

# marie claire

**75**  
**SUMMER**  
**FASHION**  
**LOOKS**  
**HOT DRESSES,**  
**SHORTS**  
**PERFECT BIKINIS**

**NAOMI**  
**WATTS**  
 'WHY I  
 EMBRACE  
 MY DARK  
 SIDE'

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# Take It Easy

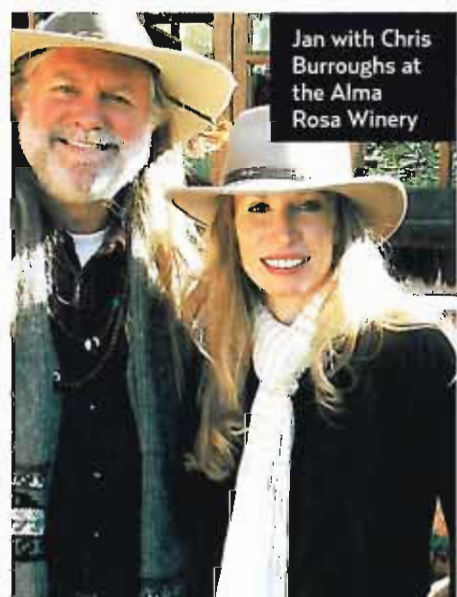
With its fine wines, fabulous sunshine and romantic energy, Southern California is seriously laid-back. Armed with an inspiring soundtrack, Jan Masters hits the highway



From far left: stores selling fresh produce are everywhere; a vintage car in Santa Barbara; and a dazzling West Coast sunset



Blast along the Californian coast between the mountains and the Pacific



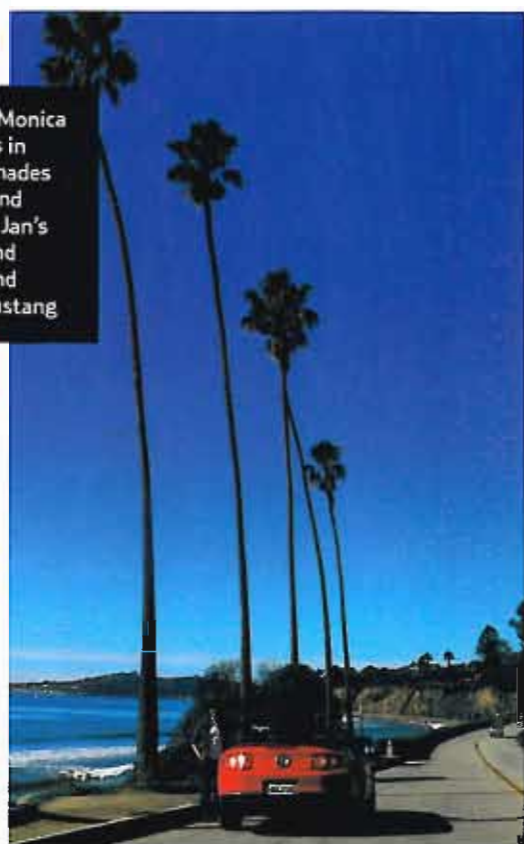
**W**ITHIN AN HOUR of exiting LA's airport, my husband Paul and I are sipping a crisp Sauvignon in the rooftop bar of the Shangri-La, a swish art-deco hotel that looks like a gleaming ocean liner moored on Santa Monica's beachfront. As we peer down to a pool flanked with striped cabanas and watch cocktail trays set sail against a backdrop of shimmering sea, our shoulders are already loosening into SoCal's seductive atmosphere of laid-back luxe. Santa Monica, a bigger, ritzier, tidier, sandier

version of Brighton, is the first stop in our seven-night, 400-mile trip along the spectacular Pacific Coast Highway. It's a route that will take us north to Santa Barbara then inland to Santa Ynez Valley Wine Country, the area that found fame when it became the fifth star of the hit movie, *Sideways*.

Even if you've never set foot in California, the place feels strangely familiar, having been hotwired into our brains from the big screen and into our hearts via a thousand classic songs. This means acclimatisation takes us, ooh, about ten minutes (and why Paul {continued})



Santa Monica houses in vivid shades (left) and (right) Jan's husband Paul and the Mustang



After a sunrise that turns the sky into raspberry ripple ice cream, we take possession of our new friend. **A Mustang. A Convertible.** In red. Natch

felt it only right to prepare a holiday soundtrack before we left).

