalleybarn.com](http://avilavalleybarn.com)

**HIKE A SECRET TRAIL** To access the **Pecho Coast Trail**, you have to make a reservation

and pass by a guard (who's protecting a nuclear power plant you never actually see), but the 3.5-mile round-trip to the Point San Luis lighthouse is so spectacular, the rigmarole is worth it. Follow your docent through oak groves and coyote brush to serpentine cliffs for jaw-dropping views. Sat 9 a.m.; hike free, lighthouse \$5; [pge.modwest.com/pge-reservations](http://pge.modwest.com/pge-reservations) or 805/541-8735.

**ROCK OUT AT A WINERY** You can check out the converted two-room schoolhouse that is **Salisbury Vineyards** any day of the week, but Sunday afternoon is when it really gets jumping. The Schoolhouse Rock Concert Series has live music, barbecue, tours, and lots and lots of Salisbury's award-winning

wine. It's about as family-friendly as it comes—in fact, you may find yourself doing the Mashed Potato with a bunch of 6-year-olds. \$5 entry, \$5 tasting, barbecue from \$5; 6985 Ontario Rd.; [salisburyvineyards.com](http://salisburyvineyards.com)

**SOAK UNDER THE STARS** People seem to think Californians spend most of their time hot-tubbing. Why not prove them right in one of the private hillside tubs at **Sycamore Mineral Springs Resort**? Steep under the Milky Way until nearly midnight—and if you book a room, you can make your way home in a robe. \$18 per hour per person; for hotel info, see *Sleep by the sea*, page 15.

**Surf**

**SAVE ROOM FOR SHRIMP** Avila is a sleepy place, and the beachfront **Fish & Farmer's Market**, with live music, local artists, and fresh strawberry shortcake, is about as rollicking as it gets around here. Save room for a shrimp cocktail (\$6) from **BJ's Seafood** and a mahimahi taco (\$3) from **Pete's Pierside Café**. Fri 4–8 through Sep 24; Avila Promenade; [visitavilabeach.com](http://visitavilabeach.com)

**DO THE BEACH LIKE A LOCAL** In the morning, before the day-trippers arrive from the scorching inland valleys, you'll share the sand with just locals, including a few beach yogis doing their sun salutations. Get a cup of coffee at local fave **Joe Momma's Coffee** and head toward the tidepools. By the time you make it back to Joe Momma's, you'll have earned a California Kiss (that's a pineapple mango smoothie; from \$4.50) and a cinnamon roll (\$3). Sort of. 310 Front St.; 805/627-1500.

**MAKE LIKE AN OLD SALT** The historic Harford Pier at **Port San Luis** (built in 1873, before the trains came to nearby San Luis Obispo) is a working fishing pier that happens to have a couple of low-key restaurants perched at the end. Stop at **BJ's Fish Market** to say hello to Speckles and Waddles, BJ's two adopted pelicans. Spend some time in front of **Pete's Pierside Café and Fish Market** (\$) watching the sea lions flop around. Finally, nab one of the see-through tables at **Olde Port Inn** (\$\$\$; 805/595-2515) to eat cioppino while watching the kelp slosh under your bowl. [avilabeachpier.com](http://avilabeachpier.com)

**CHILL OUT AT YOUR BEACHFRONT HOTEL** With a sweet spot on the ocean, **Inn at Avila Beach** is just the right amount of groovy. The rooftop deck with hammocks, pillow-strewn couches, and grills is the best sunset hang-out in town. See *Sleep by the sea*, page 15.

Avila Lighthouse Suites is just steps from the ocean



# Sleep by the sea

Our favorite lodging on and near the coast

**Anderson Inn.** Evoking the elements of sea and sky in its décor, this coastal inn makes for an idyllic stay. *In Morro Bay.* From \$269; [andersoninnmorrobay.com](http://andersoninnmorrobay.com) or 805/772-3434.

**Avila La Fonda Hotel.** Avila Beach is an undersize gem, a lovely crescent of Central Coast shoreline, covered end to end by a leisurely 15-minute stroll. The Avila La Fonda Hotel exudes this same cozy charm: Fireplaces outnumber rooms (34 to 33), the staff

seems to outnumber guests, and the sweet scent of chocolate chip cookies permeates the air. The hotel, modeled after colonial Mexican towns, is a paean to pleasurable detail, from the tile mosaics to the movie nights, fresh flowers, and—to curb those midnight cravings—the open-24-hours “chocolate pantry.” *In Avila Beach.* From \$299; [www.avilalafondahotel.com](http://www.avilalafondahotel.com) or 805/595-1700.

