

# The Ultimate California Road Trip

BY KAREN VILLALPANDO

We aptly named our adventure the “Ultimate California Road Trip” – traveling north up California’s coast by car for a week, one big happy family. Mention the words “road trip” and you’re immediately plunged back to college, where you ice up the cooler, put \$20 in your pocket and set off. This would be little higher brow, with actual planned destinations and, more importantly, reservations.

Our daughters, Emily and Rebecca, were mildly enthusiastic about it. Getting from point A to B has been our modus operandi for the 15 and 12 years of their lives. But this was to be quite different, traveling under 100 miles a day, taking in all the sights and sounds, and soaking up as much local color as possible. “It’s about the journey, not just the destination,” we said to inspire them. “Great,” they half-heartedly replied.

We began at Burbank Airport, renting a car and leaving ours in a hotel parking lot for a week. The first miles under our wheels would be LA to Santa Barbara, by way of State Route 118 through Somis, a beautiful drive through an agricultural gem of the Southland. Many of



photo by Michael Villalpando

Emily, left and Rebecca soaked up the sun at the beach, just in front of the Four Seasons Biltmore, as part of the first leg of our journey.

the oranges, avocados, and strawberries Southern Californians consume are grown in this area.

We arrived at the Four Seasons Biltmore in Santa Barbara around 3:00pm, just in time to tour the property and enjoy the beach for an hour. Our road trip was off to a great start, and looking around the Biltmore property the kids were thinking, “this could be okay.”

The Biltmore is actually in Montecito, just south of the city, nestled in a quiet neighborhood overlooking the Pacific Ocean. The Spanish Colonial hotel was built in 1927, and completed a \$240 million renovation in 2006. Owner Ty Warner carefully and meticulously presided over the renovation, ensuring the hotel was restored to its original splendor. He traveled the world selecting decorative pieces and rugs for his jewel on the California Riviera.

Custom Spanish tile is used throughout the hotel, some

original, others have been added, but you are hard pressed to tell the difference. During the renovation, magnificent stone arches were discovered under layers of plaster, and were painstakingly restored to their original state. The original architect, Reginald Johnson, designed the hotel to accent stunning vistas from every vantage point, including the archways that serve as gateways to the ocean.

The guest rooms have been upgraded. It’s amazing how state-of-the-art technology, including 42” plasma TVs, internet service and air conditioning, have been incorporated into a 1920s hotel without changing the feel. Imagine a luxury hotel without air conditioning for all these years. We were quick to notice, however, that instead of cluttering the 1920s-style rooms with air vents and metal plates, the vents are actually carved into the plaster, being both functional and decorative.

The Biltmore is your quintessential luxury California hotel and our girls were impressed with stop number one. They took note of the architecture because it is similar to our home, a Spanish style house built in 1929. The solid, rustic doors to the guest rooms and the closets were identical to the front door of our home. The old world masonry and thick walls are also indicative of the period.

We enjoyed a leisurely walk around the hotel grounds, admiring the beautiful flowers and the hotel’s signature fig tree — a majestic Moreton Bay fig with sprawling, exposed roots. Many of the plants are marked with over 3,000 species represented, including 40 varieties of palm trees. A putting green and croquet court are available on the back lawn.

The hotel’s pool is large with a mineral spring spa and a Jacuzzi. The Spa is adjacent, offering 10,000 square feet of total pampering and luxury. The eucalyptus steam room was a popular destination for us, very invigorating and uplifting.

Bella Vista restaurant offers precisely that, beautiful views of the Pacific. The patio is perfect for an alfresco brunch or lunch, and the firepit warms evening diners. Inside, the retractable glass ceiling allows ocean breezes and starry nights to abound in an elegant and spacious setting. The menu is classic California, with eclectic dishes like the Ojai honey-glazed Chilean sea bass, and the wild salmon with yukon potatoes and herb fennel salad. From the grill, the American Kobe beef tenderloin or the rack of lamb is superb. Accompanying sauces include lobster, wild mushroom jus, and watermelon and roasted pepper relish.



photo by Peter Vitali/Four Seasons

A \$240 million renovation at the hotel has restored the Four Seasons Biltmore in Santa Barbara to its regal splendor.

We ventured into town the next day, exploring the many shopping options and the beach while Michael found a golf course. Sandpiper Golf Course is public, yet maintained like a private country club, perfectly manicured with many challenging holes. Set right on the edge of the ocean, the breath-taking views give a “Pebble Beach” feel to this So Cal course.

That evening, we walked into the town of Montecito and enjoyed a Spanish meal at Cava. It was Latin cuisine, including Mexican, Spanish and Cuban. The paella was outstanding. It’s a lively place with live music, a killer Margarita, and handsome waiters. If Santa Barbara is a destination on your road trip, a visit to Cava is highly recommended.

