

## Discovering Santa Barbara

Santa Barbara has always held a special attraction for me because of treasured family stories I heard all my life about the journey of my mother's grandparents and their eight children from the mountains of northern Spain to Santa Barbara in 1917. Recently my wife and I headed to visit Santa Barbara on a dual mission: to savor the town's natural beauty, culture and historical sites, and to do some sleuthing about my Spanish family roots that I had only heard vaguely mentioned over the years.

By hitting the road early, in less than four hours we arrived at our hotel, the Fess Parker Resort, ideally located across from the ocean, about a mile from downtown. Many baby-boomers will recall that Fess Parker played Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone on popular TV shows in the 50s and 60s. Besides acting, he became a first-rate investor whose name now graces his 360-room resort in Santa Barbara, as well as a country inn and family winery in Los Olivos.

Once we were settled in our pleasant room (the resort recently underwent a major renovation), we set out on foot to explore the area nearby. Starting out across the street, we followed the curvy beachside walking path that led us to the prominent Stearns Wharf. This proved to be an ideal starting point for our visit, because it provided a picture-perfect view of Santa Barbara's Spanish-style buildings nestled between the towering Santa Ynez mountains in the background and the sparkling waters of the Pacific Ocean in the foreground.

The long, wooden wharf offered a nice mix of restaurants, shops and bold sea birds—stately pelicans and seagulls—that lined up at the end of the pier, near the fishermen, haughtily ignoring us tourists. Before leaving the pier, we discovered the first of the two dozen Urban Wine Trail stops — the Deep Sea wine-tasting room with good wine and a splendid view of the ocean, town and mountains. We enjoyed our walk, but next time we look forward to renting bikes and cruising down the shore-hugging bike path.

Across from the pier, the Visitor Information Center armed us with the brochures and maps we needed to plan our three-day itinerary. We found that the Santa Barbara Trolley provided the best way for us to get quickly acquainted with the town's major sights. The orange and green trolley passed by hourly, allowing passengers to hop on and off at any of the fifteen stops. We thoroughly enjoyed our 90-minute guided tour that started on State Street, where most visitors go to check out the varied shops, restaurants and historical buildings.

We were struck by the attractive appearance of Santa Barbara's whitewashed buildings capped by red tile roofs, the rows of stately palms along the coast road, and the town's abundant plants and fountains. Our guide explained that the distinctive Spanish-style architecture was implemented during the town's reconstruction after the devastating 1925 earthquake. (I found my great-aunt's letter describing the terrible shaking and massive destruction that she witnessed). Our favorite place was the picturesque Old Mission Santa Barbara where my Spanish grandmother was married in 1917.

"Santa Barbara is the boundary between Northern and Southern California," our guide continued, "and is often called 'The American Riviera' because of its resemblance to the beaches, mountains, gardens and mild climate of the Mediterranean coast."

The next day we were invited to the Fess Parker Winery for lunch and a chance to taste some of the award-winning wines (my favorite was the Ashley Chardonnay, named after Fess's daughter). Set among hills dotted with majestic oak trees and valleys filled with rows of grapevines, this 25-year-old winery was well worth the half-hour drive through the countryside.

Back in Santa Barbara, my wife and I decided to explore State Street on foot. After a couple of wine tastings along the way, we headed to the mid-town Salt Caves, where we indulged in a salt cave therapy session. Surrounded by 45 tons of pure Himalayan salt, we reclined on special lounge chairs for 45 minutes while meditative music played. While we may not have felt ourselves "healed" by that saline experience, we found it unique and relaxing.

We continued our State Street journey until we reached the elaborate County Courthouse, a major tourist attraction consisting of four buildings, including an 85-foot-high clock tower with a 360-degree view of Santa Barbara and its surroundings. One leading architect proclaimed the Courthouse to be “the grandest Spanish Colonial Revival structure ever built.” Not far down the street we peeked inside the Arlington Theater, whose stunning interior resembled a colonial Spanish village — next time we’re going watch a movie there.

Capping off a great day of sightseeing, we headed to dinner at the acclaimed Bouchon Restaurant. It’s not often I rave about a meal, but this was one of the best I’ve had in a long time. On our final day, having savored our experiences in and around Santa Barbara, I was determined to discover if I still had any family connections there after nearly 100 years. We headed to the Santa Barbara Genealogical Society where the gracious and helpful volunteer staff assisted me in my quest. Alas, the family’s Sanchez bakery was long gone, and we found only one elderly relative remaining in the area. I sighed as I pondered what good fortune we could have had if my relatives had remained in Santa Barbara. Who in their right mind would leave this Shangri-la?