

Abroad At Home

My Sonoma Valley staycation

By Stett Holbrook



There is a wrong way and a right way to spend a staycation.

The wrong way is to stay home. I tried that once with expectations of leisurely days playing tourist in my hometown. I ended up doing laundry, organizing the garage (again) and answering calls from people I didn't want to talk to. I think I cleaned the bathroom as well. It felt like a waste of my time off, and when it was over I felt like I needed a vacation.

The right way is to leave home and spend a few nights somewhere nice and then play tourist. To keep it a staycation it needs to be close to home. That's easy to do in the North Bay, and a lot cheaper and quicker than jumping on a plane.

I lived in San Francisco for years and never went to Alcatraz until my family came into town and was looking for something to do. OK, I said. I guess I'll go. It was fascinating and I loved the view of the City from the island. I saw San Francisco in a new light, literally and figuratively.

Living now in the land of plenty here in the North Bay, it's easy to take all the wine, food, natural beauty and history for granted. I wanted to see the area with new eyes. But why should I wait until my in-laws come to town to experience what people come from all over the world to enjoy? Thanks to my hosts at the Sonoma Valley Visitors Bureau, my wife and I took a 36-hour staycation to the Sonoma Valley this past weekend to see what we've been missing.

While I was ready to play tourist, I wanted to avoid the tourist-dense zone around the Sonoma Plaza. The square itself and Sonoma City Hall are beautiful, but shopping at the many stores around the square

was not what I had in mind. I wanted to get a little more off the beaten track. I was OK being a tourist. I just didn't to hang around other tourists.



TAKE A STROLL MacArthur Place's grounds are filled with gardens and art.

MacArthur Place Hotel & Spa made for a perfect base camp and a rather plush one at that. Rooms start at \$425. The hotel is just four blocks away from the square, close but far enough away for me. The hotel, which began as a country estate built in the 1850s, is made up of a series of colonial-style cottages surrounded by meticulously maintained gardens and outdoor sculptures. I'd much rather ramble around the grounds here than roam a hotel hallway any day. A horsey, Southern-country-manor theme pervades the place. It feels a world apart from the busy plaza. I love the varied style of homes and leafy neighborhoods in Sonoma east of Broadway. The hotel put us right in the middle and made exploring the area on foot easy.

As part of my desire to see Sonoma from a different vantage point, I enlisted the help of tour guide Bruce Mackay, a friendly expat from England with a white goatee who owns Vin de Luxe wine tours. There are plenty of tour operators in Sonoma Valley, but Mackay strives to distinguish himself with one-of-a-kind tours that celebrate some of the area's lesser known sights and attractions. Of course winery visits are the core of what he does, but he doesn't offer booze cruises. Instead of quantity, he seeks out quality with appointment-only tours that offer more history and wine education than they do bacchanalia. His background in the wine industry (Landmark, Ravenswood, Quixote) means he's got insider knowledge.

We took a version of his "over the moon" tour that began with a stop at the Sonoma Skypark. The full tour is \$850 for two. The "moon" here happens to be Moon Mountain, and we were going over it in Bob Berwick's stunning 1926 biplane. The Wright engine in the plane is the same as Charles Lindbergh used to cross the Atlantic Ocean.

"Not many things are still working at 89 years old," says Berwick, a former commercial pilot who runs Coastal Air Tours and partners with Mackay on his tours.

Good enough for Lindy, good enough for me. I've been in some small planes before, but never a nearly 90-year-old plane with an open cockpit. A layer of fog was hanging over the valley when we arrived at the airport, but as soon blue sky began to appear we taxied down the runway and climbed through a hole in the clouds.

The feeling of flying in a plane that felt no bigger than an amusement-park bumper car was unnerving at first, and I found myself holding on to a support bar in the cockpit as we raced through the cold morning air at about 90 miles an hour. What good would that do if things went wrong? As we bounced over some mild turbulence, I noticed a rising wave of nausea and considered that Berwick was seated directly behind me. And he wasn't wearing goggles. For both our sakes, I really didn't want to get sick. But Berwick has been flying for 40 years and has piloted everything from DC3s to 767s. I focused on that, and started to relax and enjoy the ride.

