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TRAVEL INSPIRATION > WHERE TO TRAVEL NEXT

By Dana Rebmann • December 01, 2023

# 8 Unmissable Places in California to Make the Most of Your Trip

California dreaming? Make it a reality at one or more of these unmissable spots.



Sonoma County is all about great wines and rugged beach walks. Photo by Carles Rabada/Unsplash

From sun-drenched beaches and rolling vineyards to towering redwoods, California is defined by its diversity. Northern California is dramatically different than its southern neighbor—you’ll want a coat in NorCal and flip-flops in SoCal—but together they boast 840 miles of striking coastline and form the third-largest state in land area. In short, California is huge.

One trip won’t do it; folks who call the state home struggle to take advantage of everything it has to offer. Simply plan on coming back again and again. Here’s a complete guide on the best places to visit in California on your next trip.

I’m heading to California for the first time. Where should I go?



The long-awaited Destination Crenshaw is finally scheduled to open in spring 2024. Courtesy of Destination Crenshaw

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Los Angeles

Go to the beach. Gaze at the Hollywood sign. Maybe spot your favorite celebrity. The star power of **Los Angeles** (an **AFAR Where to Go 2024** pick) lures travelers from around the world, but people in the know are buzzing about another upcoming premier: the opening of Sankofa Park in February in South Los Angeles. The park is the first phase and flagship of **Destination Crenshaw**, a 1.3-mile-long, open air museum with sculptures, murals, architecture, and community spaces designed to celebrate the history and future of Black Los Angeles. Look for work by such artists as Charles Dickson, Maren Hassinger, Artis Lane, and Kehinde Wiley.

Where to stay: Fairmont Miramar Hotel & Bungalows

Steps from the beach and Santa Monica Pier, the **Fairmont Miramar** was once the estate of the founder of Santa Monica. If budget allows, snag one of the hotel’s 1930s bungalows. (You can also find more than a dozen of **our favorite L.A. hotels here.**)

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I want to spot marine life. Where can I do it without crowds?



The Channel Islands National Park is teeming with life, both inland and in the water. You’ll probably spot dolphins on the boat ride over from the mainland. Photo by Lisha Riabinina/Unsplash

Channel Islands National Park

Sometimes called the Galápagos of North America, the **Channel Islands** are home to more than 2,000 species of animals and plants—and nearly 150 like the island fox and the Channel Islands slender salamander are found nowhere else. From hiking and snorkeling to backcountry camping, activities vary from island to island.

Oxnard’s **Channel Islands Harbor** is the closest launching point; watch for whales, seals, dolphins, and more as you make your way. The national park is accessible by private boat or park concessionaire **Island Packers Cruises**. The company operates four vessels that can carry anywhere from 81 to 149 passengers; all ships have restrooms and outside decks for wildlife viewing. (Other tour operators offer trips that approach the Channel Islands but do not go ashore.)

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Fine-tune a day on the SoCal coast with a tour of **DW Drums** factory, the name behind famous drummers, including Travis Barker, Dave Grohl, and Sheila E., or tackle Oxnard’s tasty **taco trail**.

Where to stay: Zachari Dunes on Mandalay Beach



Less than a five-minute drive from Channel Islands Harbor, the [beachfront property](#) boasts 250 suites, most of which face the ocean.

I’ve sipped at plenty of wineries in Napa Valley. Where next?



Combine a day of wine tasting in San Luis Obispo County with a visit to the charming namesake city. Photo by HannaTor/Shutterstock

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San Luis Obispo County

Napa Valley may be [California’s best-known wine region](#), but California’s Central Coast, about halfway between [San Francisco](#) and [Los Angeles](#), is gaining traction in the wine world. [Adelaida Vineyards](#)’ seasonal “Hilltop Tasting Experience” takes place at nearly the highest point in Paso Robles— approximately 2,150 feet in elevation—making it a stellar spot to watch the sunset. [Tablas Creek Vineyard](#) was the first winery in the world to be certified by the [Regenerative Organic Alliance \(ROA\)](#). Founded by the Rodale Institute, Dr. Bronner’s, and Patagonia, the nonprofit uses organic certification as a baseline and requires that farmers adhere to strict standards regarding soil health, animal welfare, and social fairness.

