

- Inn-Escapable: Bernardus Lodge & Spa, Carmel Valley

We had arranged it so the Refuge would be the cherry on top of a romantic Carmel getaway weekend. In the lead-up to our spa escape, we spent lots of leisurely hours strolling through quirky shops, art studios and courtyards. We watched the sun set while sprawled across a blanket at Carmel Beach. We indulged our sweet tooth with a few goodies from Lula's Chocolates and enjoyed a wonderful, splurge-worthy dinner at Anton & Michel Restaurant -- all before settling down in our room at the cozy Wayside Inn.

Advertisement

A dark blue rectangular advertisement for SF State Extended Learning. At the top left, "SF STATE" is written in yellow, with "EXTENDED LEARNING" below it in white. The main text "We Make Better Jobs Happen." is in large, bold, white font. Below this is the SF State seal, which features a circular emblem with a book and a sun, surrounded by the words "SACRED HARBOR" and "1899". Below the seal is the text "SF STATE" in white. To the right of the seal and text is a yellow rectangular button with the words "LEARN MORE" in dark blue.

Did we mention the wine? Carmel-by-the-Sea is home to the Wine Walk By-the-Sea, where a \$65 passport -- pick one up at the Chamber of Commerce Visitor Center -- lets you enjoy nine of the 14 tasting rooms in town and sample local estate-grown still and sparkling wines. How cool is that? You proceed at your own pace, the tickets never expire and you do it all on foot -- so you don't have to worry about fighting traffic

while driving from place to place like you do in Napa. Or about driving, for that matter.

In each tasting room we visited, we asked folks if they were familiar with Refuge -- and we were met with enthusiastic reviews. A friendly young woman behind the counter at Dawn's Dream Winery called it a "little piece of heaven." Our expectations were on the rise.

Refuge is located just five miles out of town, near the Carmel Valley Athletic Club. We entered along a winding, foliage-lined path and were greeted by a smiling attendant, who set us up for deep-tissue massages. Let the de-stressing begin.

After being kneaded to our heart's content, we were ready for the cycle. Designed to elevate the spirit and purify the body, it begins either with a short stint in a cedar sauna or, as we did, in the eucalyptus steam room, where you inhale the sharp aroma and feel the moist air cleanse your lungs.

From there, it's an invigorating dip in either a rock-lined "cold" or "cool" pool. Not quite as icy, the cool pool is billed as having the temperature of the Pacific Ocean. When entering either one, it's difficult to stifle a loud "Yelp!" I tried my best -- because silence is golden at Refuge, and there are signs everywhere reminding you of that fact.

It's that silence that makes the place so tranquil. (Thankfully, cellphones and other electronics are forbidden). Surrounded by nature's greenery, all you hear are the soothing sounds of babbling waterfalls, crackling fires and chirping birds.

Patrons are encouraged to do the cycle as many times as they want. Just make sure to finish it off with a dip in the bubbling warm and hot pools. Ahhhhhh. You can feel all the various irritants of life -- rush-hour traffic, work deadlines, the latest Raiders or 49ers defeat -- just melt away.

Despite what you learned in grade school, Refuge is all about the five R's: "Rejuvenate, renew, refresh, relax, re-energize." That's their mantra, and they want you to give yourself over to it.

General manager Ron Haas says the overall experience is designed to be "a little mini vacation runaway from our busy lives." Diane simply called it a "water park for adults."

Me? Enveloped in a deep trance, I just kept whispering the word "awesome" over and over.

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If You Go

Anton & Michel Restaurant: Open for lunch and dinner on Mission Street between Ocean and Seventh avenues, Carmel; www.antonandmichel.com. Lula's Chocolates: Find Lula's Carmel shop on Mission Street between Ocean and Seventh avenues, Carmel; www.lulas.com.

Refuge: This relaxation spa is open 10 a.m.-10 p.m. daily (last entry at 8:30 p.m.) at 27300 Rancho San Carlos Road, Carmel; www.refuge.com. Admission is \$44 (patrons must be 18 or older), robe rental is \$12, and massages start at \$109 (robe and admission included).

Wine Walk By-the-Sea: Pick up a \$65 passport, which can be used at your choice of nine out of 14 Carmel wine tasting rooms, at the Chamber of Commerce Visitors Center, on San Carlos Street between Fifth and Sixth avenues; www.carmelcalifornia.org/things-to-do/wine_walk_passport.aspx.