Moon Mountain loomed at the northern edge of the Sonoma Valley, rising well above the morning fog. Strangely, I felt more at ease as we flew away from the fog and above the rain-greened mountain and its patchwork of vineyards, woods and sprawling estates. As we circled back to the airport and skirted Napa County to the east, the last of the fog burned away and I appreciated Sonoma Valley below in all its glory.

Back on the ground, my nausea was replaced by hunger. We headed south in Mackay's comfortable Lexus SUV to Cornerstone Gardens in Carneros appellation of the valley, land of fog and cool-weather-loving Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. I had a vague idea of what Cornerstone was, but my limited expectations made the place that much more of a surprise.

Cornerstone Gardens is nine acres of outdoor sculpture and artful landscape architecture. Each installation is like entering a room in a gallery, but this one has no roof or walls. It's a beautiful and inspirational place. I imagine many people drive past as they hurry to Napa or central Sonoma. That's too bad. It would be easy to spend a day here wondering among the art and varied landscapes.

There are also a few winetasting rooms and tasteful shops (Artefact Design and Salvage is great indoor/outdoor shop to explore) and an excellent place to eat, Park 121. Apparently there have been several restaurants in the space that never caught on. This place has all the right moves. It's an open, airy cafe with a delicious, eclectic and locally sourced menu that includes Cuban sandwiches, empanadas, spring rolls, decadent grilled cheese and a Carneros-only wine list.



ROOM WITH A VIEW While Hamel Family Winery is just off Highway 12 it feels a world apart.

The reason Mackay likes to fly guests over Moon Mountain is to give them a bird's eye view of one of his favorite winegrowing regions. Moon Mountain sits on the southwestern slope of the Mayacamas Range and offers expansive views of Sonoma, Valley of the Moon and the Sonoma Mountain range across Highway 12. The newly created Moon Mountain American Viticultural Area is home to mountain vineyards that grow in the lean, volcanic soils created by Mt. St Helen's big blast a few million year back. We headed Petroni Vineyards up Cavedale Road. The steep, mountaintop vineyards are impressive enough, but the newly opened, 18,000-square-foot cave is the real draw. The lush Pinot Noir, Syrah and Sangiovese are worth the drive too. It's open by appointment only.

After Mackay dropped us off at our hotel, we had a little downtime before dinner. I used my time wisely. I took a nap. I wanted to be refreshed before eating at one of my favorite restaurants, the Glen Ellen Star. I reviewed the restaurant shortly after it opened about three years ago. I loved it then and love it now. Little has changed, which I take as evidence of the strength of chef-owner Ari Weiswasser's vision: a small but wonderfully executed menu of locally sourced, wood roasted vegetables and meat and fish, thin crust pizzas, great salads and reasonably priced local wines.

The bar seating around the tiny, open kitchen and intimate dining room make it feel like you're dining in someone's house. It's really a perfect wine country restaurant, welcoming, casually sophisticated and dependably delicious. On this visit and ones previous we were waited on by Tom Rice, a consummate pro in a land of amateurs. He's got a charming manner, a wide smile and he knows the menu as if he created the dishes himself. He and Weiswasser make the restaurant the little gem that it is.

Back at MacArthur Park feeling full and happy, we slipped into the hot tub for a soak under a starry sky. In our comfortable room, I found myself wishing I could transport the place with its soaking tub, fireplace and outdoor shower back home, but then I wouldn't leave home. That night I slept as if I'd been shot with a tranquilizer dart.