For two days, our chief preoccupation is ambling along Santa Monica's promenades and broad beach (*All I Wanna Do*, Sheryl Crow), passing the historic pier with its Ferris wheel that, at night, puts on a lightshow like a giant kaleidoscopic lollipop. Our relative inactivity is in stark contrast to the locals who, taking over 300 days of sunshine a year in their stride, are jogging, biking or blading along the Ocean Front Walk, pausing only to pack in some pull-ups at the original Muscle Beach, before powering on to the volleyball courts and Trapeze School.

Exhausted just watching, we stop for a margarita at Shutters on the Beach, a hotel renowned for its refined, residential atmosphere. Here I experience a real SoCal moment, second only to my purchase of a self-help mag cheerfully monikered *Going Bonkers?* The bartender informs us, with some gravitas, he's going to use agave nectar instead of sugar syrup

on account of its lower glycaemic index. Well, that's all right then.

Suitably fortified, with no chance of a mid-afternoon carb crash, we take a cab to McCabe's, a shop that offers 'the largest selection of stringed things to make music with in California' (*Ring of Fire*, Johnny Cash). Unable to justify the purchase of a Martin guitar for \$4,000, Paul plumps for a harmonica (which is plainly string-free) and, that evening, coaxes out a wistful tune as we stroll back to our chic Shangri-La room, all shiny new chrome and black leather.

After a sunrise that turns the sky into raspberry ripple ice cream, we take possession of our new friend. A Mustang. A Convertible. In red. Natch. With the top down, we hit Route 1, the soaring Santa Monica Mountains to our right, the sparkling Pacific to our left. There really is something intoxicatingly brilliant about blasting down the highway, breeze in your hair, checking out the much-coveted beach houses of starry Malibu and the

surfers on camera-friendly Zuma Beach (*Ventura Highway, America*).

Our destination today is Santa Barbara, an ocean-front city full of colourful Spanish colonial-style architecture that leans back lazily on the Santa Ynez Mountains, which are today sporting little puffs of clouds that might have been custom-spun in a candy-floss machine. As we pull into The Biltmore, opened back in 1927 and today a lavish Four Seasons Resort, all stucco walls and pantiled roofs, we can't help but experience a distinct 'we've arrived' sensation.

This hotel has been a virtual *Who's Who* of Hollywood, frequented by the likes of Greta Garbo, Errol Flynn, Clark Gable and Rock Hudson. It's also home to the exclusive Coral Casino Beach and Cabana Club, built in the 30s. Now a registered historic landmark that's undergone a \$65 million restoration courtesy of owner Ty Warner, creator of Beanie Babies toys, it's a glamorous private members' venue at the {continued}



Sign (far left) and guitar player (left) in Santa Barbara and (right) a sign for The Hitching Post II in Buellton, a location in Sideways



## We take a cab to McCabe's, a shop that offers 'the largest selection of stringed things to make music with in California'

disposal of Biltmore guests. It's the kind of place where beautiful people relax under statuesque palms, sporting resort wear by the likes of Prada and Pucci (*Skinny Legs*, Lyle Lovett).

Food-wise, it's hm-hmm (sorry, can't talk with my mouth full). At the club's Tydes restaurant we experience a meal of the kind Heston Blumenthal might rustle up on his hols. Picture a bowl of black truffle risotto sitting atop a nest of fresh pine and herbs, with hot rocks underneath that are brought to sizzling, steaming life when the waiter administers water, all in the name of evoking the aromas of a walk in the forest... After a further four equally inventive courses, we decide we will not eat *at all* tomorrow.

The next morning as we tuck into a stack of fluffy buttermilk pancakes on the terrace of 'The Guiltmore', watching a school of dolphins pass by, I wonder if life can get any better. Sure it gets more challenging. Ironic. Cultural. Exciting. But if you have the finances (which many Santa Barbarans do), it has a heck of a lot going for it. Not least,

everyone we chat to is so damn cheerful (*Mrs Robinson*, *The Lemonheads*).

The drive to Santa Ynez takes us into glorious countryside. Rugged mountains, like broken cookies, bite into big blue skies. Eagles cruise the thermals and the gently rolling foothills are quilted with countless ranches and vineyards. This really is oenophile heaven, where you can potter, pause and then plunge your nose into an appley Chardonnay or a velvety Syrah.

