

California Dreamin'

Written by Written by Nichole Brophy, Darcy Gaugler, Karen Loftus, Melissa Larsen, Marlene Montanez, Colleen Ringer, Elizabeth Smith and Christine Whitton
Monday, 30 June 2008 17:00 - Last Updated Thursday, 04 June 2009 13:44



Every year, 5.64 million Phoenixians visit California—that's more visitors than originate from any other domestic metro. In light of our obvious love for our western neighbor state, we present your guide to California—what's new, what's hot and what's happening (and what you might have previously missed). Consider AFM your Cali vacay concierge.



(FAST FACT: The year-round average daily temperature in San Diego is 70.5 degrees Fahrenheit.)

A quick drive or short flight away, San Diego is one of "Zonis" (as California residents have playfully dubbed us Arizona tourists) fave spots to escape to during our hottest desert days. From SeaWorld to Balboa Park, this coastal beauty offers all the amenities of a metropolis, but with the laissez-faire vibe of a small town.

Stay

When the iconic **US Grant hotel**, a glamorous and opulent early 1900's property, underwent major restoration renovations in 2006, it also installed original artwork in every room. Then, the owners one-upped themselves again by recently opening Celebration Fine Art Gallery, a 3,000-sq.-ft. art gallery on the lobby level—guaranteeing the hotel a reputation as a premier cultural and arts destination in Downtown San Diego. www.usgrant.net.

The **Ivy Hotel**, the stylish, year-old boutique hotel in downtown San Diego, recently launched "Ivy Enticements," a hip new program that could easily fill your weekday social calendar. Depending on the night, learn Texas Hold 'Em, pole dancing, drink mixing and more. Or enjoy movie screenings, video game night or chef demos. www.ivyhotel.com.

In a massive contemporary glass-and-steel structure, the newest luxury condominium-hotel, **Setai San Diego**, will wow visitors with its signature "Zen Chic" style when it opens in October near the Gaslamp Quarter. www.setaisandiego.com.

Last summer, legendary sanctuary Hotel del Coronado unveiled two new reasons to book a stay: **Beach Village** (a collection of 78 guest rooms and suites) and the **Spa at the Del**.

Although constructed more than a century after the hotel's main buildings, Beach Village echoes the resort's iconic aesthetic. The interiors boast all the modern comforts you could want, like flat-screen TV's, fireplaces and fully equipped kitchens. Contemporary conveniences also abound at the Spa at the Del, where visitors can enjoy Pacific Ocean views from the comfort of an infinity-edge pool. Inside, therapists soothe away stress using a variety of sea-centric treatments. 800.468.3533, www.hoteldel.com.

Play

Torrey Pines Golf Course is one of San Diego's proudest gems. With coastal views and immaculate fairways, it's easy to understand why the historic course hosted this year's U.S. Open. The South Course underwent several renovations to prep for the tourney: adding a full-length cart path, thicker rough and tighter fairways. Experience the course as the pros do, by reserving your tee time during the preparation phase for the PGA Tour's Buick Invitational each January. www.torreypinesgolfcourse.com.

The two-and-a-half-hour V.I.P. tour at the **San Diego Zoo** grants guests a behind-the-scenes glimpse. www.sandiegozoo.org.

One of the leading arts organizations in San Diego is the Tony Award-winning Old Globe Theatre located in Balboa Park. In addition to its upcoming season's shows, **Old Globe Theatre** hosts fun, social events like wine samplings. www.theoldglobe.org.

All over San Diego, the numerous **OEX Dive & Kayak Centers** equip and charter sea adventures like kayaking, fishing, diving, scuba diving and snorkeling. Whether you need to hire a guide or simply rent some gear, this well-established company knows its way around the sea. www.oexpress.com.

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Dine

The nearly new **Bondi's** restaurant in the Gaslamp Quarter was the Lamplighter winner for Best New Restaurant last year. The oh-so-Australian beer and food make patrons feel wistful for the great "down under," even if they've never visited the continent. www.thebondi.com.

The Prado at Balboa Park, located in one of the most ornamental buildings in the park (The House of Hospitality), cooks up a tasty fusion of Latin and Italian cuisine. Executive Chef Jeff Thurston utilizes the freshest Southern California ingredients to create his balanced menu.

www.cohnrestaurants.com.



(FAST FACT: Legoland in Carlsbad opened in 1999 and boasts more than 1.5 million visitors per year.)

