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Santa Barbara's charms are plenty

'The American Riviera' offers a grand ocean view, local wine and more

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Sophisticated Santa Barbara is the epitome of low-key luxury in a picture postcard setting.

Although quintessentially Californian, the charming, laid-back town is known as "The American Riviera" for its temperate climate, sweeping coasts, azure skies, and a robust wine and food scene.

With a selection of upscale hotel properties to choose from, there are options to stay just outside of town, right in the centre of it, or both.

THURSDAY

4 p.m. Room with a view

Check in to the Ritz-Carlton Bacara to maximize your view of the stunning central Californian coast.

Perched above the Pacific, the resort resembles a small seaside village. Six restaurants, three pools, two beaches, a 42,000-square-foot spa and guest villas with rooms and suites dot the 31-hectare property. Book an oceanview Fireside Room with patio fireplace. You'll never want to leave.

7 p.m. Spectacular sunset

Enjoy a legendary Santa Barbara sunset from the outdoor deck at Angel Oak, the resort's signature fine-dining restaurant. The views over the ocean through floor-to-ceiling windows are equally jaw-dropping, as is the striking 25-seat bar topped with vibrant-blue Amazonite quartz that reflects the colour of the sea.

FRIDAY

8 a.m. Morning nature hike

Santa Barbara is the headquarters of Jean-Michel Cousteau's Ocean Futures Society, a marine

conservation organization. Join one of the naturalists of his Ambassadors of the Environment program for an informative walk along Bacara beach, taking in the diverse natural wonders of the Gaviota Coast and discover the rich history of the traditional Chumash culture.

10 a.m. Ahh ... the Spa

Stop at the Bacara spa for a locally inspired treatment. The signature massage uses hot stones and heated compresses filled with organic herbs and salts to create energy flow. Pair it with a citrus-avocado body scrub for a classic Californian combo.

1 p.m. Lobster lunch

Head into town for a stroll along Stearns Wharf, and lunch at the famous Santa Barbara Shellfish Company. The popular seafood shack located at the end of the pier was a favourite of Julia Child, who lived in nearby Montecito. The sea urchin and spider crab are musts, as is the local lobster when in season.

3 p.m. Change of address

The Hotel Californian features beautiful Spanish Colonial Revival architecture and a modern Moorish vibe with trickling fountains in its courtyard and plazas. The Lower State Street destination, one block from the train station, puts you at the heart of the restaurant and entertainment Funk Zone, near the water and Stearns Wharf. The hotel's lobby-library bar Djinn provides the perfect pit stop for a pre- or post-dinner cocktail. A small rooftop pool overlooking the ocean and Spa Majorelle, a Moroccan inspired, blue-tiled oasis, are located across the street. Right opposite is Margerum Wine Company.

4 p.m. Wine o'clock

Part of Santa Barbara's renowned Urban Wine Trail, Margerum is a family-run winery creating hand-



Jean-Michel Cousteau's Ambassadors of the Environment program offers a nature walk that winds above Bacara beach. PHOTOS: VANESSA PINNIGER



Fireside rooms at the Ritz-Carlton Bacara come with their own patio fire pit and stunning view.

crafted small-production wines. Taste the bestselling Sybarite, a blend of Sauvignon Blanc grapes or the popular Riviera Rose. Don't miss Rori's amaro ice cream and amaro sorbet by Twenty-Four Blackbirds Chocolates, both made with Margerum's own amaro. More than 20 of Santa Barbara County's 275 wineries have tasting rooms along the city's walkable downtown trail. In the historic Presidio neighbourhood there's Au Bon Cli-

mat, whose legendary winemaker, the late Jim Clendenen, helped put the diverse wine-growing region on the map. Their Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs are internationally acclaimed.

7:30 p.m. alfresco dinner

Dine under twinkly lit trees on the patio at Loquita. The Spanish restaurant was awarded Michelin Bib Gourmand in 2021 for its tapas, wood-fire-grilled seafood and inventive dishes created with input from celebrated Spanish chef Perfecto Roche. The seasonal paella is a showstopper.

SATURDAY

10 a.m. Visit the garden

Stroll around Ganna Walska Lotusland in Montecito. The 37-acre (15-hectare) botanical site is now recognized as one of the world's 10 best gardens. This whimsical collection of exotic plants, a 43-year labour of love for eccentric Polish opera singer Walska, is a masterpiece of horticulture. Take a self-guided wander or book a more comprehensive two-hour tour with a docent. Visits and tours run Wednesday through Saturday by reservation only. lotusland.org visit

IF YOU GO

Air Canada operates up to five flights daily from Vancouver (YVR) to San Francisco (SFO), with an easy connection into Santa Barbara Municipal airport (SBA).

1 p.m. Lunch at the beach

Stop for lunch on the way back into town at the lovely Rosewood Miramar Beach's Revere Room where Michelin-starred Italian executive chef Massimo Falsini presents seasonally driven menus with ingredients from local farmers, fishers and the resort's own garden. The all-day eatery also serves the prettiest Pisco Sours you'll ever sip.

3 p.m. Hit the road

Head to the Santa Barbara airport for your evening flight home. The writer travelled as a guest of Visit Santa Barbara who neither reviewed nor approved this article before publication.