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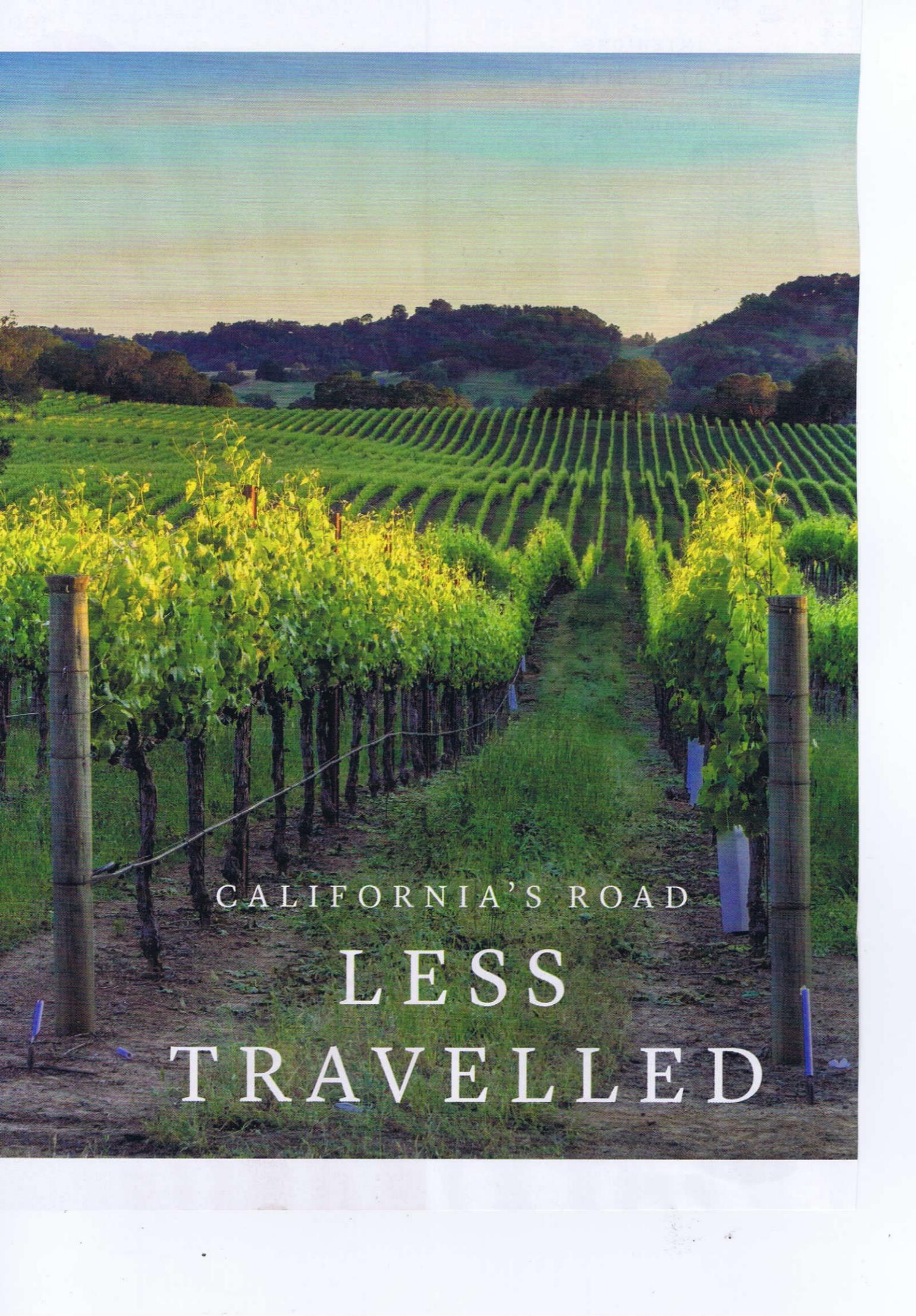
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WHAT'S HOT RIGHT NOW



A photograph of a vineyard with rows of grapevines stretching into the distance under a clear sky. The vines are supported by wooden posts and wires. The leaves are green and yellow, suggesting a late summer or autumn setting. The background shows rolling hills and a clear sky.