Along with more than 250 wineries, [Re:Find Handcrafted Spirits](#) distills vodka and gin from typically discarded *saignée* or free-run red wine grape juice. Daily brewhouse tours at [Firestone Walker Brewing Company](#) offer a behind-the-scenes look and taste of the California-centric beer maker.

End the day walking through a field of more than 100,000 solar-powered, fiber-optic “flowers” at [Light at Sensorio](#). A new guest artist exhibit, *Dimensions* by Hybycozo, is expected to open in late 2023 or early 2024, with a fifth light installation by artist Bruce Munro coming in July 2024.

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Where to stay: Hotel San Luis Obispo

Steps from Mission San Luis Obispo de Tolosa, the fifth of the Spanish missions in California, [Hotel San Luis Obispo](#) offers complimentary bikes for guests interested in cruising around the downtown area or Cal Poly’s neighboring campus.

Where’s the best place to learn how to surf?





In Santa Cruz, you can watch the pros surf before attempting to stand up on a board yourself. Photo by Gabriel Barranco/Unsplash

## Santa Cruz

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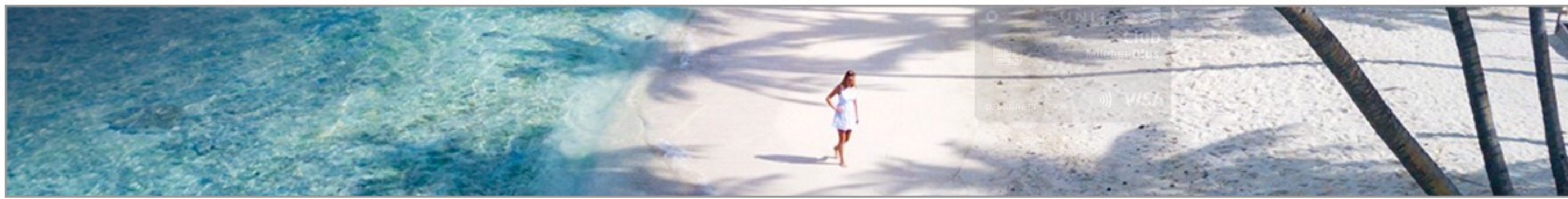
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Hawaiian royalty introduced surfing to the United States in Santa Cruz in 1885. Newbies longing to hang 10 will find mellow waves and stellar views at **Cowell Beach**. For **Club Ed** surf school owner Ed Guzman, surfing is a family affair; his grandmother, Dorothy Becker, is said to be the first woman to perform a headstand on a surfboard in 1915.

If Cowell’s beginner breaks leave you craving an adrenaline rush, climb aboard the **Giant Dipper** roller coaster at the **Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk**. The National Historic Landmark celebrates 100 years of thrills in 2024.

### Where to stay: Dream Inn Santa Cruz

**Dream Inn** is the only beachfront hotel in Santa Cruz; all 165 rooms come with a patio or balcony with views of Monterey Bay.



I want it all: art, culture, and scenery.