The region north of San Diego has some of the most beautiful coastline in California as well as several of its most popular and picturesque towns including La Jolla, Del Mar, Encinitas and Carlsbad. Upscale dining and accommodations abound, as do countless opportunities for adventure.

Stay

La Jolla's historic **Grand Colonial Hotel** just got grander with the recent completion of an \$8 million renovation that upgraded the newly acquired adjacent Little Hotel by the Sea as well as the main hotel suites and the 18 Garden Terraces. www.thegrandecolonial.com.

Condé Nast Traveller magazine once designated **Hotel Parisi** in La Jolla one of the "Top 20 Small Hotels in America." The 21-room self-proclaimed "Feng Shui" hotel with sweeping ocean views consistently earns its reputation as one of the most stunning hotels in California. www.hotelparisi.com.

Reopening in June 2008 after a \$25-million renovation, **L'Auberge Del Mar Resort & Spa**, a AAA four-diamond award winner, promises an unparalleled seaside escape. Nestled in the heart of Del Mar, the completely redecorated and upgraded boutique hotel provides an intimate scenic setting with sweeping views of the Pacific Ocean. Its world-class luxury spa is getting a December revamp too. www.laubergedelmar.com.

While luxe resorts overlooking the ocean abound, few in the area compete with the just-a-tad-inland La Costa Resort and Spa, fresh from a several-year \$140 million restoration. Each of its buildings, awash in the pristine Spanish Colonial style, is painted a brilliant white. Rooftops are lined with sun-baked tiles, and balconies are decorated with elegant wrought iron. Bright blue pots frame the pathways, and lush gardens teem with gigantic, orange birds of paradise. Walls double as soothing fountains, and a refreshing ocean mist lingers on the vivid green lawn, resulting in a dreamy, "living in paradise" feel.

Suites include flat-screen TV's, indulgent tubs and huge, European-style windows that open, allowing the fresh California air to gently waft through the room.

While there, do not miss indulging at Spa at La Costa. Named No. 1 Spa in the West by Travel + Leisure magazine in 2005, the refuge deserves its kudos. Some of its most luxurious treatments include the signature Spanish Herbal Body Rub, Avocado-Cilantro Body Masque, Coastal Stone Massage and Botanical Facial. Lastly, visit the on-site Chopra Center for Wellbeing, founded by spiritual guru Deepak Chopra and Dr. David Simon, to fully immerse yourself in the healing mind-body-soul experience of this rejuvenating resort. www.lacosta.com.

Play

Opening in November 2007 in Encinitas, **Lux Art Institute** helps patrons appreciate not only art itself, but the process of its creation with an artist-in-residence program that has resident artists create work while visitors observe. Soon, this art center also expects to be the first LEED-certified museum in the state. www.luxartinstitute.org.

The colorful underwater world of the 6,000-acre **La Jolla Underwater Park** Ecological Reserve is home to fish, seals, crabs and forests of kelp. Sign up for a guided tour or rent snorkel gear at a local dive shop to explore one of the most picturesque spots to snorkel in the state. www.sandiego.gov.

Overlooking scenic San Diego Bay, you'll find the lushly landscaped **Self-Realization Fellowship Temple**. Attracting spiritual seekers of all backgrounds, the quiet temple offers services that include readings of the writings by Paramahansa Yogananda, silent meditations, prayer and devotional chanting. www.yogananda-srf.org/temples/sandiego.

Upgrade your **Legoland** California experience with the exclusive Premium Play Pass for nearly no-wait lines and priority show seating. The

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ultra-exclusive, personalized V.I.P. tours include all of the above plus a tour guide. www.legoland.com.

For quality shopping, visit **Prospect Street** in La Jolla, frequently referred to as “the Rodeo Drive of San Diego.” Browse everything from sophisticated boutiques, high-end retail shops and überhip furniture stores to antique emporiums.

Dine

One of the most revered places to eat in La Jolla is **George's Bar**, which offers panoramic views of La Jolla Cove. Fresh from a renovation, this upscale favorite featuring high-brow bar food has won numerous titles and awards for notables from its wine selection to its chef.

www.georgesatthecove.com.

Fine dining on Prospect Street in La Jolla can be found at **Pasquale**, a four-star Italian restaurant offering fabulous food in a classy chic atmosphere. Also, watch out for celebrities—they've been known to frequent this warm and inviting eatery that becomes a lively hot spot at night.

www.pasqualesrestaurant.com.



Midway between Los Angeles and San Diego is the pulsing city of Palm Springs. Here's what's new and novel in this hot, hot spot.