CALIFORNIA'S ROAD
LESS
TRAVELLED

Drink in the amazing views of Sonoma's vineyards (below); San Francisco's spectacular Golden Gate Bridge (right)



Boutique lodges, Michelin-starred chefs and Pinot noir a plenty. It's no wonder the cool crowd is heading north of San Fran for the ultimate food and wine tour, says *Jenny Proudfoot*

Feeling the San Francisco Bay breeze on your face as you take in the green hills and rolling vineyards over a large glass of Pinot noir, you could be forgiven for thinking it's just another day in California. But it's the 50th anniversary of the Summer of Love and I'm on a food and wine tour of the northern regions, where the vibe is more boho chic than tech valley – and California's hippy heartland remains. Here, the ethos is on community and sustainability, so it's a wine tour without the guilt. What's not to love?

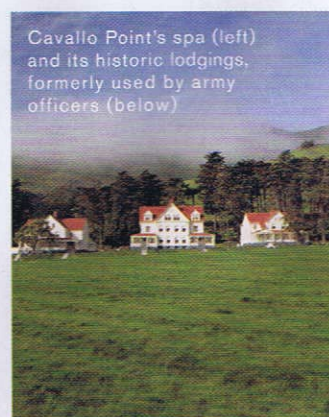
The drive out of San Francisco is a treat, watching skyscrapers fade into the distance as you cross the orange vermilion Golden Gate Bridge and enter the north coast of California. We're on our way to Sausalito and Healdsburg, Sonoma wine country where a new generation of farmers and winemakers are transforming the sleepy towns into a trail of luxury hip hotels, Michelin-starred restaurants and world-class vineyards (producing mostly Chardonnay, Pinot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot varietals), all off the beaten track.

I start my trip in Sausalito, where the *Dirty Harry* film series was shot, heading for Cavallo Point lodge, a converted US army post in San Francisco Bay. Set at the foot of the Golden Gate Bridge, views don't get much more spectacular than this. Instagram-wise, there's no filter needed. American flags fly over the parade ground and the bridge's foghorns sound, helping vessels pass safely underneath it as the huge blanket of fog (known locally as 'Karl' – a nod to the giant in Tim Burton's *Big Fish*) rolls in.

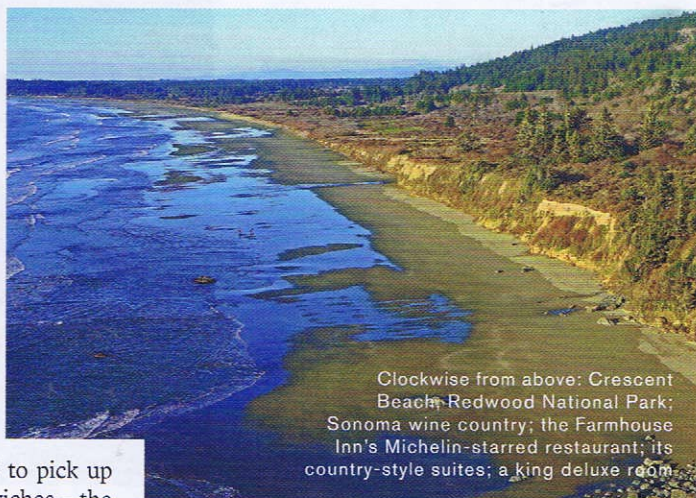
Cavallo Point has eco values at its core, serving locally sourced food, supporting

organic products, and even insulating its walls with old Levi's jeans. It's a homage to where the denim began, and a cool detail that you'd only find in California – it's not called 'ecotopia' for nothing...