After two glorious nights at the Biltmore, it was time to hit the road again. We decided to visit an old friend, Bryan Babcock from Babcock Vineyards off Highway 246. Bryan is actually not old at all, we just happened to meet him when he was just out of Occidental College and UC Davis. He was probably the youngest winemaker in Santa Ynez Valley. That was 1987. We enjoyed his wines so much, we had cases sent to Illinois for our wedding in 1988. Since then the winery has grown, and so have our families. Bryan has branched out. He now produces delicious pinot gris, pinot noir, and cabernets in addition to his signature chardonnay. His family has branched out too, with wife Lisa and two kids. He was on kid duty



photo by Peter Vitali/Four Seasons

Bella Vista restaurant offers stunning ocean views and award winning cuisine.

the afternoon we visited, so his staff gave us the grand tour, and offered to ship the wine we purchased to us, since we would be flying back. Bryan is still making great wines, and his chardonnay is still my favorite. However, the Vogelzang cabernet is so big, rich and delicious, you have to try a bottle. Go to their website at [www.babcockwinery.com](http://www.babcockwinery.com). Harvest is coming soon so be sure to watch for new releases.

We picked up Highway 1 again in Lompoc and headed to Guadalupe, where Michael's grandmother once lived. As we drove north, Michael reminded the girls of his family history, which I will now share with you. Michael's maternal grandfather was Hiroshi Araki, a prosperous Japanese landowner in the Santa Maria Valley, near Guadalupe. During World War II, he was forced to sell his land for pennies on the dollar. To avoid being sent to an internment camp, Araki went back to his native Japan, leaving his wife and four children. Michael's grandmother took her maiden name, Elisa Holguin, as did her daughters Nora (Michael's mother) and Lucille. Brother Joe enlisted in the US Army and joined the famous, 442nd "Go For Broke" Japanese-American Infantry Division. He fought in the Battle of the Bulge and became a decorated veteran. The youngest brother, Bobby kept his Araki name, and because of his young age, was able to stay with his mother. Elisa moved into a modest home in Guadalupe, where she lived until her death in 1976.

Pulling into town, we saw the cemetery, and decided to see if we could locate her grave. There was an old caretaker there, and we told him about Elisa. The man, dressed in a worn plaid shirt, pulled out a wide ledger book with a metal covering. Every entry was hand written: there was no computer or even electricity. Michael recalled the date of her death, or close to it, and remembered she had remarried late in her life. Once we added up all the particulars we found the entry. The man pulled out a plot map, and we walked less than 100 feet to her grave, complete with headstone. It had been nearly 40 years since Michael had been there. The wind was swirling through the cemetery and it was chilly for late July, yet no one was cold. It was a wonderful moment, and the girls felt an intense connection to their great-grand-

mother. Neither ever had the chance even to meet their paternal grandmother, as Nora died when Emily was only 8 months old. We stood there quietly, and soaked in the emotion.

We climbed back into the rental car and drove down the main street. Masatani's Grocery was still there, where Michael and his brothers and sisters would buy candy and treats, as was the old movie theater. A yellow sign with "La Sympatia Spanish Restaurant" stood out, and we ventured in for some lunch. Short, aqua stools laced around a counter, with four or five booths in the dining area. Two women were working, one cooked while the other served tables. We sat down, ordered lemonade and studied the menu. Chile rellenos, enchiladas, tacos – typical Mexican fare, we thought. We ordered and then watched the cook go to work. She made the chile rellenos from scratch – broke an egg into a bowl, grabbed the chiles stuffed with cheese from the cooler, dipped them in egg and flour, and fried them on the spot. They were the best chile rellenos I have ever tasted. The lemonade was squeezed to order. It was a step back in time, with pleasant service, great food and, most importantly, a terrific memory to add to our road trip journal. The girls enjoyed the

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Biltmore, but now they understood the words "road trip" and *loved* Guadalupe!

We traveled through Oceana where you can still drive on the beach, and then up to Pismo Beach, where we checked into the Mission Inn hotel. We found a great place for dinner, Rosa's Italian restaurant, family owned and operated with second generation Executive Chef Douglas Cristallo MacMillan in the kitchen. Over our fine meal, we reminisced about our journey and called it a fantastic day.



photo by Karen Villalpando

Dining at La Sympatia was a step back in time, and a great story for our Road Trip journal.

Stay tuned for Road Trip, part two, next week, where we visited Cayucos, San Simeon, Big Sur, Monterey and Half Moon Bay.

The Four Seasons Biltmore: 1260 Channel Dr., Santa Barbara, CA 93108; (805) 969-2261; [www.fourseasons.com](http://www.fourseasons.com)  
Cava Restaurant: 1212 Coast Village

Road Montecito, CA 93108. (805) 969-8500. [www.cavarestaurant.com](http://www.cavarestaurant.com)  
Babcock Winery: 5175 E Highway 246, Lompoc, CA 93436; (805) 736-1455; [www.babcockwinery.com](http://www.babcockwinery.com)  
Rosa's Italian Restaurant: 491 Price St., Pismo Beach, CA 93449; (805) 773-0551; [www.rosasrestaurant.com](http://www.rosasrestaurant.com).



photo by Karen Villalpando

We discovered Michael's grandmother's grave at the Guadalupe cemetery, which brought back wonderful memories for dad to share.

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