Stay

Stay tuned: The **Ritz-Carlton, Rancho Mirage** is slated to open its grand doors for business in late 2008. www.ritzcarlton.com.

The Willows Inn, a secluded and historic bed and breakfast retreat is an A-lister favorite. It's adorned with traditional antique furniture and fixtures from Hollywood's Golden Age. www.thewillowspalmsprings.com.

Play

Rejuvenate in the thermal mineral spring at **The Springs Resort and Spa**, recently named the best mineral springs spa by Spa Finder's

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Reader's Choice Awards. www.the-spring.com.

The Well Spa at Miramonte Resort is notorious for its romantic signature body-painting treatment for couples, Pittura Festa per Due. www.miramonteresort.com.

Golfers, take note: Indian Wells is undergoing a transformation. This secluded Player's Course recently opened in the fall of 2007 and boasts a core golf layout designed by John Fought. Also, a brand-new 53,000-sq.-ft. clubhouse debuted in the spring of 2008. www.indianwells.com.

Dine

Current "it" place to dine Spencer's Restaurant serves up classic American, European and Pacific Rim cuisine. www.spencersrestaurant.com.

A beloved favorite, Arnold Palmer's Restaurant, is noted for its two menus (one chosen by Executive Chef Brett Maddock, the other by Arnie himself) offering everything from classic mac-and-cheese to Chilean sea bass. www.arnoldpalmersrestaurant.com.



Orange County

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(FAST FACT: The tallest skyscraper west of the Mississippi - The Library Tower - is in Downtown Los Angeles.)
Welcome to Los Angeles, home of cutting-edge everything—from fashion to savory cuisine and world-class resorts. This sophisticated and sexy hot spot overflows with celebrities and glamour. Fortunately for us jet-setting desert dwellers, this lovable locale is just a quick plane ride away.

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New to downtown, in-the-works entertainment "campus," **L.A. Live** is envisioned as a major draw for the area. The first phase, launched last October, includes Nokia Theatre, soon to become a household name after hosting the American Idol finale. This fall, visitors can look forward to more than 10 restaurants including a Wolfgang Puck concept and a Fleming's. Other venues will also soon call L.A. Live home including **The Grammy Museum**; ESPN's West Coast broadcast headquarters; Jimmy Smith's much-anticipated club, **The Conga Room**; and a trendy Lucky Strike Bowling venue. By 2010, the district will boast Ritz-Carlton Hotel and Residences as well as a JW Marriott. www.lalive.com.

Play

It's only natural that the premier greens in Los Angeles belong to Trump. Located in Rancho Palos Verdes, the **Trump National Golf Club** underwent a \$250 million revamp to a course originally designed by Pete Dye. With Trump's extensive involvement in the project, including his role as lead architect, the new track is now regarded as a Trump Signature Design golf course. www.trumpnationallosangeles.com.

Santa Monica is more than meets the Boulevard. Don't miss **Bergamot Station**. Once a former industrial site, the landmark was converted in 1994 and now ranks as Southern California's largest art gallery and cultural complex, housing numerous contemporary art galleries as well as The Santa Monica Museum of Art. www.bergamotstation.com.

The **Broad Contemporary Art Museum** (BCMA) opened in February at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). BCMA is the first museum built in L.A. since 1997. www.lacma.org.

Even our native Angeleno staffers didn't know the city had a **Museum of Neon Art (MONA)**. Visit the recently reopened institution to learn about "the cultural, historic, aesthetic and technical elements of electric art." www.neonmoma.org.

So, you've experienced Rodeo Drive, Sunset Boulevard and Melrose Avenue. On your next visit, spend the day sauntering along the up-and-coming shops of **West Third Street**. This district boasts several fashion-forward boutiques retailing tomorrow's trends in addition to local farmers' market The Grove as well as Beverly Center.

Coming in '09 are the \$600 million mixed-use **Hollywood and Vine** development, complete with a W Hotel and residences; and the 57,000-sq.-ft. Children's Museum of Los Angeles, which will house interactive-learning exhibits. www.childrensmuseumla.org.

Dine

With the upscalization of downtown, fantastic restaurants and bars have found a following in the neighborhood. **Takami Sushi**, **Elevate Lounge**, **Blue Velvet** and **Edison Bar** are popular tasting and tippling spots du jour. In Hollywood, acclaimed **Sushi Katsu-Ya** under popular Chef Katsuya Uechi is attracting discriminating diners and elite celebrities with innovative sushi offerings. In search of fine fare and celebrity eye candy? Dine at The Huntington, a popular spot frequented by A-listers (and the paparazzi, of course).