**Avila Lighthouse Suites.** Kids love the pool,

## Vacation rentals in Cayucos

**RENTING TIPS** Larger ranch homes are mostly inland, and small houses closer to shore. Stick to west of State 1 unless you don't mind driving to the beach.

**BOOK IT** Two go-to agencies are **Beachside Rentals** ([beachsiderentals.com](http://beachsiderentals.com)) and **Cayucos Vacation Rentals** ([cayucosvacationrentals.com](http://cayucosvacationrentals.com)).

**RATES** Prices plummet in the off-season (starting in late fall), dropping in many cases by half (rates run from \$290 for beachfront, \$170 for houses a walk from shore, plus \$170 cleaning fee). In fall, houses usually rented by the week are available for two nights.

the giant chess game, even the putt-putt golf green, but lush landscaping, a location to die for (about 10 steps from the beach), and large guest suites with low-key nautical decor and mini kitchens make the grown-ups giddy too. *In Avila Beach.* From \$309; [www.avilalighthouse.com](http://www.avilalighthouse.com) or 805/627-1900.

**Back Bay Inn.** Near the water, this is an ideal spot from which to watch the bay's changing moods. Some rooms have fireplaces, others have private balconies. *In Baywood Park.* From \$145; [www.backbayinn.com](http://www.backbayinn.com) or 877/330-2225.

**Baywood Bed & Breakfast Inn.** From the outside it looks tastefully modern, but inside it has themed rooms (from Appalachian to Manhattan) and all the pampering you might expect. Many rooms have bay views (second-floor rooms are best). *In Baywood Park.* From \$80; [www.baywoodinn.com](http://www.baywoodinn.com) or 805/528-8888.

**Blue Whale Inn.** Spacious rooms with country styling; prime location across from Moonstone Beach. *In Cambria.* From \$315; [www.bluewhaleinn.com](http://www.bluewhaleinn.com) or 805/753-9000.

**Cambria Pines Lodge.** Imagine the kind of garden you could have if you had 5 acres to play with, an imaginative head gardener to dream up ideas, plus a crew to execute them. Such are the grounds at Cambria Pines Lodge. The 26-acre woodland site provides a range of accommodations, from pine-paneled cabins to luxury suites; for the full floral experience, ask for one of the bungalows with garden views. Stroll through the butterfly garden, organic kitchen plots, and the rest of the themed and unapologetically high-maintenance landscapes. Then follow the trail to the on-site nursery to take home a few of the plants you fell in love with. *In*



A spacious suite at Sycamore  
RIGHT A charming room at  
Cass House



*Cambria. From \$229; www.cambriapineslodge.com or 800/445-6868.*

**Cass House Inn & Restaurant.** The small surf town of Cayucos has remained miraculously immune to over-development for decades, despite its great wines to the east and white sandy beaches to the west. At this charming inn, the elaborate breakfast (included!) is nearly as good as the seasonally inspired dinner (if it's on the evening menu, the oxtail soup is a must). But the best part about the 1800s Cass House? That would be twin sisters Grace Lorenzen (the innkeeper) and Carla Wingett (groundskeeper), who manage the organic garden and the five impeccably turned-out guestrooms. *In Cayucos. From \$165; casshouseinn.com or 805/995-3669.*

**Cayucos Sunset Inn.** Charming bed-and-breakfast on Cayucos's main drag. *In Cayucos. From \$229; www.cayucosunsetinn.com or 877/805-1076.*

**The Cliffs Resort.** Nicely situated on the bluffs, the hotel recently underwent a major refurbishment. *In Pismo Beach. From \$149; www.cliffsresort.com or 800/826-7827.*

**FogCatcher Inn.** A charmer, just across from Moonstone Beach. *In Cambria. From \$224; www.fogcatcherinn.com or 805/927-1400.*

**Inn at Avila Beach.** A coastal inn that feels like you're staying at a friend's elegant beach house. *In Avila Beach. From \$219; www.avilabeachca.com or 805/595-2300.*

**J. Patrick House.** In a forest setting, traditional bed-and-breakfast features cozy rooms with wood-burning fireplaces. *In Cambria. From \$175; www.jpatrickhouse.com or 800/341-5258.*

**The Just Inn.** Justin Winery's sumptuous inn, with an excellent onsite restaurant. *In Paso Robles. From \$325, including breakfast; www.justinwine.com or 800/726-0049.*

**Madonna Inn.** In 1958, long before cute little

inns with themed rooms sprang up across the West, Alex and Phyllis Madonna created this 108-room hotel with—yes—108 unique rooms. Want to sleep in a bed made from a big-wheeled wagon? Take showers in rock grottoes? Assault your eyes with the most incredible variety of colors, patterns, and furniture styles, pure whimsy, and a big helping of kitsch? It's all here. Our favorite? The boulder-rich Old World suite. One down, 107 to go. *In San Luis Obispo. From \$179; www.madonnainn.com or (805) 543-3000.*