The wine tastings here are not intimidating. Rock up to any vineyard and for around ten bucks you can sniff and sip five or six wines, with most pourers nothing less than encouraging – like the girl at the Firestone Vineyard in her perky gingham shirt and winged-out eyeliner, swirling a Chardonnay and detecting a definite finish of pumpkin pie. So did we.

Disappointingly, you can't ship wine home – but you can buy it by the glass or bottle to consume on the premises. And you can also use the tastings to decide what to order for your evening meal (*I Can't*

*Stand Up For Falling Down*, Elvis Costello).

Motoring into the small turn-of-the-20th-century village of Santa Ynez, we're struck by its cowboy vibe. The place we're to hang our hats for two nights is the Santa Ynez Inn. Guests rave about this hotel as it serves unbelievable gourmet breakfasts and offers spacious rooms with fireplaces, showers that turn into steam rooms, under-floor heating, snuggly robes and a daily complimentary wine tasting, all for less than some of the swanky chains.

US guests get excited about the ornate Victorian styling but, given the place is actually pretty new, to Europeans familiar with the look it may not be everyone's porcelain cup of tea. However, book into a more decoratively restrained room than our ruched, top-of-the-range suite, with its marble statuettes guarding the whirlpool tub, and your every comfort will still be catered for.

If contemporary decor is more your thang, Hadsten House fits the bill. A classic American motel in build, it's been completely redesigned with rooms furnished in cool Scandinavian shades, (*continued*)



Jan enjoys a glass or two in the sun at Alma Rosa

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... touches and a restaurant that's so low (though perhaps a touch too low) it could double as a nightclub. ... on the outskirts of the curious little town of Solvang, crowded with Danish shops, cafes and houses. Although ... ine, in that Danish-Americans first ... here in 1911, as you wander past its ... y shops and windmills you can't help ... el the hand of Disney.

... rring our days in the Santa Ynez ... y we head anywhere the road takes ... orn to Run, Bruce Springsteen). Our ... of discovery are the arty hamlet of ... Olivos and the organic Alma Rosa ... ry and Vineyards in the Santa Rita ... . In its sun-drenched courtyard we ... to tasting-room manager Chris ... oughs (who, it turns out, had a cameo ... leways). A beaming, beaded, bearded ... st, he's just co-produced a CD - *Let ... og Decide* - a New Mexican electric ... stic sound, which Paul purchases

immediately. As we turn out of the drive, sending dust clouds over the cacti, we feel full of good karma (*Long Way To Go*, Rich Clayton and Chris Burroughs).

Our best evening by far is spent at The Hitching Post II at Buellton (a key haunt in *Sideways*). Fish, meat, fowl and veg are all barbecued over an open fire of red oak in the heart of the restaurant and owner-chef Frank Ostini, a wonderfully sunny guy with a Groucho Marx moustache, makes stunningly fine wines with his friend, former fisherman Gray Hartley. At the bar where the character Miles (Paul Giamatti) sat in mournful mood, we relish a berry-laden Pinot Noir.

When it comes to leaving wine country, we're more than tempted to let the 'Stang have its head and take Route 1 all the way to San Francisco. Instead, we reign its nose back to LA for a leisurely run, soaking up our last rays of Californian sunshine (*Take It Easy*, The Eagles). Fade. ■

Book now

- Air New Zealand ([airnewzealand.co.uk](http://airnewzealand.co.uk)) flies daily from London Heathrow to Los Angeles, from £623 return including taxes.
- A Mustang Convertible costs from £235 for seven days through Hertz Santa Monica (00 1 310 394 2449; [hertz.com](http://hertz.com)), including unlimited mileage.



- Stay at the Shangri-La Hotel ([shangrila-hotel.com](http://shangrila-hotel.com), from £217), The Biltmore ([fourseasons.com/santabarbara](http://fourseasons.com/santabarbara), from £312), Santa Ynez Inn ([santaynezinn.com](http://santaynezinn.com), from £217), Hadsten House ([hadstenhouse.com](http://hadstenhouse.com), from £73, including breakfast). All prices are valid for July.
- The climate is great for most of the year with late-spring and autumn the best time to see the vines.
- For more information, check out [santamonica.com](http://santamonica.com), [syvva.com](http://syvva.com) and [visitcalifornia.com](http://visitcalifornia.com). *Great Escapes Southern California* by Donna Wares (£12, WW Norton) is a useful guide - and watch *Sideways*...

Photographs by Jan Masters, Art + Commerce, Axiom, Getty Images, Image State