There are two types of guesthouses available at Cavallo Point and they are polar opposites: historic former army officers' buildings with high tin ceilings and huge fireplaces, or sleek, contemporary apartments built into the hillside. Opting for the former, Cavallo Point – the hotel at the base of the Golden Gate Bridge – was a no-brainer for me. The smell of old leather and fire embers, with a white porched verandah, made me feel like I was stepping into a Tom Hanks film. The hotel's restaurant, Murray Circle, is an obligatory stop, with local gourmet food and a wine list spanning 25 countries, including vintages dating back to 1922. I went for trout tartare, fresh ocean stew and herb-basted scallops, all washed down with Chardonnays from both California's legendary wineries and the smaller artisanal wine producers. The next morning, I stop by the tea bar for a healthy tonic – goji lime colada, which is a bit too 'California healthy' for my taste, but it looked good on Instagram. At breakfast, I tuck in to eggs Benedict and an old-school American 'cup of Joe' (coffee), then continue on the road less travelled. Before leaving the city, it's ►



Cavallo Point's spa (left) and its historic lodgings, formerly used by army officers (below)



Clockwise from above: Crescent Beach; Redwood National Park; Sonoma wine country; the Farmhouse Inn's Michelin-starred restaurant; its country-style suites; a king deluxe room

worth stopping by Davey Jones Deli to pick up some organic, locally sourced sandwiches – the turkey pesto melt and porkslaw are divine.

Sonoma is often overlooked in favour of its more famous counterpart, Napa Valley, but that's a big mistake, with over 400 wineries, from intimate vineyards to world-class estates, and a cool foodie scene in Healdsburg. Hilltop winery Copain Wines, overlooking the stunning Russian River Valley, is worth a stop for the 2014 Syrah – rich and aromatic with notes of blackberry. My top Sonoma recommendation: Valette, an authentic farm-to-table restaurant created by two brothers, serving up seasonally inspired dishes for a top fine-dining experience. They smoke and cure their own meats in-house and the chef's 'Trust me' tasting menu is not to be missed. Tip: don't joke with waiters that nine courses is too few – they will rise to the challenge and up it to 11. The Day Boat Scallops en Croûte with American caviar and Champagne beurre blanc was particularly delicious.

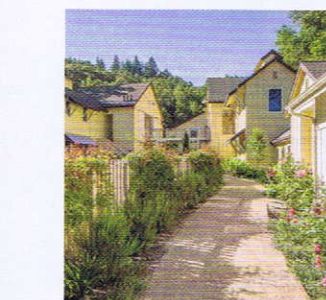
My next sleeper was at the family-owned boutique resort, Farmhouse Inn. Located ten

minutes from Healdsburg and 90 minutes from San Francisco, it's intimate but luxurious, and the on-site Michelin-starred restaurant is a bonus (the lavender panna cotta was hands down the best dessert I've ever eaten). As ever it was the little touches that made it memorable – gluten-free cookies left on my bedside table every evening and the build-your-own-bath bar, where you can cut your own artisanal soap and fill coffee cups with bubble bath and lavender salts to take back to your room. Tempting as it was to hunker down there, the next morning I set off for Sonoma County on a hike through the Redwood National and State Parks, the old-growth temperate rainforests.

Afterwards, I made for downtown Healdsburg for a green juice at Shed, a farm shop and café. You'd be pushed to find a commercial chain here, as it's mostly about independent stores. Make like a local and spend an afternoon in the stylish surroundings, dipping into Flying Goat Coffee and the Downtown Bakery & Creamery for a flat white and sticky bun. Living like a local, however, also involves following the latest CA food trend. The current one is shrubs – a detoxifying drink made of fruit, sugar and vinegar. It's sharp and bitter and, frankly, I'm hoping it doesn't catch on. On the flip side, the organic ice cream at most of the street cafés is to die for – blueberry flapjack flavour and two slabs of the Sightglass Espresso Mississippi Mud pie was insanely good.

It's impossible not to leave here and take a little Californian sunshine with you. Just soaking up the positive outlook is enough to have you checking in for good. Despite the copious amounts of wine, I left feeling rejuvenated and hangover-free. Next time you're west side, forget Highway One and follow the cool crowd. ■

Book now Farmhouse Inn and Cavallo Point are members of the Preferred Hotels & Resorts LVX Collection. Double rooms at Farmhouse Inn start from £548 per person per night, and double rooms at Cavallo Point from £433 per person per night. To book, visit preferredhotels.com. Check out visitcalifornia.com for more on northern California. Economy flights with Virgin Airlines start from £462; virginatlantic.com.



'Sonoma is often overlooked in favour of Napa Valley, but it has over 400 wineries and a cool foodie scene in Healdsburg'

