Wanna get away?

We mean really get away. Sometimes a little distance and a quaint B&B with free cookies just won’t cut it. That’s when you need a truly immersive experience, an adventure of the mind and body that transports you to another time (on an historic train, a prehistoric volcano) or another country (like an African safari) or even transforms you into another person (a master chef, a nude sunbather). We searched high and low to find the most exotic and unusual vacation suspects. Best of all, they’re all close to home. So no need to fly to a different state or a faraway land—just get in the car and put the “CA” in escape.
SLEEP IN A YURT WITH A VIEW

As dawn creeps over the Santa Lucia Mountains and lights the slopes at Big Sur’s Treebones Resort, birds sing in the chaparral and greet the day. Their chorus of chirps, trills and Tweets-free tweets reaches guests sleeping inside yurts, Treebones’ round, tent-like canvas structures. It’s the perfect wake-up call for this rustic resort that emphasizes a connection to nature and eco-friendly practices.

Sustainable doesn’t mean spartan, however. Based on the nomadic dwellings of Central Asia, Treebones’ lattice-framed yurts boast electricity, polished pine floors and quilt-covered queen beds. People call this luxury camping, perhaps the most seductive, oxymoronic concept since fat-free ice cream.

Treebones’ eaves you from campfire’s bean work. Fresh coffee assails in the main lodge, where a fire crackles in a hearth made of river rocks adorned with a driftwood mantle. And the aroma of batter fills the lodge as guests prepare breakfast at Treebones’ do-it-yourself waffle bar. As for the location, well, walk out your door and there it is, Big Sur ocean spreading to the horizon, mountains dropping to the shore and jagged sea stacks rising from the water. With no cell reception on site or Internet in the rooms (and forget about in-yurt televisions), Treebones is a media-free zone. Balanced on the edge of the continent, it provides an escape so complete that it’s easy to pretend you’re in Patagonia and not just south of Monterey.

It’s tempting to never leave this self-contained world and simply decompress on your private deck or hang poohside (the resort gets its name from an osite well). You can also play Taizan in the “human nest,” a campfire with combination treehouse and art installation woven of branches by local artist Jayson Fann. But Big Sur, justly celebrated as the greatest meeting of sea, sky and land anywhere in the world, offers its own temptations. As an extension of Treebones Resort’s environmental commitment, the resort arranges private ecotours (available daily at 10 a.m. and lasting six to eight hours) through local outfitter Central Coast Outdoors. The company shows Treebones’ eco-focus, as evidenced by the bird’s-eye view of the world in which we live. The compound of yurts, all glowing from within, is an unmarked dirt road at the foot of a Big Sur forest.

As night falls, the compound of yurts, all glowing from within, is a forest of Sacramento lights. Balanced on the edge of the continent, it provides an escape so complete that it’s easy to pretend you’re in Patagonia and not just south of Monterey.

As dusk settles over the Santa Lucia Mountains and lights the slopes at Big Sur’s Treebones Resort, guests begin to drift up a profusion of wildflowers (and patches of Big Sur’s notorious poison oak) to watch the passage of stars across the sky, all the while serenaded by a symphony of chirps, trills and Tweets-free tweets. There are more walks to waterfalls and deep into canyons where carpets of moss cover fallen logs and Steller’s Jays call not by the treetops. She pauses at the burned trunk of a redwood that survived a blaze and explains how these iconic trees are adapted to the periodic fires that burn through Big Sur forests. Her love for the area is tangible. “I have this fascination with Big Sur,” she says. “I’ll be a student of it for life.”

Back at Treebones, it’s dinnertime. The resort is open to non-guests, and despite the remoteness, delivers a locavore experience by using produce from an organic garden planted last October. Besides mainstays such as mesquite-rubbed tri-tip, the restaurant now offers a sushi and tapas bar.

