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NATURAL ADVENTURES THAT TAKE
ROMANCE TO NEW HEIGHTS

by KATHY CHIN LEONG



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WHO SAYS ROMANCE has to be as predictable as heart-shaped boxes of chocolates, bouquets of resplendent roses and love poems on Valentine's Day? If your relationship is stuck in low gear, or ready to shift into high gear, there's no better way to get it unstuck or turbo-charged than to embark on a romantic adventure. Whether it's biking the coast or ballooning above the vineyards, a mini expedition gets the blood flowing, the hormones hopping, and it's only human nature if it also deepens your commitment to love for a lifetime.

Fortunately for couples in the South Bay, opportunities for exhilarating escapades abound. For your pleasure, here are four accessible and easy-to-accomplish adventures. And to make your romantic escape as unique as your relationship, each is paired with elegant lodging where amenities abound—all designed, of course, to reward you after a rigorous day.

SKY HIGH ROMANCE

HOT AIR BALLOONING IN NAPA VALLEY

Up, up and away you go, and the next stop may well be the altar. There seems to be something about soaring over vineyards together in a hot air balloon that leads to marriage proposals. According to Joyce Anna, owner of Bonaventura Balloons, it happens frequently, and she thinks she understands why: floating on air currents epitomizes the light-headed intoxication of romance. That may help to explain why hot air balloon rides over the Napa Valley have been a popular part of the wine-cation experience for decades. Companies such as Bonaventura (www.bonaventuraballoons.com) and Napa Valley Balloons (www.napavalleyballoons.com) lift off just before sunrise, when all's calm, taking guests 2,000, even 5,000 feet into the air.

Rides cost \$200 and up, depending on whether you want to indulge in the champagne brunch afterwards. Spring and summer rides are recommended, when the air is still and the weather dry. As a certified wedding minister, Anna of Bonaventura Balloons often conducts nup-



tials in mid-flight. "We love small, romantic things around here," says Anna. "Sometimes I conspire with the young men and have a bouquet of red roses and champagne on board." She recalls one customer who tossed a fake engagement ring over the basket as a prank, but presented the real thing to his girlfriend and dropped to his knees and proposed.

People afraid of heights usually do fine on the excursion, notes Anna. "You don't even feel any motion of

the balloon. Many don't even know that we have taken off. And people think it will be freezing cold, but it's not. Everything is as smooth as silk." According to Anna, seeing the earth gently fall away and standing in the stillness of the air is a soul-stirring experience.

Retreat to Romance

Following your descent, make your way to a Napa inn or resort. Consider cozying up in front of a crackling fireplace at the Sil-



verado Resort and Spa where each fireplace suite comes with a full kitchen, luxury Egyptian linens, and a private patio or balcony. To top off your special getaway, loosen up with a couple's massage at the resort's 16,000-square foot spa. The mansion also offers tennis, swimming, and golf so you can burn up those calories before dining at the Royal Oak. (Silverado Resort, 1600 Atlas Peak Road, Napa, 707/257-0200; www.silveradoresort.com)

For those who want a European experience without the expense of flying to Europe, rent a Napa villa from Beautiful Places (www.beautiful-places.com)—for instance, a villa perched 1,000 feet above

Lover's Option: San Diego If you're looking for another unique balloon experience, go to San Diego where the weather is nearly picture perfect throughout the year. A Grape Escape Balloon Adventure (www.hotairtours.com) wafts you over Temecula Valley, a land quilted with vineyards and citrus groves.

Meanwhile, the variety of gourmet sleeps in San Diego County is prolific. One of the newest boutique digs opened in 2004 is the Estancia La Jolla Resort & Spa. In this ranch estate-styled dwelling with 210 rooms, it's old world Spanish tile meets state-of-the-art amenities. Get toned at the 8,000-square foot spa and

Other idyllic destinations? Check out the newly revamped Hyatt Regency Mission Bay Spa & Marina (www.missionbay.hyatt.com) for crystal blue water views and jet skiing, the Blue Marble eco-spa, and dining at the Red Marlin restaurant. Also on the hot list is Hotel Parisi (www.hotelparisi.com) for artsy European sleeps bundled with a delicious continental breakfast. The updated Grande Colonial Hotel (www.thegrandcolonial.com) turns heads with a classic take on colonial décor with nationally acclaimed, Nine-Ten Restaurant featuring outstanding farm fresh, California cuisine.

PEDAL PLEASURE

BICYCLING IN CARMEL/ MONTEREY

Cycling makes hearts stronger, and it could definitely make hearts grow fonder, too. The famous bike ride along the 17-Mile Drive is a rite of passage for every Bay Area resident. And Bay Bikes (www.BayBikes.com) and Adventures by the Sea (www.adventuresbythesea.com) rent wheels for everyone. Bay Bikes also offers guided bike tours for groups on the 17-Mile Drive as well as lesser known dirt trails.

Retreat to Romance

And when it's time to get cleaned up, check into the Bernardus Lodge, a Tus-

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the vineyards with floor-to-ceiling windows. Owner Liza Graves will secure your ballooning experience and set up everything you need. Graves can also hire a personal chef to whip up a gourmet meal in your professional kitchen.

Get the scoop on mud at Spa Solage, a 20,000-square foot spa at the hip and contemporary Solage Calistoga cottage-style hotel. Head to the mud bar and a staff mud-tender will create a custom mud cocktail for your body. The Mud mojito with mint invigorates the senses while the lavender mudtini relaxes and soothes. Of the 89 rooms, the Capella Suite sizzles with a sumptuous king bed, two 37-inch plasma TVs, fireplace, and hot tub. And when you are ready to explore outside, a bocce court, swimming pool, and cruiser bikes await. (Solage Calistoga, 755 Silverado Trail, Calistoga, 866/942-7442; www.solagecalistoga.com)

Not far is the highly rated Calistoga Ranch with The Bathhouse spa and The Lakehouse restaurant open only to guests. The 157-acre property, tucked in a secluded canyon, features 46 rooms, along with its own lake, fitness studio and yoga deck. With an emphasis on wellness and outdoor living, many of the suites come with chic outdoor furniture and hot tubs. When you reserve one of the Oak Creek Lodge suites, you can indulge in an outside garden shower amid 100-year-old oaks. (Calistoga Ranch, 580 Lommel Rd., Calistoga, 707/254-2800; www.calistogaranch.com)

fitness center. For serious bodily pursuits, opt for the Estancia package called the Whole Person Examination at the nearby Scripps Center for Executive Health. With interiors drawn from equestrian sensibilities (think upscale horse blankets and trendy sliding barn doors), you can recharge on this lush property which was previously a horse farm. (Estancia La Jolla Resort & Spa, 9700 North Torrey Pines, Road, La Jolla, 858/550-1000; www.estancialajolla.com.)

