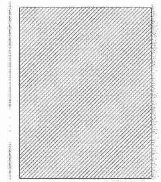


## 10 gems in the *Golden State*

California's diverse vacation options provide something for everyone | By Matt Villano



Magnificent Half Dome, Nevada Fall and Vernal Fall are highlights of Yosemite National Park.





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**California is all about magnitude.** The Golden State boasts more people than any other in the union, and is third behind Alaska and Texas in size. It also has plenty of wonders to behold: from the tallest trees on earth to dramatic geologic features such as Half Dome in Yosemite; from high-caliber wineries to top-notch museums; from skiing to surfing; from whimsical theme parks to abundant wildlife.

Simply put, there's something in California for everyone, and both Alaska Airlines and sister carrier Horizon Air serve destinations around the state.

For vacationers, this incredible diversity can make it hard to decide where, exactly, to spend time. With this in mind, here are 10 stellar destinations in the Golden State, complete with suggestions for how to get the most out of each trip.

## Redwood Empire

Things are looking up in this tiny corner of California—literally. Although coast redwoods can be found as far south as Santa Barbara, the heart of redwood country hugs the Pacific coast about 250 miles north of San Francisco. This region is home to many of the tallest redwood trees in the country. Among them: 379-foot Hyperion, the tallest tree in the world.

While the specific location of Hyperion is kept secret to protect the tree's identity, most of the big trees are located inside the boundaries of Redwood National Park, Humboldt Redwoods State Park and Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park. All told, nearly half of the world's remaining old-growth coast redwoods are in this park system. The trees can live to be 2,000 years old, and they regularly grow to more than 360 feet tall.

Elsewhere in the forests, hemlock, Douglas fir, berry bushes, spruce and sword ferns intertwine in a multiple-tiered canopy that forms a cool shelter for forest dwellers such as Roosevelt elk, Steller's jays and Pacific giant salamanders.

Most of the big trees are within an hour's drive of Arcata, home of Humboldt State University, and

Eureka, a historic logging town that has one of the state's best-preserved Victorian-era commercial districts. Nearby soft-sand beaches beckon ocean lovers, while fresh figs and peaches are favorites at the Saturday morning farmers market in Arcata. The area also has become an enclave of culture. For instance, actors and other artists perform periodically at physical theater school Dell'Arte International in nearby Blue Lake.

## Wine Country

While wine is made just about all over California, the state's primary wine country—located in Napa and Sonoma counties to the north of San Francisco Bay—still reigns supreme.

The area has grown exponentially in the last 35 years; in 1975 there were only about 75 wineries in Napa Valley and Sonoma County, and today there are more than 800 in the two regions. Tourists come not only for wine-tasting (think hearty reds and light whites), but also for hiking, bicycling, hot-air ballooning and relaxing in spas.

Another attraction, of course, is food. Notable chefs and restaurateurs work their magic in these parts, including Thomas Keller, Charlie Palmer, Michael Chiarello, John Ash and Sondra Bernstein. Douglas Keane, the chef at Cyrus in Healdsburg, won a James Beard Award—a food Oscar—in 2009.

Downtown Napa is the main metropolis in Napa County, and a recent urban-renewal project led to the development of new hotels, such as the Westin Verasa and AVIA Napa, as well as the Oxbow Public Market—an eclectic food destination that resembles



the market at the Ferry Building in San Francisco. In Sonoma County, be sure to see downtown Sonoma's plaza, which evokes a lovely Spanish village. In addition, the Charles M. Schulz Museum in Santa Rosa offers insight into the life and work of the creator of Peanuts.

## Yosemite

Internationally renowned for its granite cliffs, spectacular waterfalls and biological diversity, Yosemite is one of the country's first wilderness parks and has inspired countless individuals, including photographer Ansel Adams and preservationist John Muir.

While most of Yosemite's 3.5 million annual visitors travel to the Yosemite Valley to marvel at Half Dome and El Capitan, there are other beautiful spots in the park, as well. The Hetch Hetchy Valley,

for instance, 40 miles away, is home to the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, which stores most of the drinking water for San Francisco. Trails in this part of the park are relatively flat and untrammled; fewer than 50,000 people visited this side of Yosemite in 2008.

With winter approaching, another popular area is Badger Pass. The cross-country ski trail to the Glacier Point Ski Hut follows Glacier Point Road and rises 2,000 feet in

Above: Some of the tallest trees in the world are in California's redwood forests.

Left: Children view artifacts from ancient Egypt at the de Young Museum's "Tutankhamen and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs" exhibit.