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DO YOU DREAM of the winemaker’s life? Now’s your chance—only you’ll find that experience not at a romantic vineyard, but at a flat-screen building that looks like a warehouse, perched on the still getting-expansive 3rd Street in San Francisco’s newly gentrifying Mission Bay neighborhood Dogpatch.

Open the door and step into another world: bustling, clanking, and scented with the briefly aroma of fermenting grapes. Crushpad is a custom-crafted winemaking facility where you control the process from start to finish. Depending on the varietal you choose and other factors, the process can take six months to more than two years, but you don’t have to be on-site any more than you like. Most people come for an intense crash experience during harvest season, then visit again at their convenience throughout the process.

On a first visit, you’ll marvel at the busy space: That clanking comes from the bottling line, where you too can stand in a few months, getting your first vintage cooked and labeled. The barrels, stained with purple drips, give off ‘wineries’ signature aroma, like fruity brioches rising: yeasty, tinged with sweet vanilla and tange juice.

High above it all, five Internet feeds about winemaking scroll by on flat-screen monitors; clients who can’t attend a particular stage in the process visit again at their convenience throughout the process.

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FIND YOUR INNER MONDAY!

Your very own vintage? You’ll take it home the wine you’ve dreamed up yourself.

—Kate Washington

CRUSHPAD: 2573 3rd St., San Francisco. 877-946-3404. CRUSHPADWINE.COM

FIND YOUR INNER (JULIA) CHILD

HAVE YOU BEEN DYING TO SEE ‘Julie and Julia’? Already setting the trend for the new season of Top Chef? If you have a taste for the gastronomic life, you don’t have to travel to Paris to enroll at the Gordon Bleu. Instead, a short drive to St. Helena in Napa Valley lets you storm a culinary citadel. Preceded on a hilltop, the tidy facade of the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone feels a little intimidating—as do the huge, stainless-steel professional ranges when you enter the kitchens for a hands-on cooking class.

These culinary precipices aren’t sacred, exactly, but they’re usually reserved for happily bonged upper-echelon cooking students in the CIA’s graduate and professional programs. But on weekends—and at some “boot camp” programs during the week—you too can smelt the drizzling aromas of spices, inspect a gallon of mushrooms with a prompt “Yes Chef!” and feel the singeing, blue-flamed heat of those ultra-powerful stoves.

The offerings range from one-hour demos every weekend, each of which showcases a different dish (Aug. demos include Napa peach ice cream with ginger snap and chilled shrimp with Pacific Rim salsa) for just $15, up to those vaunted five-day boot camps. Classes are open to anyone, and small class sizes ensure students get plenty of individual attention. Newbies may prefer shorter classes like the intimate two-hour CIA Sampling classes ($95), offered every other weekend to just 12 participants; it’s best to book a couple of weeks ahead. Themes range from Tastes of the Napa Valley (next offered Oct. 3 and 17) to a seminar on the California Harvest (Aug. 29, $495) or the five-day Baking and Pastry Arts Boot Camp (Aug. 3-7, $2,095)—even more delicious.

No matter which class you choose, the experience doesn’t end when the course is over. Lounging on the terrace of the CIA’s Wine Spectator Greystone Restaurant (707-967-1000), you can take in the sweeping vista across nearly wired vineyards while sipping a chilled glass of wine from the restaurant’s unique program, which offers organic-savignon blancs from around the world. This summer, for just $10, you can pair a drink with a small plate, or stay for a full dinner with seasonal treats like grilled liner-caught salmon with sweet-tart cherry gastrique. Shoppers, head straight to the CIA’s newly revamped store slated to reopen in the fall, along with the osteria, aka the olive-oil tasting bar. Still hungry? St. Helena is a food lover’s paradise, so stay the weekend (uplake at Auberge du Soleil or enjoy the sea-viewed bistro at The Harvest Inn on St. Helena’s main drag. Biking into the tender-steamed tummy at the local Farmer’s Market (1347 Main St., 707-963-3799; market.sthelena.com) transports you instantly to the sea. Just up the street, Woodhouse Chocolate (1367 Main St., 707-963-4143; woodhousechocolate.com) sells sculptural chocolates like the meltaway milk chocolate caramel mouse. Or stop at foodie mecca Dea & Debra (697 South St., St. Helena, Highway 29, 707-967-9888; deandeluca.com) to assemble your dream picnic—creamy cheeses, Arne breads, Fia’s Mani sammies—or take home culinary equipment like smooth, hefty cooking platters hewn from pink salt that will inspire you to keep those newly seasoned culinary skills as sharp as a CIA-trained chef’s knife. —Kate Washington

