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A head-clearing jaunt to Ventura County during the holidays



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Weekend Escape: Ventura

By Julie L. Kessler

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One doesn't often think of Ventura County as a proto-foodie haven, but in December, my daughter and I learned about Adolfo Camarillo, an early 20th century visionary. Camarillo, a prominent landowner, businessman and philanthropist — and the town's namesake — was a leading innovator in introducing new crops to the area, forever altering the local economy. Now in Ventura County, you can find impressive food, beachfront accommodations, a lovely marina, great shopping and a touch of history that provided a welcome holiday-season hiatus, all within a 90-minute drive. The tab: \$350 plus tax for two nights at the Embassy Suites Mandalay Beach Hotel & Resort, \$90 for a one-hour gondola ride in Channel Islands Harbor [(805) 612-4475, www.gondolaparadiso.com], \$150 for dinner at Tierra Sur at Herzog Wine Cellars, \$45 for lunch at Rhumb Line Restaurant and \$20 for breakfast at the Boatyard Cafe.

The bed

Embassy Suites Mandalay Beach Hotel & Resort (2101 Mandalay Beach Road, Oxnard; [805] 984-2500, www.mandalayembassysuites.com) is a family-friendly, all-suite hotel on a wide, pristine beach. The 600-square-foot suites have separate living and sleeping areas, two granite bathrooms and come with kitchenettes and Keurig coffee makers. Full made-to-order breakfasts and a daily cocktail reception are included. The grounds are lovely, with a large, sun-drenched pool, Jacuzzis, a fitness center and spa treatment rooms.

The meal

Dinner brought us to Tierra Sur at Herzog Wine Cellars (3201 Camino del Sol, Oxnard; [805] 983-1560, www.tierrasurherzog.com, closed Saturdays). It's in an odd location in an industrial park, but the tasting and dining rooms are beautifully appointed and the service is impeccable. We had two of the best steaks we've ever had: a grass-fed Uruguayan rib-eye and a Crescent-certified Angus beef steak, complemented with a 2012 Petite Sirah. The kosher cuisine was delectable. Also on the itinerary: lunch the following day at Rhumb Line Restaurant [1510 Anchors Way Drive, Ventura; (805) 642-1200, www.rhumblinaventura.com], a lovely spot with Ventura Harbor views, where we swooned over the New England clam chowder. Our final breakfast at Ventura Harbor's Boatyard Café (1583 Spinnaker Drive, No. 109, Ventura; (805) 850-0202, www.theboatyardcafe.com) was delicious and inexpensive (omelets \$10.50-\$14.95).

The find

The Barefoot Boutique [1575 Spinnaker Drive, Suite 106B, Ventura; www.barefootboutiqueusa.com] and Ventura Swimwear [1559 Spinnaker Drive, Suite 102, Ventura; (805) 642-6281], both at Ventura Harbor Village, have unusual, well-priced items. While there, stop by Channel Islands National Park's visitors center [(805) 658-5730, www.lat.ms/1YUNYUd] and see "A Treasure in the Sea," an excellent, free movie narrated by Kevin Costner that explains the history and importance of the nearby Channel Islands.

The lesson learned

Spending a weekend in Camarillo/Oxnard/Ventura will remind you that innovative food can be enjoyed outside big cities, and that small-town friendliness and abundant free parking are beautiful things.

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