The first Gordon Ramsay restaurant in Los Angeles opened its doors in May. Be among the first to taste **The London West Hollywood's** fare. www.gordonramsay.com.

Foodies, consider planning your trip around the end of January to catch the two-week annual **DineLA** restaurant event. Sample three-course prix-fixe meals from some of L.A.'s best dining establishments. Advance reservations strongly encouraged. www.dinela.com.



Santa Barbara

A mere 92-miles north of Los Angeles, the easygoing wine-country community of Santa Barbara has long been recognized as California's "American Riviera."

Play

Golf gurus can experience top-quality Bermuda while also appreciating expansive ocean vistas at **Sandpiper Golf Club**. For scenic panoramas of sweeping mountains and valleys, **Rancho San Marcos** is a best bet. Duffers in the Santa Ynez wine region should golf the greens at **La**

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Purisima. A member of California's Central Coast Golf Trail, La Purisima was voted one of the 50 Toughest Courses by Golf Digest. Its tough layout and ball-thieving tendencies have even provoked locals to nickname the course "La Piranha." www.lapurisimagolf.com, www.sandpipergolf.com.

The arts are now more alive than ever in Santa Barbara, since **1st Thursdays** debuted downtown in early 2007. Also, you can easily view downtown architecture by way of the city's simple self-guided Red Tile Walking Tour. www.santabarbaradowntown.com/go.

The emerging **Funk Zone** (a hot hangout among locals), east of State Street by the waterfront, is a can't-miss. What used to be the town's industrial hub is now a mixed-use establishment housing eclectic businesses like galleries, wine tasting rooms, surfboard shapers and other local indie treasures. Cap off your night's entertainment with a visit to **The Granada** theater on State Street, which reopened in March after a several-year closure for extensive renovations. www.granadasb.org/index.html

Dine

Hungry tourists can indulge at David Lentz's hip and happening hot spot **Hungry Cat**, which initially carved its culinary reputation in Hollywood. The raw bar and bistro offers unique handmade cocktail creations that complement your meal. www.thehungrycat.com.

Two blocks from State Street, **Quantum Kitchen & Cocktails**, another newbie, serves gourmet comfort food and farm-fresh classic dishes. www.quantumrestaurant.com.

SeaGrass, a seafood restaurant in wine country, was started by the team behind Bouchon Santa Barbara. With fish and produce sourced from fresh local markets and an entire menu page devoted strictly to Santa Barbara pinot noirs, this is a superb spot to savor local flavors. www.seagrassrestaurant.com.

Healthy sorts will drink to **EOS Lounge**, which since summer of 2007 has been offering chic organic cocktails.

Several reputed local chefs make themselves available for cooking classes in the area. **Chef Leonardo Curti** opens his own home in wine country to teach visitors. Culinary aficionado and writer **Laurence Hauben** has been known to host special tours and culinary courses. At the **Roblar Winery & Vineyards in Los Olivos**, learn from "guest chefs" hailing from fine restaurants and resorts worldwide. **Market Forays'** guided culinary tours will let you meet the people behind your meal. You'll meet growers and fishermen; visit the farms where raw ingredients originate; and cook and eat amazing dishes. www.marketforays.com.

Wine

It goes without saying that Santa Barbara has more wine tasting and touring options than you can raise a toast to. Still, there are new ways to "wine" in the region.

Several local outfitters offer guided tours of **Santa Barbara's Downtown Urban Wine Trail**. In the span of an afternoon, you'll tour four downtown tasting rooms. (Conveniently, bottles you purchase can be dropped off at your hotel.) www.breakaway-tours.com. Don't want a chaperone? Do it yourself with the **Urban Wine Trail Map**, available at any of the wineries en route.

Sustainable Vine Wine Tours are another fab way to experience Santa Barbara's venerable vinos. Take a "green" wine-tasting tour of the area's organic and biodynamic wineries, and learn about cutting-edge sustainable and organic wine-making practices. With transportation provided by a biodiesel-powered van, tour-goers enjoy rare behind-the-scenes access to wineries normally closed to the public. www.sustainablevine.com.

Quit wining! Well, just for long enough to celebrate the noteworthy (and in some cases, award-winning) microbreweries located in the Santa Barbara region. Get a taste of Santa Barbara's sudsier side through one of **Captain Jack's Tours**. www.captainjackstours.com.