THE CULINARY INSTITUTE OF AMERICA AT GREYSTONE: 255 MAIN ST., ST. HELENA, 707-967-1000. CIA.CHEFEDU
JOURNEY TOWARD THE CENTER OF THE EARTH

THE AFTLY NAMED ‘Adventure tidy’ of Mount Diablo shows its dizzying, dazzling, three-hour journey in which you plunge into and then explore an unseen world formed in the heart of Gold Rush country. After a brief rappelling tutorial, your expedition begins with a 35-foot drop through a narrow, silo-like chute that leads to a 130-foot descent into the cavern’s main chamber. Large enough to hold the Statue of Liberty, the space bursts with marbleized limestone and calcite formations molded over ages by dripping water. The faint echo of that dripping, sometimes heard after rainstorms, creates a moaning sound, hence the cavern’s name.

Once you touch down on the cave’s floor, you’ll squirm through openings like “The Pancake,” which forces you to flip onto your back as you snake between two flat slabs of limestone that lie three feet apart. A self-pinchning tunnel dubbed “Godzilla’s Nostrils” connects to a 10-foot vertical chute you climb called “Santa’s Nightmare.” Between the passageways are small rooms where you can study delicate stalactites hanging from the ceiling. You might also spot human bone fragments, vestiges of ill-fated prehistoric explorers. But your safe exit might also spot human bone fragments, a reminder that even when the cave’s entrance is closed, there are dangers that might be hidden inside.

After an opening course of soup or salad, entrées are served; recent selections have included roasted coriander breast of chicken, seared local petrale sole, and roasted beef tenderloin. Dining-car attendants quietly turn your attention to wineries along the route: the Grgich Hills Winery Tour. The three-hour excursion includes a three-course gourmet lunch, fine wine and an up-close glance of what makes a vineyard tick. The journey begins amid the mahogany-white linen elegance of a 1915 Pullman dining car that was refurbished in the 1980s. As the train travels north out of Napa at 20 mph, its gentle rocking strips away stress and cares drain away. Instead of focusing your eyes on traffic, you’re returning the gaze of your sweetheart. Instead of gripping the steering wheel, you’re holding a glass of Meadovisk Collins cabernet sauvignon or another of the dozens of wines offered on-board. Outside your window, the world drifts past: rolling golden hills stipped with oak trees, endless acres of green, green vineyards, deeds, sheds and homesteads that Cézanne might have painted had he lived in Northern California instead of Southern France.

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Take a Trip Back in Time

YES, WE KNOW: The country’s depressed economy has almost everyone feeling like it’s the 1930s all over again. But there’s another way to return to that era and actually enjoy the ride: Hop on the Napa Valley Wine Train. On this trip back in history, you’ll be transported to a simpler, slower time, when the journey itself was as important as the destination, when dressing up meant more than wearing your “nice” pants, when traveling by rail promised luxury, sophistication and romance.

