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L.A. Getaway: Two Days in Canine-Friendly Carmel

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After five hours of uninterrupted farmland, the sight of Bernardus Lodge & Spa in the beautiful wine country of Carmel Valley felt like a continent away from the bustle of Los Angeles. Nestled among nearly 30 acres of vineyards and orchards, the picturesque award-winning resort is the embodiment of tranquility, teeming with lush, fragrant gardens. The lodge, a perfect marriage of Old World elements and Modern style, underwent a multi-million-dollar remodel at the end of last year, the result of which is an unparalleled indoor/outdoor space that takes full of advantage of the ever-warm microclimate that pervades this charming nook of the valley.

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Views at the Bernardus Lodge and Spa - Photo by Gina Hall

In the evening, the crisp air comes alive with the smell of a wood fire, burning in the magnificent outdoor fireplace on a luxurious patio overlooking the focal point of the resort -- a perfectly manicured bocce ball/croquet lawn right out of Victorian England. I've never seen my dog so happy. It brought out the Italian greyhound in him, apparently, as he zoomed in circles, darting this way and that, as if chasing an imaginary jackrabbit. His look of smug satisfaction afterward, as he lay in the shade, assured me that he was grateful to be so welcomed here.

Of course, if there is any better way to unwind after a long trip than with a glass of local Pinot Noir and a friendly game of bocce ball, it can only be the spa, which is open to all resort guests. A large pool provides a refreshing respite on a warm Indian summer afternoon, and the hot tub offers relaxation after a long day on the road.

The allure of the resort is magnified by Lucia, a Wine Spectator "Best of Award of Excellence" winner and perhaps the culinary epicenter of the valley, where Chef Cal Stamenov's seasonal menu is composed of produce he harvests from the bountiful garden on the estate, mere footsteps from the kitchen. This is not a box of herbs calling itself a "garden." This is two full acres of organic fruits and veggies, more than 150 fruit trees, domestic and Italian honey bees, and five varieties of chickens, all functioning as a synergistic model of sustainability.

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Seared Day Boat Scallops at Lucia - Photo by Gina Hall

A graduate of San Francisco's California Culinary Academy, his relationships with the local fishermen and ranchers dates back even before he opened the restaurant in 1999, ensuring that he gets the first choice of the finest meats and seafoods. Whether dining by the fireplace in white leather chairs or under the sparkling chandeliers amid a veritable grove of olive trees on the wooded patio, the experience is an unforgettable one.

A stay in Carmel Valley is not complete, however, without sampling some of the local wines. Bernardus' tasting room is just a few miles away, in town. Here, you can enjoy wine grown right on the estate -- that vineyard, despite its natural beauty, is not just for looks. I purchased a bottle of a 2009 late-harvest Sauvignon Blanc, a sweet dessert wine that the chef had paired with his out-of-this-world seared foie gras and wild huckleberries. The staff is knowledgeable about both the wine and region, and I departed better educated... and a bit more euphoric.

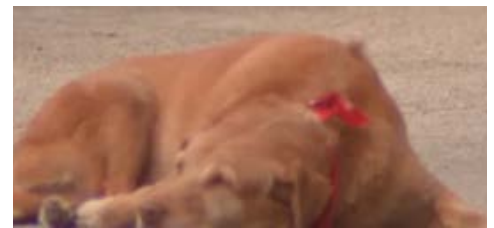
My only regret is that I won't be in town later this month (Oct. 24) for the fourth-annual Grape Crush & Oyster Shuck in Ingrid's Vineyard at the base of the estate. The event -- which features live music, wine-tasting, a bloody Mary bar and a family-style lunch -- is an ideal opportunity to meet with fellow oenophiles, as well as vineyard managers and wine makers in what is the culmination of their year's efforts.

After a breathtaking morning drive through the rolling hills of the valley, I entered once again the unique charm that is Carmel-by-the-Sea. Part alpine village, part beach community, this gem of a town beckons me back year after year.

Although, I regularly stay at the Cypress Inn, where they remember me despite the passage of time, I had new reason to do so this year: Auggie. The downtown hotel, owned in part by animal activist Doris Day, has always been a dog-friendly haven but now I was bringing my pooch. And, like the romantic comedies that Day used to star in, the little guy fell in love. It wasn't a Maltese and it wasn't the filet Mignon at Terry's (the hotel's intimate restaurant and lounge) -- although we both loved that, as well as the truffle-mushroom ravioli and pre-Prohibition-style cocktails -- no, Auggie fell in love with the Pacific. And, having never seen the beach before (as far as I know), it was love at first sight.



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Auggie hits the dog-friendly beach - Photo by Gina Hall

The dog-friendly beach at the end of Ocean Avenue is as idyllic as a coastline can be, with sweeping views of Pebble Beach Golf Course on one side of the bay and architectural masterpieces on the other. But it was the crystal-clear water lapping onto the wet sand that enraptured this little dog. His wide-eyed wonder mirrors my own as I reminisce on a barstool at Terry's "Yappy Hour," sipping a Sazerac and contemplating the timeless beauty and friendly ambience that define Carmel.

Follow Gina Hall on Twitter: www.twitter.com/Capra_Girl
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