

Sonoma – a full bodied experience



Sue Wood pedals past a vineyard on her way to Chateau St. Jean. Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

SONOMA – History beckons from our doorstep. A mission, wineries, early California, Jack London. But contemporary times are just outside, too, including innovative winemaking, cutting edge restaurants, logical trail networks, well-trained massage therapists.

Sonoma. It has it all.

Staying at the Sonoma Valley Inn was the perfect launching pad for a long weekend of fun to celebrate Sue's birthday last month. The Best Western is just off the Sonoma Square.

Jack London's works on display at the state park that was once his homestead.

The park is 9.8 miles via this bike route from our hotel. The woman taking our money says the mountain bike trails are worth exploring. That was not going to happen with our thin tires and me being out of replacement tubes.

Fortunately, we had been to the park before because it's not ideal to explore in clip-on bike shoes. And knowing we hadn't even made it to our halfway point, we didn't want to linger too long. Still, we took a quick trip through the museum to reacquaint ourselves with one of California's most famous writers.

On we pedal, now with Chateau St. Jean as our destination. We are allowing ourselves one tasting while on two wheels.

Idyllic, sweeping grounds beckon. A water feature is soothing. I have thoughts of hiring a car to give us a lift back. But it's Sue's birthday, so pedaling is how we return to the hotel.

We fuel up on a light lunch at the winery and sip their wines. Tastings are normally \$15 per person, but one of the great things about the Sonoma Valley Inn is they have free tasting coupons for some of the nearby wineries. That's one of the things that led us to Chateau St. Jean – that and it had been years since we were there, and we like their wine.

The hotel

We soothe our muscles in the hotel's hot tub that is steps from our backdoor patio. It feels like we are in a secluded garden because of the mature landscaping. It's quiet, except for the other guests. Traffic cannot be heard. Just the birds telling stories.

A pool, fire pit and steam room are part of the courtyard. Many of the rooms at this two-story hotel look out onto this area.



Sue Wood tries to do a little tree climbing at Sonoma Square.

While there are children staying at the hotel, it has a definite adult feel to it. Maybe it's because everyone seems to be there to go wine tasting – a distinctly adult activity.

We have our four-legged kid with us. AJ likes that she has her own grassy area to do her business.

And the staff all seems to understand people are there to unwind, have a good time and not be rushed. The service is several steps up from the typical Best Western.

The room is plenty big – larger than a typical hotel room, but not quite large enough to fit two massage tables.

A fireplace with a “fake” log is in the corner, adding a bit of ambiance as the evening cools off.

The only downside to the hotel is how far away the

complimentary breakfast area is. While it wasn't a big deal while we were there, had it been raining, it could have been a miserable experience.

Plenty of wineries

From historic to contemporary, from average priced to breaking the bank, from run of the mill service to off the charts – the wineries of Sonoma have it all.

One spot I wanted to visit was Buena Vista. It was my parents' favorite winery and where my sisters and I threw them a surprise 25th anniversary party.

It was founded in 1857 and is considered California's first premium winery. It is also the state's oldest commercial winery. It is undergoing a multiyear, extensive renovation.

Close by is Gundlach Bundschu. It started a year later and is California's oldest continuously family-owned winery.

In the opposite direction are Jacuzzi Winery and Cline Cellars. Both are owned by the same family, with Cline having been established first. And, yes, Jacuzzi is the hot tub family. The winery is built as a replica to the family's estate in Italy.



Buena Vista Winery

We learn about the Sip California card from women in the hotel hot tub. The discount card costs \$50 and is good at more than 20 wineries for the year. They gave us theirs so now we “have” to go back to Sonoma County this year.

Other things

Driving into San Francisco was easy from the Sonoma Valley Inn. We took in a (losing) Giants game that weekend.

We had contemplated getting a massage in our room, but I knew there was no way two tables would fit. So off we went to Spa Sonoma. It was about a five-minute drive.

It was the antithesis of a high-end spa – exactly to my liking. It was a little funky. But the most important part, each of our massages had our bodies feeling like putty.

One night we ate outdoors at the Plaza Bistro. Sue is still raving about the salmon special she had that came with little cherry tomatoes and roasted potatoes. My mushroom risotto was great. We shared a salad of greens and beets as well as crème brûlée.

Another night we opted for Mexican at Maya restaurant. While Mexican food is easy to make vegetarian, so many places don’t. It was nice to look at a menu with choices where I didn’t have to ask for anything to be removed. Sue indulged in the fish tacos. This was clearly a locals place just by overhearing conversations.

And it was nice having a Whole Foods market across the street from the hotel to provide picnic fare and an excellent selection of Sonoma and Napa wines.

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Notes:

- Sonoma Valley Inn is on 2nd Street West. Details are online.

AJ was an extra \$35 for the entire stay.

- Spa Sonoma is a short drive from the hotel, or therapists will come to your room.
- Jack London State Historic Park is accessible via bike for \$5 or \$10 per vehicle.