COURTESY: ANDREW FOX / DE YOUNG MUSEUM

10.5 miles to a wood-and-stone hut. From the top, the views of Half Dome are stupendous.

Finally, no visit to Yosemite is complete without a stop at the historic Ahwahnee hotel, which opened in 1927. Every winter, the hotel produces The Bracebridge Dinner, an 18th century Yuletide-themed dinner theater based on a Washington Irving short story. During several evenings in December, performers in elaborate costumes sing and dance and juggle, and tell the story of Lord Bracebridge and his household. Tickets that sell for \$375 are a bit spendy, but the show is one-of-a-kind.

## San Francisco

Most people associate the City by the Bay with the soaring orange spires of the Golden Gate Bridge, the intrigue of Alcatraz, and the high energy and fresh seafood of Fisherman's Wharf. Beyond these iconic attractions, however, more than a dozen museums provide entire worlds of nature, art and history. Two of these were recently renovated.

First is the California Academy of Sciences, which kicked off a new era last September with a new \$488 million facility in Golden Gate Park. The building, designed by architect Renzo Piano, is a 4.5-acre rectangle with both museum and scientific-research space, and is the only facility in the world with a planetarium, aquarium and natural-history museum under one roof. The center of the building harbors a glassed-in central "piazza" flanked by two 63-foot-high globes that rise through the roof like camel humps. One "hump" houses the Morrison planetarium, the other a rain-forest exhibit.

Also in Golden Gate Park, the de Young Museum reopened in 2005. This museum specializes in American art, international contemporary art, textiles, costumes and art from around the world, including an extensive collection of murals from the Mexican civilization of Teotihuacan. It is also a popular destination for traveling exhibitions; "Tutankhamen and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs" will be on display through March 28 of next year.

## Monterey Bay

Wildlife abounds in the waters of Monterey Bay. The Monterey Canyon System, which plunges to depths of more than 6,000 feet, is one of the largest underwater canyons in the world. Located off the coast of Moss Landing, in the middle of the bay, it draws thousands of animals to the region.



Many of the area's inhabitants stay close to shore. Elkhorn Slough, for instance, has one of the largest populations of sea otters in California. Once hunted nearly to extinction, the animals have made a significant comeback along the Pacific coast and often come to this particular slough for food—specifically the large clams that live in the tidal mud. Visitors can take a pontoon boat ride or rent kayaks to see the otters, birds and, occasionally, seals up close.

Blue whales, the world's largest mammals, frequent the waters farther offshore. With tongues that weigh two tons each, and hearts the size of cars, adult blue whales can measure up to 100 feet long and spend summers feeding in deep-water channels in and around the bay. A number of whale-watching services operate out of Monterey and Moss Landing.

Also walk along Cannery Row in the town of Monterey, the place of inspiration for John Steinbeck's novel of the same name. There, continue your marine-life immersion with a trip to the world-renowned Monterey Bay Aquarium.

## Santa Monica

It's no wonder that Santa Monica is a beach-lover's paradise. With 3.5 miles of waterfront, the city is where the Los Angeles area meets the Pacific and where Angelenos go for fun in the sun.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the Santa Monica Pier, making now the perfect time to try out the historic carousel, the romantic Ferris wheel or the new trapeze school.

Also of note: the new Annenberg Community Beach House. The 5-acre facility, which opened in April, mixes new architecture with structural rem-

The Santa Monica Pier is celebrating its centennial. The giant Ferris wheel and new trapeze school make this an ideal place to visit.

nants from an estate that William Randolph Hearst commissioned in the 1920s for Marion Davies. Today it boasts a public pool, art gallery, playground and beach-volleyball courts.

While the original mansion was demolished in 1956, the site incorporates historic elements, such as the restored pool—a smaller version of the opulent pools at Hearst Castle in San Simeon (both homes were the work of architect Julia Morgan). The adjacent Georgian-style Marion Davies Guest House has a visitors center featuring photographs from the site's heyday; some with Barbara Stanwyck, Joan Crawford and Cary Grant.

## Mammoth Mountain

Home to the highest-elevation ski resort in California, Mammoth Mountain certainly lives up to its name. About 400 inches of snow fall annually, providing the perfect wonderland for all sorts of winter sports.

Winter season at Mammoth usually stretches from November to May and sometimes into July. Skiing and snowboarding at the Mammoth Mountain Ski Area are popular, and the resort also offers snowmobiling and cross-country skiing. For visitors who'd rather not fight gravity on the slopes, there's theater, great restaurants and terrific shopping, as well.

