



California or Bust!

Please allow me to begin with a hearty dose of full disclosure: I am a Californian. I'm a fifth generation, blue-eyed, blonde-haired Southern Californian. Orange County-cheesy-reality-show-land Californian. Surrounded by sun and sand, cloudless days and easy average temperatures.

And I realize that I completely take it for granted.

I don't spend my weekends at the beach, or skiing in the local mountains, or rock climbing in the local desert, or spending obnoxious amounts of money at the local high-end shopping centers.

Are you kidding me? I'm a mom, expecting our third daughter (!!!), and living on a crazy tight budget. I live in the real Orange County, the one where money doesn't flow like water, and taking a break can't break the bank.

Now I'm a mom on a mission. To deliver a way to re-discover the gorgeous state that I live in, bring the hubby and kids along for the ride, and not have to sell a kidney to do it. So, in the interest of fun, family and not wanting to take advantage of sunny California anymore, I threw the family in the minivan and we took a fantastic (and very memorable) old-school road trip down the coast.

We began up north a bit in Monterey. I absolutely love the area with its amazing trees, beautiful peninsula shoreline and the simple fun that is offered there. Our hotel, the Portola Hotel and Spa, was located in the heart of downtown right by Fisherman's Wharf and the Marina, and easy walking distance to the historic Cannery Row and world-renowned Monterey Bay Aquarium.

I did mention that this was a family friendly trip, and the Portola did not disappoint! They have begun a new complimentary program for kids - called Portola Pirates – that provides young guests with a treasure chest upon check-in, complete with pirate-inspired toys and a scavenger hunt "treasure" map. The program was inspired by Gaspar de Portola, the late 1700's Spanish explorer that is the area's namesake, to introduce children to Monterey's historically rich culture. This was a huge hit, as my daughters insisted on wearing their pirate eye patches to the unforgettable Monterey Bay Aquarium and adorable Dennis the Menace Park, which are definitely not to be missed!

From there, we headed back down the coast – on a gorgeous drive along the Pacific Coast Highway (PCH), I might add – to the city of Anaheim. There we stayed at the Hyatt Regency Orange County, a hotel whose location is convenient to Disneyland, which was a major destination for us. Our room was a family suite, which was wonderfully well-appointed with a lovely parlor area, king bedroom for the hubby and I, and a kids room with bunk beds and a flat screen TV. They offered a poolside movie in the evening for the kiddos, and a great family-friendly cooking class with chef Laura de Martin in TusCA restaurant's demonstration kitchen.

Next we decided to head to the beach, and what better place than Surf City USA, otherwise known as Huntington Beach. Our hotel, the Hilton Waterfront Beach Resort, is a pet-friendly establishment that is literally connected to the beach by a beautiful bridge running over PCH. Our recently-remodeled room was gorgeous, with ocean views and room service that couldn't be beat. Huntington Beach's Main Street, a great place for shopping and dining, was within walking distance, as was the International Surf Museum and famous Dog Beach. A highlight of our time there was our visit to the Bolsa Chica Wetlands, which includes over 1200 acres of undeveloped wetlands, lowlands and lower mesa areas. The wetlands are an

important stop for migratory birds along the Pacific Flyway, and more than 200 species of birds have been spotted there. We had fun counting crabs and horn snails, and even saw a stingray in the water under the loop trail's walkbridge!

Our next destination kept us near the beach, but took us into the realm of legend and fantasy. The St. Regis Monarch Beach is an absolutely gorgeous piece of property located in Dana Point. We went there specifically for one thing (I'll get to that), but discovered that this truly is a first class establishment. The resort boasts a private beach, butler service and wonderful poolside assistance, not to mention the incomparable teaming of celebrated chef Michael Mina and world-renowned designer Tony Chi at Stonehill Tavern. You haven't lived until you've tried the Truffled Mac & Cheese. It is simply divine!

Back to our reason for heading to The St. Regis: the Butterfly Ritual, which was created to honor the sacred breeding grounds of the Monarch Butterfly located on the St. Regis property. This amazing one-of-a-kind event takes place through the summer for guests of The St. Regis Monarch Beach and their children. After a procession through the main lobby to the ocean view terrace and a reading of the Monarch Butterfly legend, a St. Regis Butler releases dozens of Monarch Butterflies for everyone to enjoy. Children then have an opportunity to bring another set of once-frozen butterflies to life by warming them in their hands before they take flight. The Butterfly Ritual was an enchanting experience for our whole family – it was truly a memorable event!

Last, but definitely not least, we drove to the southern hub of California and stayed at the Hyatt Regency Mission Bay in San Diego. This recently transformed hotel is the area's ultimate waterfront destination. The coastal chic hotel features panoramic bay and ocean views, waterside dining and a poolside lounge, an eco-friendly spa, redesigned guest rooms and meeting rooms, as well as three pools with waterslides. And of course the resort is in close proximity to San Diego's famous Mission Beach, Sea World, the Gaslamp Quarter, PETCO Park, the San Diego Zoo, the U.S.S. Midway, Old Town, Balboa Park and more.

This was the perfect end to our family road trip, as the hotel has a wonderful spa for the adults and camp program for the kiddos. Named one of the "Top 10 Green Spas and Resorts" in the world by Organic Spa magazine, the Blue Marble Spa features all natural and organic products derived from the environment. Camp Hyatt, a children's camp that offers fun daily activities, is available at the Hyatt Regency Mission Bay during the summer, as well as other family activities such as hula hoop contests, pool-slide races and water balloon toss competitions. Year-round, kids can enjoy the hotel's three pools with waterslides and s'mores. We had an especially good time cruising Mission Bay and exploring San Diego's Old Town, where the girls loved running around the historic adobe and eating delicious guacamole until they were stuffed.

All in all, our trip was laid-back, relaxing and invigorating. We truly re-discovered the hidden, and not-so-hidden gems of the California Coast. I was reminded every day of why I love living here, and why millions of people come here each year to visit. And now that I've done your research for you, you can plan your family-friendly California vacation. It's California here we come!

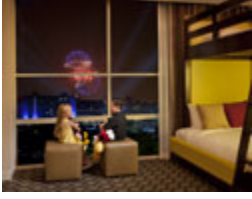
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Portola Hotel and Spa

www.portolahotel.com

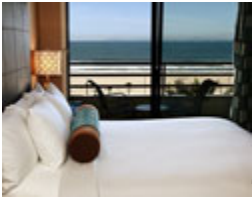
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