While you can’t go wrong with any of the wine train’s several tour packages, we favor the Grgich Hills Winery Tour. The three-hour excursion includes a three-course gourmet lunch, fine wine and an up-close glance of what makes a vineyard tick. The journey begins amid the mahogany-white linen elegance of a 1915 Pullman dining car that was refurbished in the 1980s. As the train travels north out of Napa at 20 mph, its gentle rocking strips away stress and cares drain away. Instead of focusing your eyes on traffic, you’re returning the gaze of your sweetheart. Instead of gripping the steering wheel, you’re holding a glass of Meadovisk Collins cabernet sauvignon or another of the dozens of wines offered on-board. Outside your window, the world drifts past: rolling golden hills stipped with oak trees, endless acres of green, green vineyards, deeds, sheds and homesteads that Cézanne might have painted had he lived in Northern California instead of Southern France.

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A guide leads your group on a private tour of the grounds, explaining the art and science of picking grapes and taking you inside the fermentation room. The tour culminates in the estate’s tasting room, where you’ll sample five Grgich Hills wines—chardonnay, fumé blanc, zinfandel, merlot and cabernet sauvignon—and learn insider tips on how to identify a fine wine by sight, smell and taste.

Then there’s time to reboard the train and head back to Napa. You’ll take a seat in a lounge car, appointed with plush velveteen armchairs, to enjoy your dessert (pray the cake tray is being served). When you’re done, check out the wine-tasting car, where you can sample four wines for a mere $10. And be sure to walk through the glass-ceiling wine-tasting car, which hosts a decadent four-course lunch and dinner for guests who book that package instead of a winery tour.

Once back at the station, you won’t want to ruin your serene mood by hitting the highway. So head down the block to the Westin Verasa (1314 McKinstry St., Napa; westin.com), which through Nov. 30 is offering what it calls the Discovery package: a traditional room with late checkout (1 p.m.), and wine train tickets for $399. All aboard! —Martin Kuz

AUGUST/SEPTEMBER | 09

Drink in the views of rolling hills and miles of vineyards around the Napa Valley Wine Train
Born to Be Wild! Your untamed heart will overflow at Safari West, a pristine 400-acre preserve in Santa Rosa dotted with rolling hills and roaming animals—from buffaloes and zebras to endangered antelopes and cheetahs—that makes you feel like you’re in Out of Africa just two hours outside of Sacramento. From the moment you drive up a dirt road to this lush savanna setting and see the majestic giraffes loping in the distance, you’ll be jumping at the chance to trade in your city ride for one in an open-air jeep. But first, if you’re staying the night and we highly recommend that you do—you’ll want to check in and check out your tent located either at base camp (overlooking active, early-rising wildlife) or hillside (overlooking the quiet, picturesque Catfish Lake). Although all 31 tents are easily within walking distance (1-5 minutes) from the registration desk, after check-in, a staffer will carry your luggage and drive you to yours. Safari West calls their accommodations “luxury tents,” and accurately so. While still made of canvas, albeit imported from South Africa, and blissfully basic (for instance, the doors have no locks), the tents boast plush giraffe-print duvets and 600-thread-count sheets, hardwood floors, heaters and ceiling fans. But while Safari West is a first-rate travel destination (guests have included Robert Redford and Maria Shriver), it is foremost a conservation effort, so the rooms’ most charming elements are their greens ones, such as coat hooks created out of branches, wooden bathroom counters hand-crafted from felled local trees and toiletries from Environmentally Sensitive Amenities. And with no TVs, phones or Internet inside the tents and no cell service throughout the resort, the only call you’ll be taking is the call of the wild. To help you heed it, Safari West offers tours at 1 and 4 p.m. daily (lasting 2.5–3 hours each), where a guide snakes around the massive preserve teeming with exotic animals. Ride on top of the safari vehicle and let giraffes tickle your feet, get up close and personal (although not too personal) with dangerous cape buffaloes, feel the breeze as a herd of Watusi cows stampede by, snap black-and-white pictures of a zebra family, study an albino ram and see a pregnant rhinoceros. For an extra cost ($225 for two people and up) and advance reservations (two weeks is recommended), you can also go behind the scenes and play “keeper of the day,” toss the soccer ball around with a cheetah and feed animals like the adorable Miss Lily, a tiny blue duiker antelope, who loves yams and apples. When you need to be fed, head to on-site restaurant Savannah Cafe, where in addition to a buffet that typically features pastas, salad and steamed veggies, chicken or beef (such as tri-tip) is cooked on an open African fire pit for lunch and dinner (complimentary continental breakfast is served to overnight guests). Postdinner, the fire pit stays lit for roasting marshmallows; after you get your sticky sugar fix, be sure to walk over to the lake for the catfish feeding, a squeal-inducing event for your little ones as they throw down raw chicken pieces for big black catfish to jump out and snag. Look up, and on a distant hill, you’ll catch the romantic sight of deer-like impala silhouetted against the sunset—yet another reminder that at Safari West, it’s a beautiful jungle out there. —Elyssa Lee

