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[DESTINATION: MARIN COUNTY, CALIFORNIA](#)

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The kids and I planned a hooky day right before the Christmas holidays. Right before the East Coast contingent would arrive. We knew we would do our fair share of typical sightseeing – which is always a pleasure. Shopping in Union Square, a trip to Napa to see Coppola’s latest excesses manifest themselves at the old Inglenook winery, and good food and drink galore. But today it was destination Marin. The only question was where.

In the 26 years I have lived in Marin County, I have taken hundreds of day trips around the county with my husband and kids. With all due respect to the Philadelphia suburbs I hail from, I could only muster a few in all the years I lived there. One could only visit Valley Forge so many times and even the Amish country and quaint New Hope got stale after a score of repeat trips – and these meant a trip outside my county. County actually didn’t mean much back there.

In Marin, it’s everything. It’s the bond that holds this incredibly diverse band of municipalities and unincorporated areas together. It’s a very tangible feeling of membership into an extraordinary piece of land bounded by the ocean and the bay and infused with hundreds of miles of meandering open space that is of paramount importance to all of its residents.

Today we opt for a trip to Mount Tamalpais, the imposing mountain that hosts hundreds of trails, lakes, waterfalls and wildlife. It is cold and clear as I make my left turn at the “2 AM” Club in Mill Valley to head uphill. It’s the only way I know to get there, and I don’t know how I know this way, but it always gets me there. We are treated to a unobstructed climb – in warm weather the narrow road holds competing traffic and bicyclists. We plan to eat lunch at the Mountain Home Inn, a mainstay for fantastic food and views year-round. We refuse to be daunted when my son locks the keys in the car, so we eat slowly while waiting for AAA to come. Oversized hamburgers and mesquite grilled chicken sandwiches are extra delicious, as is the tomato soup I am still trying to replicate. We agree as we always do, that we should spend the night here



sometime and ask the hostess about the rooms. She gives us a few keys and we explore a few of the one-of-a-kind cozy rooms until she rings us that our car rescuer is here. The inn and the rooms are as friendly as she is. We agree on Room #1 for a future date.

Back in business, we drive to the top parking lot and hike our way to the peak in record time. It dawns on me that Marin County is the best place in the world if you like to eat great food and then hope to work it off. I remember doing the same thing in the Austrian Alps – after a trip into one of the many magical towns like Kitzbuhel and St. Anton, we would head back up the mountain to our lodge, making a stop halfway up for a beer and a mouthwatering sausage sandwich. A mere snack before dinner. I lost about 5 pounds after a two-week vacation. My kind of diet. My kind of vacation. Very Marin, too.

From the top of Mt. Tam you can really comprehend the amazing topography of Marin County – a sliver of green hills and valleys between two majestic bodies of water. We pick out Tam's smaller sister, Mount Burdell in Novato, some 15 miles or so away and our home town, then look for more well known landmarks, the Golden Gate Bridge, Alcatraz Island, The Transamerica Tower in The City and the rolling Marin Headlands. Westward we look down on Stinson Beach and we decide that's our next destination.

It's a quick, breathtaking drive down the mountain as we land at Marin's largest strip of southern-California-like beach. It's a mecca in the summer but today there are just a few dozen beachcombers. We run for a mile in the crystal clear air, chasing sea gulls. We run past a sign advertising "Shakespeare on the Beach" and we plan to attend a performance next summer. Our friend is the Director of the Marin Shakespeare Company, and we frequent his talented performance closer to home at a fern-covered amphitheater on the campus of an old college – but a production on this beach sounds like great fun.

We decide to head back to Novato, Marin's most northern city via the water, up Highway 1, which ultimately can wind you up and down the coast to Oregon if you are so daring. But first, we follow a security truck marked "Sea Drift" – we have always wondered how one enters this toney enclave that sits between the ocean and a scenic spit. We find all sorts of quaint beach cottages as we make our way to the gatehouse, and we make great plans to lease one for a week this summer.