The first order of business the next morning was breakfast. Lots of hotels offer complimentary continental breakfast, but I've come to be wary of them since they're usually little more than store-bought pastries, corn flakes and out-of-season fruit. You get what you pay for, right? MacArthur Place offers something altogether different: house-baked muffins and pastries, excellent granola, chia seed

and yogurt muesli, bagels with salmon-cream cheese spread, local hardboiled eggs, and fresh (albeit out-of-season) fruit.

Sunday was our last day and the agenda wasn't too demanding: massage, lunch and another winetasting appointment. I was beginning to get the hang of this staycation stuff.

Lunch was a quick one at Maya, our one trip to the Sonoma Plaza. The stone-walled restaurant boasts a tequila list 150 bottles deep. But I came for food not shots. We were running late so we unfortunately had to wolf down a bowl of excellent tortilla soup, a so-so caesar salad and an enjoyable pair of tlacoyos, pockets of lightly fried masa filled with mole verde and chicken. I wish we had more time to enjoy it, but we were late for our massage back the hotel.

The longest massage I've ever had was a 15 minutes in a chair in my office. Nice, for sure, but I was relishing the thought of 60 minutes. After slipping on a robe and pair of sandals, we were escorted into separate rooms filled with ethereal New Age music and pleasantly perfumed air. I was in for an aromatherapy massage. I was instructed to select an aroma from a flight of bottles. I chose eucalyptus. It's rejuvenating, my masseuse told me. And who doesn't want to feel rejuvenated? In truth, when my time was up and the massage was over I felt more calm and Zenned out than rejuvenated, and that was fine by me. I lingered on the warmed massage table to savor my serene state of mind and body.



VISTA POINT The view from Hamel Family Winery is stunning. And the wine is pretty great, too.

Thoroughly unstressed, we headed to our last stop, Hamel Family Wines. I heard a few things about this new winery between Sonoma and Glen Ellen. I heard they threw an over-the-top rager of an opening party last year. I heard the place oozed money. And I heard the owners had a thing for badgers. But I hadn't heard much about their wines.

Once we were buzzed in (appointment only), we drove up a long driveway to the modern looking "estate house" and entered another world—one of wealth, impeccable taste and, to my pleasant surprise, a real commitment to the environment.

Water from the winery is used to wash out tanks is collected in a pond where it's used for irrigation. The soil excavated from the newly opened 12,000-foot cave (yep, they've got one too) was used to create

rammed-earth walls for the tasting room and administrative office that help reduce the building's energy use. The grapes are certified organic and cover crops run between the vines. Biodynamic certification is in the works.

"We're creating our own ecosystem on this property," says Hamel's ebullient "wine ambassador" India King.

The tasting room ("room" really doesn't do it justice—how about "hospitality center"?) and expansive decks and grounds, water features and chairs that all orient you to the rolling vineyards, across the valley and to Sonoma Mountain in the background. It's positively stunning. It's the most beautiful winery I've ever seen, hands down. King and director of hospitality Dawn Agnew clearly enjoy working here, and their enthusiasm shows.

How's the wine? Like everything else here, it's exceptionally fine. Tasting our way through five wines, each exhibits enough fruit and accessibility to satisfy California palates but with sufficient restraint and finesse to please those with a more European sensibility. I'd given up on Zinfandel because more often than not it's got the subtlety of blackberry-flavored jelly, but Hamel's 2012 estate Zin displays a seductive delicacy backed by muscular tannins. The flagship 2010 Hamel Family Ranch Bordeaux blend is a gorgeous age-worthy wine of power and grace that's eminently drinkable right now.

This is clearly a money-is-no-object winery, but every detail from the lighting of the cave, the leather-covered doors in the "reserve room," and the individually folded terrycloth hand towels in the bathroom reflect the owners' style and sensibility.

Next time you've got family in from out of town, skip Alcatraz and take them here. Better yet, don't wait for them and take a staycation of your own.

Though our trip was only 36 hours, heading back home as the hazy winter sun set over Sonoma Mountain, I felt like I had truly been away in spite of the short distance we'd traveled.