3115 Porter Creek Road, Santa Rosa. 800-616-2695. SAFARIVEST.COM. TOURS $68 PER ADULT. TENTS $170-$295 PER NIGHT.
SOAK UP THE SUN (AND STARS)

SLIP INTO ONE of the large, rectangular pools at Wilbur Hot Springs. The silky minerals lap at your bare skin, and as you sink down into the 88-degree, 20-foot-deep mineral waters, you reach up to your neck. Lean back against the deck—slosh your eyes, and the heat—broken only by the milling of birds, rustling wind, and the bubbling of the water against the edge of the naturally spring-fed pools—lets you imagine that the busy life you left behind—the stress, the traffic, the kids—has simply faded into oblivion.

That pool—the first you encounter after you shed your robe and step into the covered part of the Fluminarium complex, a group of natural mineral pools that is at the heart of Wilbur Hot Springs—is part the trust of the name. Low-key delights at this simple resort.

There are two more covered hot pools, kept at 105 and 110 degrees, to melt away any remnants of tension. An outdoor sauna in the complex further drains your cares away, and a big, cold plunge pool, reflecting the deep, deep blue of the sky above it, refreshes with a bracing chill. There’s also an open-air hot flame, as well as plenty of deck chairs and landscaped space perfect for daydreaming. Make a point of an evening soak in the hot flame under the stars, which appear preternaturally bright here, far from cities’ light pollution.

Many of Northern California’s other hot springs have a loud, bustling, even swinging scene, full of chatter and not-so-discreet scoping of fellow spa-goers, which undermine their reputation for relaxation. Wilbur, by contrast, is an isolated, calm gem uniquely surrounded by a private, 1,800-acre nature preserve. Peace, quiet and politely averted gazes are the rule in the hot springs, and step into the covered part of the hot springs, kept at 105 and 110 degrees, to melt away any remnants of tension. An outdoor sauna in the complex further drains your cares away, and a big, cold plunge pool, reflecting the deep, deep blue of the sky above it, refreshes with a bracing chill. There’s also an open-air hot flame, as well as plenty of deck chairs and landscaped space perfect for daydreaming. Make a point of an evening soak in the hot flame under the stars, which appear preternaturally bright here, far from cities’ light pollution.

First opened in 1865 and renovated by psychologist Dr. Richard Louv Miller in 1974 after decades of being in disrepair, Wilbur retains a mild 70s flavor, with abundant redwood decking, solar power. The whole resort is off the grid, and a slowly slow pace that includes yoga on weekends and massage by appointment. Lodging options in the sprawling, remodeled original hotel range from extremely basic (mattress outdoor camping at $30 per night or a single bed in the shared bunk room for $157) to simple full or queen rooms to a redwood-clad studio apartment with a kitchen, full bath, dining area and queen bed ($289 per night). There’s no food service at the lodge, so pack a cooler and cook alongside fellow lodgers in the spacious communal kitchen. At this time of year, we love to take our time getting there with a drive up scenic Highway 16, through the Capay Valley, and stop for local produce at overflowing farm stands on the way.