We pass the Bolinas Lagoon with seals sunning themselves at every turn, pass the rolling horse ranches, through miniscule Dogtown and into the town of Olema. Another one of our favorite places to eat near the beach is the Olema Inn and we talk about stopping for some oysters – but we are still full. I tell the kids about shooting a commercial for the Inn – and how each room is decorated with comfortable European charm to complement the tasty food. Another place we will spend the night some day.

Now on to Point Reyes Station, the tiny West Marin town that we stop at on every return trip from any one of our favorite beaches. Today there isn't much produce at Toby's Feed Barn – in summer you can stock up on fresh fruits and vegetables as well as other locally produced goodies. The Station House Café provides top notch dining here, and in summer, if you make it up the road through the Point Reyes National Seashore, you'll get to Drakes' Beach Café where the fish and chips are shouting fresh inside, and barbecued oysters and corn-on-the-cob are simmering outside on the grill. Today however, we happily settle for huge chocolate chip cookies, hot chocolate and espresso at Café Reyes, tucked in behind our favorite antique shop where we find a few small Christmas gifts. We have been looking for red chili pepper lights that I want to hang in my kitchen and one small shop has them hanging in the window. We are disappointed to learn that they only have green ones left and we all concede this just won't do: we buy more gifts instead.

We feel as though we have been to several different worlds today and it's only four o'clock: mountains and beaches and numerous small towns, and as usual, we've just hit a few of the spots Marin County offers us.

I think of our other exploits just in Sausalito alone. The nefarious Sam Z, a colorful character, who often held

court at the still-hopping No Name Bar and owned quite a bit of the town, was once our landlord when we owned an athletic shoe and apparel store across from his famous waterfront eatery, “Zack’s,” now the Paradise Cafe. Sam let me shoot some commercials on Richardson Bay in front of his establishment for an East Coast client, and the kudos were impressive – but what seemed like the Riviera to them was just a few clever angles, easy to find in Sausalito.

My friend Tony is another unlikely Sausalito scion – a transplanted Chicago musician, he operates an enormously successful women’s sportswear business from his Sausalito base while also buying and restoring a mammoth waterfront design complex, a movie theatre, an office building and a restaurant. Locals keep an eye out for his “sample sales” along with those of a few other manufacturers headquartered nearby. It’s always a treat too, when scores of local artisans, some his tenants, open their doors and show off their unusual works.

But that’s for another day. We head back over the Nicasio hills where movie mogul George Lucas has his environmentally low-key, technologically high-octane compound. It’s said he is illusive, but I’ve been behind him in line at the Taco Bell drive-through in Novato, and ate lunch a few tables away at the Marin Brewing Company in Larkspur. My neighbor Harlan, fitted him and his then girlfriend, Linda Ronstadt for glasses at his optical shop in San Rafael. His understated image precisely mirrors Marin County.

We make one final stop as we head into Novato, to the Marin French Cheese Company, also known as Rouge et Noir. Made on-site, you can’t find better brie anywhere. The absolute truth. Also camembert and schloss. We buy six flavored rounds ripe for eating and head to our town. This super family-oriented city of close to 50,000 is home to numerous leading high technology companies, yet maintains a small-town feel that is reflected in its “old town” shops, excellent schools and active park and recreation department and more. In summer, Novato hosts the annual Festival of Art, Wine and Music. Once a small, local affair, it now brings in huge crowds from all over. I don’t know how he does it but an insurance agent and amateur musician in town, has managed to consistently book great acts to satisfy every musical taste. I think Novato is an incredible place to raise a family, to work, to shop and to dine. It has a flavor, as uniquely it’s own as any of the places we visited today.

Once again, “destination Marin” is a great success. I wonder what our next escapade will be. I know it will involve great food, beautiful vistas and some outdoor activity – on a hill, at a beach or a festival, on one of the bays – on bike or foot or boat, with a tennis racquet, a golf club or even an umbrella.

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Christine Scioli owns Zan Media, a film and video production company, <http://www.zanmedia.com> with her husband and daughter.

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