In the summer months, tourists and mountain bikers use local ski gondolas to get a view of surrounding mountain peaks. There also are great trails and dirt roads for off-road vehicles. Even if you're not passionate about rocks, the geology of the Mammoth area is fascinating. The mountain was formed from a long series of eruptions that began about 100,000 years ago and the ski area sits on the southwestern edge of Long Valley Caldera, which formed after an eruption 760,000 years ago.

The city of Mammoth Lakes is a quintessential ski town, and Horizon Air will increase service to the region, with two daily nonstop flights from Los Angeles, as well as new daily nonstop flights from San Jose and Reno, and direct (same-plane, one-stop) service from Seattle and Portland, Dec. 17–April 11.

## Los Angeles

Celebrities in this town know how to party, but you don't have to be starlets (or paparazzi, for that matter) to hang out at L.A.'s swankiest hot spots.

The glamorous set seems to congregate in West Hollywood, the neighborhood in the shadow of the Hollywood Hills along Sunset Boulevard. Bars at hotels such as Chateau Marmont, Andaz West Hollywood, Sunset Marquis, Mondrian Los Angeles Hotel and the Standard are quite popular. Other celebrity favorites include Formosa Cafe, Rainbow Bar & Grill, The Abbey Food & Bar and Villa Lounge.

Angelenos also flock to a number of celebrity-backed nightclubs and restaurants. On this list: Ago (Robert De Niro), and The Viper Room (once co-owned by Johnny Depp) in West Hollywood, Tagine (Ryan Gosling) in Beverly Hills, and Beso (Eva Longoria Parker) in Hollywood.

Los Angeles has a number of other attractions. The Skirball Cultural Center is a Jewish cultural institution that strives to inspire people of all ethnicities through a museum with changing exhibitions, engaging music, theater, comedy, film and literary programs. Other classics include hikes in the nearby [Santa Monica](#) mountains; and, of course, Disneyland down I-5 in Anaheim.

## Desert Escape

The eight cities of Palm Springs Desert Resorts have even more to recommend them than sunny weather, relaxing spas and up-scale shopping. Among them: casinos, concerts and golf.

The casinos—Agua Caliente, Fantasy Springs and Morongo, to name a few—offer an adrenaline-pumping array of gaming options and rejuvenating spas. Many of these attractions also book top-notch entertainment: This fall alone, Anita Baker, Jenni Rivera, and Kenny Loggins and Jim Messina will perform in casino venues, while Kenny G and Michael Flatley's *Lord of the Dance* will be at the McCallum Theatre nearby.

Golfers love the Southern California desert for its challenging and picturesque

courses—more than 100 in all. Notables include the Gary Player Signature Course, the Indian Springs Golf Club, La Quinta Resort Mountain Course and the PGA West Stadium Course, which was ranked among *Golf Magazine's* "Top 100 Courses You Can Play" last year.

Finally, the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway has the world's largest rotating tram-cars. The cars climb 2.5 miles up a steep incline to reveal views of the entire Coachella Valley. The ascent from the desert floor to an altitude of more than 8,500 feet is accompanied by a drop in temperature of about 30 degrees. It's the perfect activity to escape the desert heat.

## San Diego

As California's southernmost city, San Diego has a host of fabulous beaches, an accessible waterfront, terrific surfing and a historic Old Town with shops and restaurants that hearken to its days under Mexican rule. California is well-known for its theme parks, and San Diego ranks among

the top cities for thematic amusements.

Arguably the most famous park is the San Diego Zoo, which has more than 4,000 animals of more than 800 species, including giant pandas. Exhibits are designed around particular habitats, ranging from the African rain forest to the Arctic tundra. Many habitats are "natural" with invisible wires and darkened blinds (through which to view birds), and pools and open-air moats (for large mammals). In addition, just 30 miles north of San Diego is the San Diego Zoo's Wild Animal Park—a 1,800-acre sanctuary for more than 3,500 animals.

Another popular park is SeaWorld San Diego. This was the original home of Shamu, and was where marine biologists cared for J.J., an orphaned gray whale that was rehabilitated and released into the wild. It is also one of the few places where emperor penguins can be seen in captivity.

Legoland California, near Carlsbad, showcases sculptures of Lego plastic bricks. In a section dubbed "Miniland USA," look for scaled-down structures such as the Empire State Building and the Daytona International Speedway skillfully made with Lego. The park is quirky, eclectic and definitely worth a visit with the whole family.

With all of these great destinations, you could visit California dozens of times and still have more to see. In fact, following your next visit, you may even find yourself uttering the words made famous by then-governor-to-be Arnold Schwarzenegger in *The Terminator*: "I'll be back." ▲

*Matt Villano is a writer and editor based in Healdsburg, California.*

### GETTING THERE



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