Even if you can’t commit to a long stay, it’s worth a day trip to slip into the pools after a winding drive; the waters are open for day use by advance reservation ($47 per day). Three copious minerals—the source of that sulfurous scent and the white residue on the mineral creek’s rocks, and the reason most guests prefer to skip the swimsuit (it gets covered in residue, too)—are renowned for their healing properties. But it’s therapy enough to slip into the waters for a seen spell of solitude and utter escape.

—Kate Washington
GO CLIMB A VOLCANO

Loose rocks and gravel skitter under your boots. The sun pushes down on you through the thin air. Even at its hottest, though, a cool breeze whips across your face almost constantly. And the trail only goes one way: up. It switchbacks, it winds, it climbs straight up the bare flank of the active (but don’t worry: it’s dormant) volcano for 2.5 miles, until it takes you all the way in a final scramble to the cindery cone at its summit, with its congealed lava flow: The rocks date to a 1915 eruption, making them the youngest in California. You’re 10,457 feet above sea level. The Sacramento Valley spreads out to the west; Mount Shasta shimmers, seemingly, not far to the north; and to the east and south, mountain ridges recede into the distance like a rumpled blue quilt, with heart-shaped Lake Almanor an even more azure spot in the middle. You’re on top of Mount Lassen—and, for the moment, the world.

From the freeway, Lassen is easy to spot, but remote: Its lavender-gray peak—still snow-splotched even in August most years—looks serene, forbidding, unknowable. But it isn’t. Getting to know the volcano up close and personal requires only a morning’s hike. (Morning is the best time to go; the sun won’t be as intense, and sharp winds can whip up unexpectedly in the afternoon.) And climbing Lassen requires no specialized gear, endurance training or mountaineering know-how—all you need is a pair of hiking boots and an appetite for altitude. The trailhead starts at 8,500 feet above sea level, and from the parking lot at first the trail looks almost flat, but it quickly angles up. As you climb, the air warms as you gulp it hungrily into your lungs, and the views get ever more dizzying. The climb can take from 90 minutes to three hours, depending on your fitness level and how many breaks you take; once at the top, perambulate on a rock outcropping for snacks or a picnic and rest up for the hike back down.

This transformative climb is the best but far from the only reason to visit Lassen Volcanic National Park, just three hours north of Sacramento. And August and September are the perfect times. By August, all trails and campgrounds are open (many don’t open until July), the park is at its warmest and ranger-led hikes and programs are available, such as stargazing sessions and a guided hike to 75-foot Mill Creek Falls; in September, the weather is still great, and you’ll have the park largely to yourself.

For all its cloud-scraping height, Lassen Park is distinctly short on lodging and dining amenities. To get the best early start on a Lassen climb, reserve a site at one of the two Summit Lake campgrounds, or choose the walk-in Southwest campground sites. Like a little more luxury? The small town of Chester, a half-hour from the park on the shores of Lake Almanor, offers a sea of motels and one charmer of a B&B. At Birdwell House (1 Main St., Chester; 530-258-3338; birdwellhouse.com), you can choose from 14 spacious rooms, sip sherry in the evenings and enjoy sumptuous three-course breakfasts. Owners Filip and Eva Laboda also run Chester’s best dining option, the Red Onion Grill (384 Main St., Chester; 530-258-1800; redoniongrill.com). If there’s ever a time to indulge in the ribeye topped with soft Gorgonzola, it’s after you’ve climbed a mountain.

You’ll want to linger in the cool high country, but however long you stay, the trip out will give you one last thrill: As you glimpse Lassen’s once-explosive, now seemingly tranquil peak from the road, you’ll know exactly what it feels like to stand astride a volcano, looking down to the faraway, everyday world.

—Kate Washington

Lassen Volcanic National Park

21800 Lassen National Park Hwy., Mineral, 530-595-4480. npow.gov/lassen