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RIVER CRUISING

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April 2007

TRUE STORIES

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Naughty
monkeys!
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COOL
LIST
Best new
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NAPA SONOMA AND BEYOND...

Ten hideaways you'll adore
in California wine country

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Secret Hotels of California Wine Country

You don't have to spend a fortune to visit the fanciest farmland in America. We've found a crop of lovely, family-run inns in Napa, Sonoma, and beyond for less than \$200 a night.

By Jaime Gross Photographs by Emily Nathan

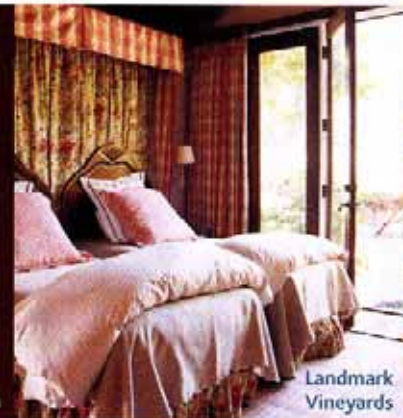




Old Crocker Inn



Napa Valley Railway Inn



Landmark Vineyards



Beltane Ranch

ALEXANDER VALLEY

Old Crocker Inn

In the late 1800s, Charles Crocker, one of the founders of the Central Pacific Railroad, purchased nearly 600 acres above the Russian River and built a ranch and summer home there for entertaining his powerful friends and business partners. The ranch has been subdivided and parts have been sold over the years—much of it is now a residential development and a KOA campground—but five of those acres still bear Crocker's name, in the form of the Old Crocker Inn. Marcia and Tony Babb have been running the inn since 2005, when they moved north from Menlo Park. "You could call it retirement, except that we're working," laughs Tony. The Babbs have thrown themselves into their new career as innkeepers, turning out three-course breakfasts every morning (he cooks, she bakes), and generally making their guests feel at home.

The eight rooms are named after historical figures and events. The Golden Spike (honoring the ceremonial spike that joined the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads) has a Jacuzzi, a fireplace, and pine-and-redwood-paneled walls hung with photographs and newspaper clippings related to railroad history. The Crocker has more of a tree-house feel, with a carved four-poster bed and great views of a pond and valley from a secluded corner of the wraparound deck. Although the property is hidden near the town of Cloverdale, in the sparsely populated and pleasantly remote-feeling Alexander Valley, it's only a 30-minute drive to Healdsburg, known for its upscale restaurants, shops, and wine-tasting rooms. 800/716-2007, oldcrockerinn.com, from \$145.

ANDERSON VALLEY

Boonville Hotel

Eighty miles north of Sonoma, along a winding road, the town of Boonville (population 700) was historically so isolated that in the

1880s locals devised their own language, Boontling, to entertain themselves. Though it flourished in the valley for 40 years, it's rarely spoken today—except, that is, on the rare occasions when the town's *codgy* kimmies (old men)

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The Boonville Hotel's 10 rooms are airy and uncluttered, some with hemp-grass carpeting and furniture crafted from timber harvested nearby

break it out during a *lews and larners* (gossip) session. Boonville is still idiosyncratic, but it's also surprisingly chic, thanks in part to Johnny Schmitt, owner and head chef at the Boonville Hotel. With decor inspired by his travels through Europe (where, he says, "it's not unusual to find hip, unfussy inns in the countryside") as well as by his own minimalist aesthetic, the hotel's 10 rooms are airy and uncluttered, some with hemp-grass carpeting and furniture crafted from timber harvested nearby. Towels are unbleached, and the cleaning products used throughout the property are ecofriendly. At dinnertime, Schmitt dons his chef hat in the hotel's romantic candlelit restaurant, crafting entrées like lamb with Gorgonzola-mint sauce using mostly local ingredients (some of them grown in the hotel garden). There are many great wineries in the area—Schmitt recommends the family-run Navarro Vineyards for its gewürztraminer, and

Roederer Estate for its sparkling wines—as well as a solar-powered microbrewery, Anderson Valley Brewing Company, where award-winning beers like Barney Flats Oatmeal Stout are made in copper kettles. 707/895-2210, boonvillehotel.com, from \$125.

NAPA VALLEY

Calistoga Inn

Compared with glitzier Napa Valley towns like St. Helena or Yountville, Calistoga is refreshingly unpretentious, with its old-timey main street (devoid of chain stores) and frontier architecture. It's also home to the best bargain in wine country: the Calistoga Inn, where \$75 secures a simple European-style room (read "no private bath") and front-door access to the best nightlife in town. Evenings begin on the banks of the Napa River at the hotel restaurant's dining patio, where chefs cook over wood-fired grills and diners savor roasted Sonoma duck and oak-grilled jerk chicken. Later, the festivities move to the adjacent English-style pub, where both locals and visitors drink house-brewed beer and rock out to live music. The bedrooms are directly above the pub, so pack earplugs (or plan to stay until the party's over, usually around midnight on weekends). It's all part of the culture at the Calistoga, as the receptionist jovially warns people when they make reservations: "We're not quiet, we're fun." 707/942-4101, calistogainn.com, from \$75, including breakfast.