**Moonstone Cottages.** Individually designed cottages nestled in a cypress grove, all with ocean views. *In Cambria. From \$215; www.cambriainns.com/moonstonecottages.html or 805/927-1366.*

**Paso Robles Inn.** Tile-roofed hotel in downtown Paso Robles. Great steakhouse (\$\$\$) and coffee shop (\$) too. *In Paso Robles. From \$199; www.pasoroblesinn.com or 800/676-1713.*

**Petit Soleil Bed et Breakfast.** Bursting with Provençal charm and conveniently located near downtown. *In San Luis Obispo. From \$159; petitsoleilslo.com or 805/549-0321.*

**Ragged Point Inn & Resort.** Sitting on high cliffs in southern Big Sur, this self-contained inn has a restaurant, general store, and gift shop. *In Big Sur. From \$169; www.raggedpointinn.net or 805/927-4502.*

**SeaVenture Resort.** Right on the sand, just south of Pismo Beach Pier. *In Pismo Beach. From \$169; seaventure.com or 800/662-5545.*

**Sycamore Mineral Springs Resort.** At this lovely spa-resort, the indulgence doesn't have to stop with your cozy room. Book any 60-minute treatment (*from \$95*) at the onsite spa and you get a 30-minute soak under the oaks in a private mineral hot springs tub. Guests also have access to tai chi, yoga, and pilates classes, plus guided hikes. *In San Luis Obispo. From \$239; sycamoresprings.com or 800/234-5831.*

# Travel resources

Find more inspiration for travel in the West on [Sunset.com](http://Sunset.com)



## Top 10 hideaways by the sea

These coastal retreats have it all: stellar scenery, rich amenities, nearby treats, and plenty of romance. Listen to the ocean from your room in one of our favorite lesser-known inns, from a rainforest resort on B.C.'s wild Vancouver Island to a secluded boat-in spot on SoCal's Catalina Island.

[www.sunset.com/travel](http://www.sunset.com/travel)

## Sunset.com/Travel

Your ultimate resource for travel in the West, *Sunset* Travel is packed with tips on the best places to go, from National Parks to urban retreats. Get inspired with *Sunset's* ideas for fun weekend trips or the ultimate Western vacation.

[www.sunset.com/travel](http://www.sunset.com/travel)



## Fall for the Sonoma Coast

If you love the Central Coast, you'll flip over the rugged stretch of Sonoma County shoreline. From the pocket coves of Bodega Bay to inland pine-covered, this is a place where you can tide-pool for hours in precious solitude—and where wine and cheese are made carefully, lovingly, by hand.

[www.sunset.com/travel/california/](http://www.sunset.com/travel/california/)



## Road trip the Cali coast

Ready to explore the Central Coast and beyond? Hit the road on this California adventure from Santa Barbara to San Simeon, with stops along the way in Santa Ynez Valley wine country, Monterey, Camel, and Big Sur.

[www.sunset.com/travel/california/](http://www.sunset.com/travel/california/)



The Western lifestyle is a journey. *Sunset* magazine is its road map.

# Subscribe to Sunset

You're invited to enjoy a FREE PREVIEW of the next 2 issues of *Sunset* magazine risk-free. No obligation to buy.

If you live in the West, or visit it regularly, you already know **Sunset**. For more than 110 years, **Sunset** has been the West's preeminent source for information on home, food, travel, and gardening. **Sunset** is the leading independent authority on Western living.

What makes **Sunset** magazine so special? For some of our devoted readers, **Sunset** both informs and delights their passions for the scenic beauty of the West and their desire for travel and exploration. For other subscribers, **Sunset** is about celebrating the newest and best ideas in Western home design and landscaping. Whether you're looking for Western travel and recreation...gardening and outdoor living...home and design...or food, wine and casual entertaining —**Sunset** is your monthly ticket to a dream.

SUNSET does more than just tell you how to build a gracious life —**Sunset** shows you "how-to-do-it."

**"Preview 2 issues of SUNSET magazine absolutely risk-free."**

If you like **Sunset** after receiving your 2 FREE PREVIEW ISSUES, you'll pay just \$16 for 10 more, for a total of 12 in all. This price includes the cost of your FREE PREVIEW Issues—a savings of 73% off the newsstand price.

If you're not completely satisfied, you'll return the bill marked "cancel" and owe nothing. The cancellation is effective immediately, and any Free Preview issues you receive are yours to keep FREE!

**To subscribe, visit [www.sunset.com/travelsub](http://www.sunset.com/travelsub) or call 800/823-7270**

# Sunset