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IN FULL BLOOM

california dreamin’



PHOTOGRAPHY JACQUELINE PILAR

SPENDING A WEEKEND EXPLORING 100 YEARS OF HISTORY AT HOTEL CALIFORNIAN

BY *Eva Grunburg*

In my opinion, the best kind of staycation is one that is simultaneously transportive and immersive—and that’s exactly what my stay at Hotel Californian delivers.

Having passed the grand facade many times before, I thought I was prepared for the hotel’s interior awaiting inside. But, entering the foyer is transcendental. Stepping inside the Spanish style buildings reveals kaleidoscopic tiles, opulent gold fixtures, and rust-red cushions, curating a hypnotic atmosphere with the edge of the Funk Zone, the elegance of the American Riviera, and the essence of the establishment’s hundred-year history. Built in 1925, Hotel Californian carries on a 100-year legacy of trials and trailblazing. Eviscerated by an earthquake just a week after its opening, the hotel is intimately familiar with challenges—but these challenges made Hotel Californian an innovator of Central Coast culture and beyond.

I’m handed my room key—along with a map of the three buildings that comprise the hotel: the State Building, Mason Building, and Californian Building. “Don’t hesitate to ask any questions,” the attendant says with a knowing smile. “It can be kind of a maze.” If Hotel Californian is a maze, I’d be thrilled to get lost.

I brave the 121-room, Martyn Lawrence Bullard-designed labyrinth, eventually finding my Mason Building abode. The spacious room boasts velvet emerald seats, a studded ruby headboard, and the hotel’s characteristic black-and-white color palette appearing in the striped carpet, stunning bathroom backsplash, and funky wall graphic that reads “Always be yourself unless you can be a unicorn—then always be a unicorn.” The space is imbued with the electricity of the Funk Zone—from the floor-to-ceiling windows to the eclectic decor.

I trade my jeans and flats for the plush robe and soft slippers—embracing comfort the Californian way—and venture to the balcony. With State Street at my center, the Pacific to my left, the Santa Ynez mountains to my right, and champagne in my hand, I realize I’m living

a picturesque American Riviera moment. Despite its many obstacles, Hotel Californian has decided to be the unicorn, providing an unmatched experience with the magic of Santa Barbara.

Though I could have spent my entire stay on the balcony, I have a wine tasting reservation at The Society: State & Mason. I make the trek to The Society (which entails walking down the stairs and turning right) and am greeted by my boyfriend, who just got off work, a welcome splash of rosé, and Connor, our server. From the 70 plus wines in the Foley Family portfolio of wineries, we elect to try the Riviera Reserve tasting flight to sample the best of the American Riviera, from Chardonnay to Cabernet Sauvignon.

As he pours, Connor shares anecdotes about the wines and The Society—just beginning to explain how the location is perfect for people watching when a low-rider rolls by with four scruffy white dogs lapping out the window. He tells us about other local legends, like a man with a parrot on his shoulder, as we sip and stare as the sun sets on State. Though the people walking by may be different, I can imagine that they embody the same vibrant, tenacious spirit as one hundred years ago.

The next morning begins with a leisurely stroll around the Funk Zone—which ends up being shorter than anticipated because of the hotel’s prime location in its center. We wander past local favorites and pause for temptations like a fruit tart and hefty almond croissant at Goat Tree. Wandering through paseos between buildings, we discover new nooks to explore around every corner.

It’s a picture-perfect day, with palm trees swaying in the light ocean breeze, so we decide to take advantage of the sunshine at the rooftop pool. Aptly located in the Californian building, along with the mystical Majorelle Spa, the Tan-Tan pool does not disappoint—dozens of luxe chaises make it the perfect place to swim, relax, and get our tan-tan on. Overlooking Hotel Californian’s three buildings and the coastline, the rooftop is an escape in its own right.

Returning from the rooftop respite, we get ready for Uncorked and On The Rocks: an Evening at Blackbird restaurant (this time, down the stairs and to the left). Blackbird is an inviting space, from the welcome charcuterie and Chardonnay to the lively company. Senior Winemaker Rebecka Dieke steals the show with her knowledge and charm at this wine dinner in honor of Women’s History Month. Born amidst the movement for women’s rights to now celebrating female contributions in male-dominated fields, Hotel Californian continues to embody the spirit of innovation.

Rebecka and Head Chef Travis Watson lead us through the exquisite four-course dinner, their contagious energy inspiring continuous chatter at the table. I overhear someone mention that Hotel Californian was able to build over three stories due to different building regulations from the 1920s. I think back to my lounging at the rooftop pool, and it clicks as to why I felt so on top of the world.

Our new friend, Mercedes, asks about everyone’s favorite course. A testament to Chef Travis Watson, there is no clear winner: I instantly say the Lobster Risotto paired with the Ferrari-Carano Tré Terre Chardonnay, my boyfriend is partial to the Sous Vide Filet Mignon paired with Ferrari-Carano Tresor, and a couple nearby enjoyed the Grilled Pork Loin with apple chutney and braised kale paired with 2021 Ferrari-Carano Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon—though, it should be noted that everyone participating in the discussion hardly takes a break from their chocolate cake and sea salt ice cream to speak.

A booming voice interrupts the debate—it’s Chef making his final remarks. “It’s a Thursday night in Santa Barbara, the world is your oyster. It *means something* that you chose to spend it with us tonight,” he says.

His words encompass what Hotel Californian instills in its guests, locals, and onlookers worldwide: staycation or vacation, staying at Hotel Californian isn’t just a visit—it means something more. At Hotel Californian, you’re more than a guest—you’re a participant in the living, thriving history of a resilient city. Whether overlooking Santa Barbara from the rooftop pool, or immersing yourself in it via the Funk Zone, Hotel Californian offers an unforgettable getaway by inviting you to step into its history.

*Stay tuned for June’s celebratory events to commemorate Hotel Californian’s comeback and its centennial year.**

- CENTENNIAL PACKAGE - \$1,925/NIGHT (PLUS TAX + FEES)
- Book and stay June 1 – December 30 in an upgraded room category (Granada + Sestina)
 - Dinner for Two in Blackbird, up to \$300 value
 - Two Taste of Wine Country tastings in The Society: State & Mason
 - Tastings for Two at Lincourt Vineyards, Foley Estates, and Firestone Vineyard
 - Two Custom 60-minute treatments at Majorelle
 - Commemorative anniversary keepsake
 - Welcome amenity

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