The focal point of the El Dorado Hotel's restaurant is a 21-foot table crafted out of a single plank of wood recycled from a bridge in Vermont

Hideaway Cottages

For more than 100 years, people have flocked to Calistoga for its natural hot springs and mineral-rich waters, which have been said to cure everything from arthritis to chronic fatigue syndrome. The stucco bungalows at Hideaway Cottages were built in the 1920s and '40s to cater to wellness-seekers and still serve as a home base for such guests today. Scattered on two-and-a-half acres planted with sycamores, elms, and the oldest cork oak tree in the Napa Valley, the 17 cottages are all configured differently—some have sitting rooms in addition to a bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen; others have private patios—but all are located a few steps from a swimming pool and hot tub filled with Calistoga's legendary water. The property is just two blocks from Calistoga's quaint main street, and a short stroll from the 55-year-old Dr. Wilkinson's Hot Springs Resort (owned by the same family as the Hideaway Cottages), where for \$119 guests can get The Works: a soak in mineral mud baths, a lavender mineral whirlpool bath, time in the steam room, a blanket wrap, and a 30-minute almond oil massage. 707/942-4108, hideawaycottages.com, from \$149, no guests under 18.

Napa Valley Railway Inn

Is it a train? A hotel? Actually, the Napa Valley Railway Inn is both: a hotel with nine guest rooms housed in individual train cars, set on a piece of track from the now-defunct Napa Valley Railroad. In the 1970s, the red-and-blue boxcars and cabooses were airlifted into place and used as souvenir and clothing shops. The Altamura family bought the property in the 1980s and converted the cars into guest rooms. Lori Jones, the Altamuras' daughter, together with her contractor husband, Jason, took over the business in 2005. They renovated and brightened the formerly dark and dingy rooms, adding refrigerators, tiled showers, iron-and-brass beds, and antique armoires. The quietest rooms are on the east side, facing away from the adjacent parking lot (where hot-air balloons take off nearly every morning—a great, but loud, photo op). The hotel is ideally located in the heart of Napa Valley, in the center of tiny Yountville; it's a 30-second walk to the town's many famous restaurants, including Thomas Keller's budget-blowing but



unforgettable French Laundry and his more affordable Bouchon and Bouchon Bakery. The downside? There's no on-site staff—guests are asked to pick up their keys at the neighboring gym, and the rest of the time they're entirely on their own. (Lori's cell number is posted in the rooms for emergencies only.) 707/944-2000, napavalleyrailwayinn.com, from \$140.

SONOMA VALLEY

Beltane Ranch

Just north of the town of Sonoma, in Glen Ellen, Beltane Ranch's 105 acres are filled with fruit trees, vegetable and flower gardens, a vineyard that sells grapes to nearby winemakers, and an olive orchard yielding oil that guests snap up for \$15 a bottle.

No wonder, then, that L.L. Bean and Victoria's Secret have shot their catalogs here: The location is downright idyllic. The yellow, gingerbread-trimmed lodge has a two-story wraparound porch and five wainscoted rooms. The best are on the second floor, where hammocks and porch swings overlook the vineyard and Sonoma Mountain beyond. (Ask for Room 1, which has a wood-burning stove and separate sitting room.) Alexa Wood is Beltane Ranch's third-generation owner. Her great-aunt and great-uncle bought the property in 1936 to raise cattle, sheep, and turkeys. "My family has such roots here," says Wood. "This is where I spent most of my childhood summers, where I raised my kids." Breakfast, which may include sweet-potato latkes or oatmeal pancakes with homemade fig-merlot syrup, is made with ingredients from the gardens. Second helpings are basically mandatory. You can burn off extra calories on the property's tennis court (the front desk loans out rackets and balls) and by exploring the 20-plus wineries within a five-mile radius. 707/996-6501, beltaneranch.com, from \$140, including breakfast.

El Dorado Hotel

On the northwest corner of Sonoma Plaza, the historic Spanish-style square in downtown Sonoma, the El Dorado has a hip, W-Hotel-meets-wine-country look that starts in the lobby, with a concrete-mantel fireplace and low-slung leather sofas. The 27 guest rooms are small but stylish, with flat-screen TVs, pint-size



