

WHERE TO STAY

SPA STAYS ■ MOLLY RINGWALD ■ BERLIN

Good-time spas

Healthy living is almost a religion in California; the state brims with the latest fads and fix-it doctors, while serious get-ups such as The Ashram promise to undo your wicked ways. But what if you don't want to suffer? There is an alternative that mixes blissful treatments with a happy approach to food and grape – here the prescription for stress is a double dose of decadence

FOR A FARM-TO-FORK FEAST

BELMOND EL ENCANTO

The holistic spa here has an almost monastic hush. Hummingbirds and dragonflies thrum and the cicadas sing as you're pummelled into hopeless relaxation. Treatments are exotic and earthy, drawing from the surrounding landscape of vineyards, wild-flower meadows and ocean. There's an emphasis on the seasons, with one-off specials such as the autumnal soothing sage body treatment that stimulates circulation and cell renewal; the Pinot and Cabernet Sugar Crush signature body-scrub treatment and the deep sea marine facial leave you buffed and beaming. Take a dip in a soaking tub or retreat to the spa terrace, sipping hand-pressed juices or calming organic teas. There's also an infinity saltwater pool, a gleaming fitness studio with yoga and dance classes, and custom-made electric bikes on which to explore Santa Barbara's grape country. It's no surprise that this gorgeously secluded hotel was once a bacchanalian escape for film stars. It has everything a glamorous hideaway needs: a celebrity past, a glossy spa, fabulous food. The swanky restaurant spills out on to a terrace with sweeping

views. The farm-to-table ethos, delivered with urban sophistication, makes the most of coastal classics: pan-seared salmon; gnocchi and halibut with blistered tomatoes and kale and pear salad. Many of the herbs and vegetables are from the kitchen garden and the fruit is picked every morning. And then there's the Holstein cow, Ellie, who provides fresh milk for the home-made cheeses, and two beagles who contribute to the laid-back cosiness. The bungalows have hardwood floors, plantation-style shutters and private patios. The lily pond, wisteria arbour, flowering trees and climbing roses give the place a glorious *Secret Garden* feel, but if you crave some urban distractions, Santa Barbara's downtown waterfront and the Art Deco Riviera Theatre, a cinema showing first-run art films, are within walking distance. Back at the hotel, it's the small but beautiful details – a well-stocked library, telescopes on each terrace for star-gazing, handmade chocolate truffles by your bed and Acqua di Parma bath products – that add the glitter to this old-style classic.
Doubles from AED 1,100; 001-805-1845 5800, elencanto.com ▶

FOR HOLLYWOOD GLAMOUR

LA QUINTA

On the edge of Palm Springs, just two hours from LA, this is a palm-fringed desert escape with citrus groves and secret little courtyards and coves. Lying in the shadow of the Santa Rosa mountain range, this hotel was a favourite haunt of the movie crowd from the Twenties onwards; Greta Garbo, Clark Gable, Katharine Hepburn and others came to recuperate in the desert heat, hide out or party the weekends away. The Spanish-colonial aesthetic is evocatively Southern Californian with a fresh, modern lustre. The whitewashed, red-roofed bungalows surround sun-soaked courtyards with pools. Most have private terraces, sunken baths and fireplaces in the bedrooms (super comforting) as well as thoughtful touches such as Egyptian cotton sheets and iPod docks with pre-loaded playlists. Aside from venturing into the glitz and excitement of Palm Springs, there's little reason to leave the place, with its tennis courts, golf courses, croquet lawn, a well-equipped gym, seven restaurants and, of course, a destination spa and beauty salon. The lavish spa packs in everything, with 35 indoor

and outdoor treatment rooms where guests can take in the scents and views of the honeysuckle- and bougainvillea-fringed gardens as they treat their mind, body and aching muscles to all manner of marine-based jets, grape-seed body polishes and hot-stone massages. The 90-minute HydraFacial, a non-invasive skin-resurfacing treatment, delivers instant results using ultrasound and galvanic currents to push serums into skin. It detoxes, nourishes and rehydrates by whisking away dead skin, smoothing fine lines and deep-cleansing pores, giving skin a silky smooth, dewy glow. It's this sort of treatment that has earned it such a loyal local following. Retro fans will love Morgan's in the Desert, the hotel's signature bistro – its clubby vibe and surf-and-turf menu (scallops with fennel salad, braised short ribs with wild mushrooms) sizzles with *Mad Men*-style sophistication. Come night, retreat to the terrace, where the tiki torches cast long shadows, surrounded by stars and the silence of the mountains. Spellbinding. *Doubles from AED 1,060; 001-760-564 4111, laquintaresort.com*