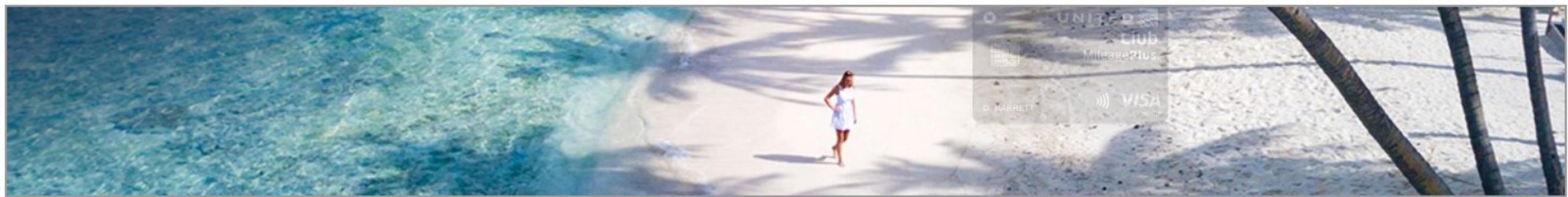
We love San Francisco, for its world-class museums and restaurants, parks, views, and much more. Photo by EQRoy/Shutterstock

## San Francisco

Walk across the **Golden Gate Bridge**. Ride a **cable car**. Or take a ferry to **Alcatraz Island**, a former prison once home to famous convicts such as Al Capone. **San Francisco** has packed everything you can think of, and more, into 49 square miles.



Along with permanent works by names like Andy Warhol and Jackson Pollock, through early September 2024, you can catch two famed Infinity Mirror Rooms by artist Yayoi Kusama at the [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#) (SFMOMA). Not a fan of art museums? (We won't tell.) Play your way through [Musée Mécanique](#)'s 300 coin-operated mechanical musical instruments and antique arcade games. Most machines only cost a quarter or two.



**Where to stay: The Jay Hotel**

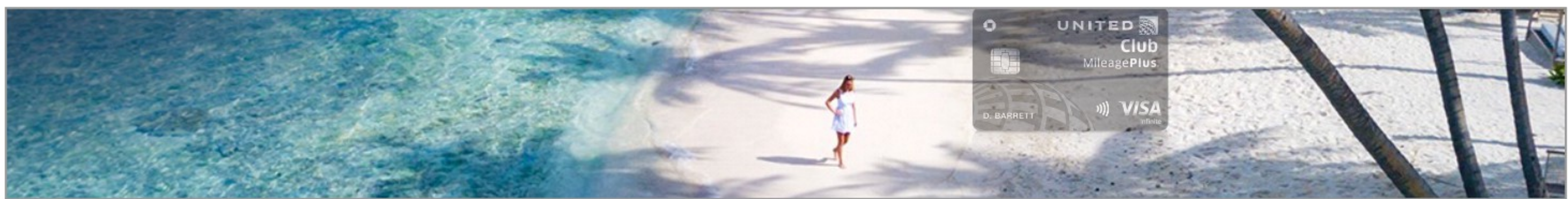
San Francisco's only hotel opening in 2023, the [Jay](#) features 360 rooms all boasting floor-to-ceiling windows with views of the City by the Bay.

**I want to go chasing waterfalls.**



Yosemite National Park is justifiably popular—but it's easy to plan a trip during a quieter time. Photo by Gantas Vaiciulenas/Unsplash

**Yosemite & Beyond**



[Yosemite National Park](#) attracts millions of visitors every year, but there's no reason for you to hang out with the crowds. In spring, a pair of waterfalls reward hikers who make the hour's drive from Yosemite Valley to [Hetch Hetchy](#). A quiet, shady hike into Yosemite Wilderness Area leads to [Carlon Falls](#). Pack a picnic and a bathing suit. Technically located outside of park boundaries, [Rainbow Pool Day Use Area](#) is a swimming hole that once served as a stagecoach toll stop.

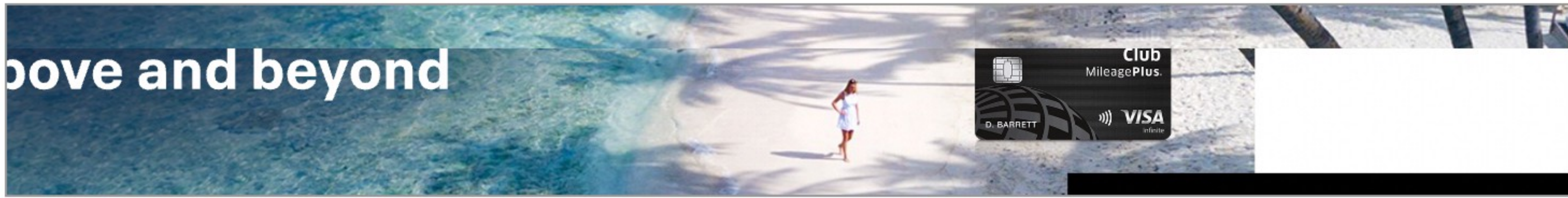
**Where to stay: Rush Creek Lodge & Spa**

