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Los Angeles To San Francisco: From Goat Cheese To Gaultier

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The Jean Paul Gaultier fashion retrospective at the de Young Museum in San Francisco was the perfect pretext for a road trip along one of the world's most spectacular coastal roads -- Highway One -- winding from L.A. up to the Bay Area. My bff, Toronto writer [Lin Stranberg](#), who wrote this blog with me, was game to join in the fun.

Paso Robles (rhymes with "nobles")

Malibu. Ventura. Pit Stop: Lunch on the terrace overlooking Butterfly Beach at the Santa Barbara Four Seasons Biltmore. Quesadillas, delicious Parmesan toast and the best iced cappuccino ever. Majestic ocean views all the way to PR.

Checked into Hotel Cheval, a boutique hotel whose French country elegance seemed at first anomalous in this mid-19th century American ranch town. Not so much of an anomaly, though, considering the town is now the epicenter of the Central Coast wine country. Its rolling green hills are dotted with hundreds of wineries, and tasting tourism is the big thing. We opted for a tantalizing dinner at Il Cortile, cooked by chef/owner Santos MacDonal: truffle risotto, duck, branzino, burrata and desserts galore.

Like so many PR transplants, Carole MacDonal, who runs the front of the house, had a high-powered job -- she was a producer for "The Biggest Loser" -- before taking to the hills. The feast combined with Le Cheval's sumptuous beds and linens, a good book and the flickering in-room gas fireplace made for a memorable sleep indeed.



Being enthusiastic about food in general, and organic farm-to-table cuisine in particular, we laced up our sneakers early the next morning to tramp around the lively grounds of the [Happy Acres Family Farm](#), where tribes of goats, herded by owner Stephanie Simonin and guarded by a manic goose, chow down on top-grade grains and grasses to produce the milk that her mom, Laurie, uses to make a deeply delicious range of organic goat cheeses and skin balms.

Norwegian Wood. Isn't it good.

Ignoring the sign on Route 46 indicating Highway One was "closed at Pitkins," and assuming we'd be able to play the

"local" or "journalist" card and talk our way around a roadblock 25 miles south of Big Sur, we were nevertheless nonplussed to be forced to turn around, hightail it back down the coast, head north on the 101 to the Monterey Peninsula when, at last, we headed south again down to Big Sur.

Dinner in Big Sur at The Bakery, a local place, hidden behind the Shell station, with a pizza oven and simple, tasty farm-to-table cuisine, definitely soothed our spirits. The night at Deetjen's, a historic inn built by Norwegian Helmuth Deetjen in Castro Canyon in the 1930s and pretty much unchanged since, made us forget about all that driving: wooden cabins in the Scandinavian style with paper-thin walls, Franklin stoves (wood provided) and decades of character with the unexpected luxury of pressed linen sheets. Hiked the property the next morning for some hilltop eagle-watching with an awesome ocean view.

On to Esalen. The famous bastion of '60s consciousness-raising is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. It's a true classic. From the clothing-optional mineral baths set into a staggeringly beautiful Pacific cliff to the freewheeling architectural style to the rambling grandeur of the grounds, they just don't make 'em like this anymore. Esalen is a one-of-a-kind place that's constantly evolving and reinventing itself; a place where psycho/spiritual explorers young and old still go to cozy up to the cutting edge in cultural and personal transformation.

We were lucky enough to book a brief "private retreat" and spend an unforgettable couple of days taking the baths and salt air, wandering the paths and organic gardens, eating wholly natural food in communal meals and even getting our dance groove on at a Brazilian drumming workshop. Our accommodations were basic, including DIY bed-making, but no complaints. We were at Esalen, after all.



Heading up the coast, we opted for a distinct change of pace at the tranquil 500-acre golf, tennis and spa enclave of the [Carmel Valley Ranch](#). Dazzled by the array of activities, we hardly took advantage of our spacious and sophisticated suite; instead, we relaxed in the spa, then dined in the elegant Lodge Restaurant, overlooking the valley, on grass-fed beef and local sustainable ingredients, many from the Ranch's organic garden. The next morning we took an uphill 90-minute hike before being rained out of the Ranch's signature Bee Experience where you don a bee suit and enter the hives where 60,000 Italian bees whip up sensational lavender honey.

Foie Gras and Fashion, oh my!

No time and too rainy to stop at the [Monterey Museum of Art](#) to see the California Impressionism show (up through May 27), but hope to get back up there for In Sharp Focus: The Legacy of Monterey Photography, June 16-September 30. When our GPS glitched during the drive to SF in pelting down rain, an old school map delivered us to the valet at the [Hotel Palomar](#). This urbane and trendy Kimpton property is a stone's throw from Union Square and right across the street from the Four Seasons, yet it offers impeccable service at half the price. The Jacuzzi in the spacious bathroom, the Etro amenities, the animal print bathrobes and the morning newspaper and coffee service made for a satisfying stay.

Plus it meant we didn't have to leave the building to dine in one of SF's best and most original temples of molecular gastronomy, [Fifth Floor](#). We were wowed by Chef David Bazirgan's humor and creativity from the teeny, tiny *amuse-bouche* of quince served three ways on a giant white plate, to the *foie gras* in several forms including ice cream to the perfectly poached lobster. Move over, Jose Andres.



Sunday morning we arrived at the de Young Museum just as Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk opened, despite having to switch taxis when the first cabbie had no idea where (or what!) Golden Gate

Park was! No McQueen- at-the-Met lineups here, no crowds and the only sounds came from the disconcertingly outspoken mannequins. The first of these lifelike figures, animated with sound loops and videoed facial features, was in the image of Gaultier himself, ranting on about life, and art, and, of course, fashion.



His fashion world was all there, from men in kilts to Madonna's corsets, complete with fashion photography, film and video clips. The Gaultier oeuvre, up until Aug. 19, celebrates diversity, and this multimedia retrospective is a knockout. Read more [here](#).

A great trip. Peace out.

Time to head south towards home; we once again (!) traveled route 46 to the peaceful town of Cambria for our check in to the pine-fresh air and calm surroundings of the [Cambria Pines Lodge](#), an ideal cool-down resort where we could relax and wind down our trip. It was a holiday for the nerves and senses.

We had a tasty wok dinner at Cambria's charming Robin's Restaurant before driving to San Simeon for our evening tour of Hearst Castle, six miles up the now-familiar Cambria coast.

This tour was a perfect no-brainer for the end of our trip. A winding five-mile uphill bus ride ended at the extraordinary main house and astounding guest "cottages" just as the sun set over the Pacific and the over-the-top swimming pool. We toured the dazzling exteriors and sumptuous rooms, while a garrulous guide regaled us with a wealth of information on the history, art, architecture and lifestyle enjoyed by William Randolph Hearst and his guests during the 1930s. Volunteers in period garb moved through the rooms like ghosts, doing their best to recreate the mood of the era for 21st-century tourists like us. The evening tour is worth it to see the castle spectacularly lit up light a birthday cake on the way back down the hill.



If making an LA to SF road trip, check out these websites, too:

<http://www.visitcalifornia.com>

<http://www.sanluisobispo.com>