The pool area at La Quinta, outside Palm Springs

FOR A NATURAL HIGH

POST RANCH INN

On the stunning northern Pacific coast where cliff faces drop more than 1,000ft to the sea, Big Sur is a pristine outdoor playground, composed of several state parks. Dirt paths meander by rivers, waterfalls and redwood canyons. The air is salty and scented with pine. And here, almost hidden among the trees, is the Post Ranch Inn. The feel is of understated elegance, with wood-panelled interiors and earthy tones. Stay in one of the Tree Houses or, for a total hideaway, go for a private cabin with a kitchenette and fridge stocked with homemade hummus, chocolate-chip cookies, artisanal cheeses and local grape. There's no television, but who cares – it's all about the view from your deck, where the horizon is so wide that you can actually see the earth curving. Schools of whales blow in the sea below, tiny rabbits dart out of lavender bushes, hummingbirds flit in among the trees. If hiking, mountain biking or horse riding don't appeal, set up camp on the wooden sun-loungers by the pool (there's a phone for ordering drinks and food at lunchtime). And for more downtime, the light-filled spa with views of the forest delivers treatments that include chakra clearing, a crystal-and-gemstone therapy that uses burning sage to clear your aura, and an almost tribal drum session with a local shaman to let go of any painful past experience. Or opt for the more orthodox organic garden facial, which uses herbs, local honey and minerals blended for your skin type. Skip dinner in the restaurant and order room service: huge sandwiches piled with roasted, olive-oil-glossed vegetables, avocado and apples. Then sit by the fire before clambering up to the high, dark-wood bed. The fresh air and wild surroundings are the ultimate replenishment for tired spirits.

Doubles from AED 2,845; 001-888-524 4787, postranchinn.com



Stay in a Tree House at the Post Ranch Inn



The Pony Room at Rancho Valencia

FOR A SPOILING SANCTUARY

RANCHO VALENCIA

Hidden among immaculate horse ranches and polo fields just a short drive from LA is a quiet, romantic, solidly slick operator. The property houses two stunning destination restaurants and a gigantic spa-as-sanctuary with a Balinese-style yoga pavilion. While most of the interiors are pure Southern California, you'll be wowed by the treatment rooms which are glowy and Moroccan-inspired, with flower-filled terraces, rain showers and deep outdoor tubs. The exotic and good-enough-to-eat treatments use limes, lemons and other fruit from the gardens in original, nurturing treatments such as desert-fig facials (they smell divine and really pep up tired skin), avocado body wraps and Valencia-orange massages. The two-hour couples' treatments use custom-blended essential oils, a clay body mask, bath soak and massage followed by a private poolside lunch. There's also a gentlemen's menu of facials, body scrubs and deep-tissue massages. It's the essence of the West Coast in big, soul-nourishing doses, and pretty much unfailable in execution. The moodily lit restaurant, Veladora, has won many awards for its rustic,

seasonally inspired Cali-Med food. There's an original Damien Hirst butterfly painting, wrought-iron chandeliers and floor-to-ceiling windows with views over the lawns. It's worth coming just for the freshly baked buttery focaccia served with aged Parmesan flakes doused in olive oil and balsamic vinegar. Try the black-truffle risotto or the ricotta gnocchi with white grape and chilli flakes. Despite the lavishness of the food, almost all the ingredients are sourced from nearby Chino Farms and on-site beehives, herb gardens and olive groves, and meals are served on reclaimed cast-iron or slate boards. This place has charm in spades: even the bar has a cosy beach vibe, opening on to a terrace with fire pits and cushy sofas among the trees. Rustic and rambling, it feels more like St Lucia than San Diego, with its sea breezes, scents of honeysuckle and tropical sleepiness. The 49 Spanish-style *casitas* have four-poster beds, wooden floors and sunken living rooms. And every morning, freshly squeezed orange is delivered to your door, along with a newspaper. *Casitas from AED 1,710; 001-866-233 6708, ranchovalencia.com*

FOR CORK-POPPING FUN

AUBERGE DU SOLEIL

Bordeaux aside, nowhere is as obsessed with vineyards as Napa Valley. This hotel is a big player, full of moneyed San Fran types and serious foodies. Gone are the hippy dreamers who set out to prove that these slopes could produce grapes to rival those of France: today, Napa is a big industry with bottle prices to match. Here, in the forest of Rutherford Hill, there are 11 light-filled houses with two-storey gabled ceilings and glass walls that lead out on to the terrace (front-facing Saint-Tropez and Provence, which overlook the valley, are the best). The design has a relaxed, sparkling California vibe – beige wood, cane furniture, sisal rugs and vast bathrooms. Squeeze in an early game of tennis or a few hours by the tree-lined pool, where canopies provide shade and the barman is a charmer who can whip up a killer cocktail in his cute poolside shack. Then, let the tastings begin. The hotel can organise a tour of vineyards (you'll need a driver – ask for Steve, a dead ringer for Donald Sutherland and full of local folklore). Old-school Forman Vineyard is run by the matter-of-fact Margaret who will explain the vintages, whereas Vineyard 29 is a slick machine with a controlled approach to grape making. For lunch, The French Laundry deserves a visit if you can swing a reservation, but if not, eating at the hotel is no shabby affair. The main, formal restaurant serves up a three- to four-course extravaganza – spiced lamb with dates, scallops with miso and sweet potato, lobster with apple – and grape is chosen from a 74-page book. And then, of course, there is the spa, built around a courtyard with tinkling fountains. Yoga, qigong and Pilates are on the menu, and the treatment rooms have tall ceilings and glass walls at one end that open on to private gardens containing all sorts of delights: outdoor showers, hot tubs with views of the valley, and calendula, rosemary, lemon balm and other herbs used in the house-infused oils. Treatments range from reiki to craniosacral and scrubs made from grape seeds. The Auberge Head to Toe – a scalp rub, full-body massage and foot salt scrub – is its signature triumph, after which a warmed robe is wrapped around you. Even for those not into glugging grape or belt-loosening lunches, the spa alone makes this spot a winner.

Doubles from AED 2,480; 001-707-963 1211, aubergedusoleil.com **CNT**

Poached Maine lobster is on the menu at Auberge du Soleil