When you want a lodge feel, and perks like a spa, [Rush Creek](#) fits the bill.

**Give me a stunning stretch of coast.**



Sonoma is known for its wine, but plenty of rugged coastal trails await too. Photo by Danita Delimont/Shutterstock

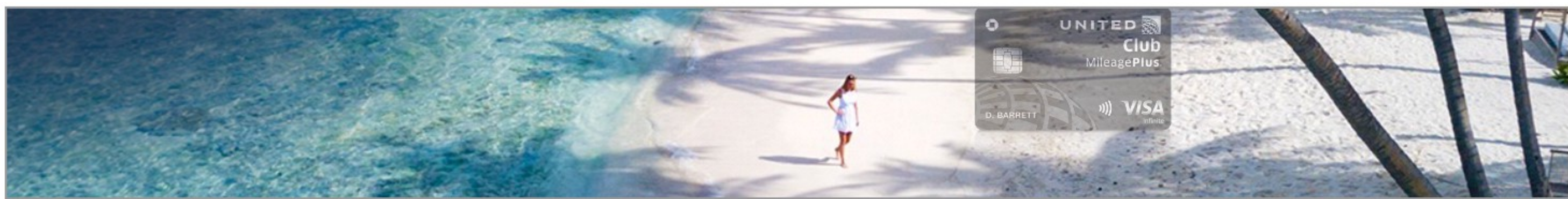


Sonoma Coast

Forget your swimsuit, it’s about layers and hiking boots on this rugged stretch of Northern California. Any of the half-dozen trails at [Jenner Headlands Preserve](#) will impress, as the ocean views begin at the parking lot. If fewer steps is more appealing, park your car at [Timber Cove Resort](#) and follow the short path to view Benjamino Bufano’s seaside *Peace Obelisk*.

And because it’s [Sonoma County](#), there’s great wine, too. The deck at [Fort Ross Vineyard & Winery](#) boasts views that can stretch to the Pacific. Winetastings are paired with small bites, but if you seek more substantial sustenance, grab a calzone (and a sticky bun, if there’s any left) from [Twofish Baking](#).

Where to stay: The Sea Ranch Lodge



There are just 17 rooms, but fresh off a multi-year renovation, [the Sea Ranch Lodge](#) is a dreamy spot to disconnect and stare at the sea.

How about a peaceful trip into the woods?

Commune with the trees in Humboldt Redwoods State Park. Photo by Cyrus Crossan/Unsplash

Humboldt County

The [Avenue of the Giants](#) meanders more than 30 miles through [Humboldt Redwoods State Park](#), home to the largest stand of old growth redwoods in the world. It’s easy to see why Steven Spielberg choose [Fern Canyon](#) in [Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park](#) to film scenes for *The Lost World: Jurassic Park*. Roadside attractions—the [Legend of Bigfoot](#) or the [Chimney Tree](#) hollowed out by flames in 1914—make for a fun, quick stop.

Where to stay: Humboldt Bay Social Club

A former World War II blimp base turned teeny boutique hotel, [Humboldt Bay Social Club](#) boasts easy access to Oyster Beach, as well as an open-air bathhouse.



Dana Rebmann

Dana Rebmann writes about travel, wine, and food for AFAR, *Hemispheres*, *AARP*, *Garden & Gun*, and more. Dana loves adventures that get her outside, especially near or in water.

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