Stay

The new **Canary Hotel Santa Barbara** (formerly Hotel Andalucia) opened on downtown State Street in January. Brought to you by the team behind celebrated Santa Monica celeb haunts Shuttlers on the Beach and Casa del Mar, the sophisticated hangout, complete with rooftop pool and bar, is a stylish scene. www.canarysantabarbara.com.



(FAST FACT: Held each September, the acclaimed Monterey Jazz Festival is the longest continuously running jazz festival in the world.)

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Paso Robles

Paso Robles, the other California wine country, with its access to 170 local wineries, is quickly stealing the “wine-light” from Napa and Sonoma. Located halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, the natural beauty of the prime central coast makes clear why folks like William Randolph Hearst would build a castle here.

Santa Barbara couple Robert and Sherry Gilson, first time hoteliers, used the beautiful surrounding country as a canvas when creating their equine-inspired castle in Paso Robles—a 16-room, luxury boutique hotel called **Hotel Cheval**. Appealing to a wave of discerning foodies and wine connoisseurs hitting the Central Coast, the hotel is the first of its kind in the region's downtown. www.hotelcheval.com.

The Pony Club, a classic European-style hot spot serves celebrated wines of the region. **Bistro Laurent** and **Villa Creek** are the two long-standing restaurants that set the foodie-culture bar in the area. Bistro Laurent is a classic upscale French Bistro where duck breast in red-wine-and-blueberry-reduction sauce is paired with Paso cabernets. Villa Creek is California to the core with local organic foods. In addition, semirecent newcomer Artisan is also making some culinary noise. www.bistrolaurent.com, www.villacreek.com, www.artisanpasorobles.com.

No visit to the Central Coast is complete without a stop at **Hearst Castle**, a stunning journey back in time complete with home film footage of W.J. Hearst, Charlie Chaplin and friends enjoying the opulent property. www.hearst-castle.org.

Big Sur

From April through October, take a three-hour guided moonlight tour of Big Sur's historic stone **Point Sur Lighthouse**, a working 1889 monument listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Forewarning: Ghost stories abound. 831.649.7139, www.pointsur.org.

Every January and February in this picturesque coastal city, you can take an **Eagle Watch Tour** by boat to observe wintering eagles. The 17-mile-long Lake San Antonio is one of the largest Central California winter habitats for bald and golden eagles. 888.588.2267, www.lakesanantonio.net.

Monterey

This idyllic seaside city offers more than the peace that meets the soul –specifically, a wealth of film and literature history in the form of movies filmed in and books written about the area.

Did you know nearly 200 films feature the county of Monterey? Tour some of the shooting locations in a luxury coach via **Monterey Movie Tours**. 800.979.3370, www.montereymovietours.com.

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History Fest Monterey, Oct. 3-19, features in-depth tours, films, history, music and workshops.

Along with many haunts of modern writers that populate the area, the **National Steinbeck Center** provides literary inspiration. 831.796.8388, www.steinbeck.org. Also for Steinbeck devotees, on Aug. 7-10, 2008, the city will hold its annual four-day **Steinbeck Festival**, replete with tours, lectures and events commemorating the famous author's legacy. If you can't time your travel then, you'll find numerous guided and self-guided tours available throughout the year. www.steinbeck.org and www.canneryrow.org (festival and guided tours); www.historicmonterey.org (self-guided).



San Francisco

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Napa

(FAST FACT: A ton of grapes yields approximately 720 bottles, or 60 cases, of vino.)

What's New in Napa? Pack some stemware and fill up in Napa Valley. If it's been a while since you've paid a visit, get your reservations in a row and hit up these Napa newbies.

Dine

In December, **Oxbow Public Market** became Napa's newest culinary magnet, where about 35 merchants sell the region's best meats, poultry, seafood, artisan cheese, breads, baked goods and, of course, wine. 707.963.1345, www.oxbowpublicmarket.com.

Sip

You'll have to wait to experience one of Napa Valley's most exciting tasting spots: the new-and-improved **Hall Wines** in St. Helena. Renowned architect Frank O. Gehry is at the helm on the eye-popping project, scheduled to open in 2010. The nearly 11,000-sq.-ft. center will include the restored Hall Wines building, top-notch technology and eco-friendly design elements. (Hall Wines hopes to achieve LEED certification.) If you simply can't wait for Hall's completion, book a tour now to witness four-years-worth of drawings, photographs and models that went into the project's conception, plus partake in a wine tasting. www.hallwines.com.