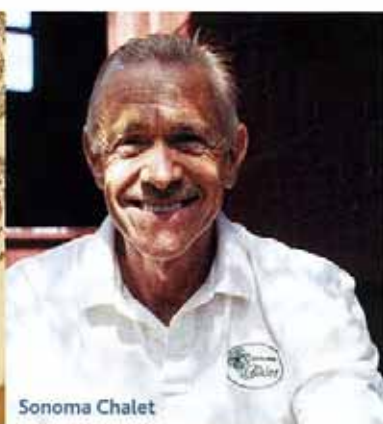
Old Crocker Inn



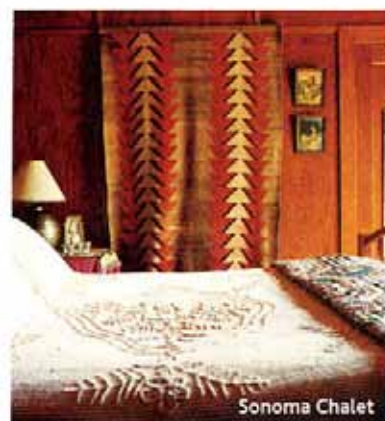
Bungalows 313



Calistoga Inn



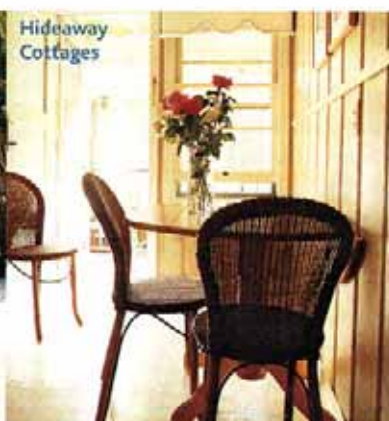
Sonoma Chalet



Sonoma Chalet



Landmark Vineyards



Hideaway Cottages



Boonville Hotel

balconies with views of the plaza or a quiet courtyard, colorful abstract paintings, and four-poster beds made of brushed steel. (Rooms 11, 12, 16, and 17 have higher ceilings and a bit more square footage.) There are also four detached bungalows, for \$20 more a night, each with a private entrance and patio. They're just steps from the lovely pool area, where the surrounding extra-wide chaise lounges are ideal for stargazing. The El Dorado's restaurant and bar are the most happening places in Sonoma—the citrus martini and warm chocolate cake with huckleberries are particularly delicious. 800/289-3031, eldoradosonoma.com, \$175.

Landmark Vineyards

For people who harbor fantasies of running away and starting their own winery, Landmark has the answer: two guest rooms right in the middle of a working vineyard, where, from your front door, you can watch the grapes growing and being harvested. Seeking an escape from the rapidly suburbanizing town of Windsor (20 miles north), Landmark's founder, Damaris Deere Ford, relocated the winery in 1989 to a spectacular piece of property at the base of Sugarloaf Ridge in Kenwood. She also brought in her son Michael Colhoun and daughter-in-law Mary as partners, making it a real family business. Ford is the great-great-granddaughter of John Deere, and the John Deere company's signature forest green pops up throughout the property, whether on a pair of rocking chairs or on an antique 1946 tractor near the front gate. The white-shuttered, stand-alone Cottage sleeps up to four and is ideal for families—it has a bedroom, a foldout couch in the living room, a washing machine and dryer, a small front porch, and a spacious, fully equipped kitchen. The smaller Suite has two twin beds (which can be pushed together), a fireplace, and a private patio with views of Sugarloaf Ridge and Hood Mountain. Both rooms are a stone's throw from the bocce court and California mission-style tasting room, so guests can sip freely, knowing it's a quick stumble home through the vines. 707/833-0053, landmarkwine.com, from \$150 (or \$260 for both rooms).

Sonoma Chalet

Fans of flea markets and *Antiques Roadshow* will feel at home in the offbeat Sonoma Chalet, in a bucolic valley of pastures and tall

eucalyptus trees five minutes by car west of downtown Sonoma. The inn is packed, crazy-aunt style, with old books and collectibles, including several sets of colorful Fiesta dinnerware on display in the dining room. Four of the seven guest rooms are in the main lodge, and each has its own personality. The walls of the ground-floor Mural Room are painted with Swiss mountain landscapes done by one of the house's original owners, an immigrant from Switzerland, in the 1940s; it also features a sunporch, perfect for afternoon reading. Sophie's Room is sweet and feminine, with pink walls and Irish-lace curtains. The Indian Room is decorated with antique Navajo rugs and a 1930s tube-style radio. And the sprawling second-floor Farm View Suite has two balconies, worn quilts on the wood-paneled walls, and an antique velvet couch facing a wood-burning fireplace. A short walk from the main house, there are also three stand-alone, studio-style cottages on the property. 800/938-3129, sonomachalet.com, from \$110.

Bungalows 313

In 2003, while searching for a vacation home in the Bay Area, Michigan natives Denise and Anthony Salvo instead stumbled upon a bed-and-breakfast in the town of Sonoma. "It really needed some love and attention," says Denise. The rooms were filthy, the pipes were leaking, and the overgrown grounds were scattered with many years' worth of junk. The Salvos weren't looking to become innkeepers—Denise had worked in retail for 30 years and Anthony was a hair colorist—but, inspired by the property's potential, the couple took the leap. After extensive renovations, the B&B reopened in 2006. While Bungalows 313 is more expensive than other hotels in this story, the money is well spent. The five guest rooms, linked by granite pathways, open onto a Tuscan-style courtyard planted with bougainvillea and citrus trees. Even the smallest room, Luna, is luxurious. It features limestone floors, a wood-burning fireplace, a galley kitchen with copper pans hanging over the stove, and a private patio with a small table—the perfect place for morning coffee. The inn is just north of the Sonoma Plaza and a block from a scenic half-mile walking trail that winds past vineyards and farmhouses en route to Ravenswood Winery. 707/996-8091, bungalows313.com, from \$209, including breakfast. ■

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