Whether you are a Napa Valley novice or a frequent visitor wanting to experience the area's little-known gems, contact **Wine Country Concierge** (WCC). Longtime Napa resident and WCC owner, Jackie Richmond, knows the in-and-outs of Napa and can create a personalized itinerary to suit your sipping needs. 707.252.4472, www.hallwines.com.

Live

If you're an FNV (Frequent Napa Visitor), maybe it is time to consider a second home in Cali's lush wine country. In the spring, **The Lodges at Calistoga Ranch** unveiled its final phase of 27 two-bedroom, fractional-ownership residences. Each picture-perfect pied-à-terre comes equipped with more than 2,500 square feet. of space, an alfresco living area, an expansive kitchen (with storage to stash your vino, of course), and access to a community pool, fitness area, wine cave, hiking trails and The Bathhouse at Calistoga Ranch. www.calistogaranch.com.

Stay

Set to open Sept. 18, **The Westin Verasa** is the first luxury property to debut in Napa Valley in five years—and it will be well worth the wait. The 180-suite hotel-condominium is rooted in the historic architectural style typical of the area—from wood and stone accents to expansive bay windows. Plus, the Westin outpost has a lengthy to-do list to keep you busy during your wine country reprieve, including a tasty trip to Chef Ken Frank's famed French eatery, **La Toque**. If you're in town this January, enroll in Frank's highly anticipated Truffle Camp, complete with truffle-cooking lessons and winery visits. Can't get enough of Verasa? A few condos are still available for purchase starting from the \$400,000's. www.verasanapa.com.



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Yosemite

(FAST FACT: Yosemite National Park boasts the tallest waterfall in North America: Yosemite Falls at 2,426 feet.)

Just because you go to Yosemite for the great outdoors, doesn't mean you should give up fine dining. Reserve your spot now for January or February, during **Chefs' Holidays at The Ahwahnee**. During the annual two-month celebration, some of our country's most prestigious chefs host sessions complete with a chef's reception, cooking demos, and a final five-course Gala Chef's Dinner. (\$155 per person), 801.559.4949, www.yosemitepark.com.

For those wanting to do more rejuvenating than roughing it, choose destination **Spa du Sureau**, located at the AAA five-diamond and Mobil five-star bed and breakfast, **Chateau du Sureau**. The Chateau, which boasts European stylings, offers luxurious amenities and estate hospitality like butler service. 559.683.6860, www.chateausureau.com.

Tahoe

(FAST FACT: Lake Tahoe is about 22 miles long and 12 miles wide.)

Tahoe is known for its lake and outdoor recreation, and while that's unlikely to change, what will change is the resort scene: **The Ritz-Carlton Highlands** opens in fall 2009. www.ritzcarlton.com.

On the restaurant scene, **Mikuni**, a Japanese restaurant and sushi bar which expanded operations to Tahoe from its five locations in the Sacramento area, has become the newest attraction. The upscale Southwestern spot **Caliente** is also attracting crowds, www.mikunisushi.com, www.calientetahoe.com.

While in Tahoe, don't miss the **Shakespeare Festival**—the event of the summer in the area—which runs July 9 through Aug. 17. (This summer you can also catch the original musical production "Cambio," a modern retelling of The Hunchback of Notre Dame story.) www.laketahoeshakespeare.com.

Mammoth

Mammoth Marvel Late last year, visitors to Mammoth Lakes encountered a brand-new high-end accommodation option within easy reach of the town's ski slopes and translucent lakes: **The Westin Monache Resort, Mammoth**. As the first full-service hotel in the area, The Westin sits in a prime spot near the Village Gondola, which connects to Mammoth's superior slopes. To fuel those days of battling moguls and black diamonds, guests can savor the American fare offered at the hotel's on-site eatery, **Whitebark Restaurant, Bar and Lounge**. Try to grab a seat around the open kitchen and make sure to take a close look at the wallpaper, which isn't just an eye-catching design—it actually features topographic maps. www.westin.com/mammoth.

Summer or winter, ride the gondola to the new Top of the **Sierra Interpretive Center**, California's highest facility of its kind. After taking in the lofty viewpoint and interactive exhibits, grab a bite to eat at 11,000-plus feet. www.mammothmountain.com.

Dig into the family-style fare at **Restaurant LuLu**, which sits in Village at Mammoth. And trust us, you'll want to end your meal with the cookie plate. www.restaurantlulu.com.