

TAKE 5 IN VENTURA

By Jan Schroder



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Until recently, my only knowledge of Ventura was the lyrics of the song by America that mention alligator lizards in the air. Hardly a reason to visit. But now that I've been down that Ventura Highway in the sunshine, I'm enamored by its charming small-town feel. Just 70 miles from Los Angeles, Ventura draws surfers, shoppers and visitors simply seeking its friendly vibe. Here are five things *Travelgirl* recommends to do when you visit the town nicknamed "the land of endless summer."

1. KAYAK/HIKE IN THE CHANNEL ISLANDS NATIONAL PARK

Battling the waves as they crashed into caves, under the watchful eyes of the sea lions who live there, I wondered if my mild case of claustrophobia would be an issue as we steered our kayaks into very dark, very narrow passageways. Our experienced leader from Island Packers guided our intrepid group of six as we paddled in and out of several caves surrounding Santa Cruz, the largest of the five islands that make up the Channel Islands National Park. The day started with a short boat ride from Ventura Harbor, walkable from the Four Points by Sheraton hotel where we stayed. After our 2½ hour kayak trip, we enjoyed a picnic lunch and a hike up the hill for a spectacular view of the harbor. nps.gov/chis, islandpackers.com

2. SIP YOUR WAY ALONG THE VENTURA COUNTY WINE TRAIL

As we drove onto the grounds of the Old Creek Ranch Winery we spotted a bachelorette party enjoying a picnic and party games with a view of the orchard and the mountains beyond. The 30-year-old winery is a popular picnic place for locals who enjoy drinking wine and taking in the scenery. Old Creek Ranch is one of 15 family-owned wineries in Ventura County, where owners or family members often conduct tastings themselves. If you visit on a weekend, sign up for a Wine Trail Tour, which includes transportation, a visit to four wineries and lunch. If you can't make it to the wine trail, stop into the cozy Paradise Pantry in town, where you'll find a selection of local wines and knowledgeable owners. *Travelgirl tip: Have a seat in the back and order the cheese platter.* Venturacountywinetrail.com

3. LEARN ABOUT LEMONS AT LIMONEIRA

I had no idea how much was involved in getting those bright yellow luscious lemons to my fruit bowl. But I found out when I visited Limoneira, one of the largest lemon producers in North America. After donning our lovely hair nets and foot covers, we toured the factory where one million lemons a day are sorted according to size and color, then boxed and shipped around the world.



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PHOTOS: 1. COURTESY JAN SCHRODER 2. COURTESY OLD CREEK RANCH WINERY 3. BY JAN SCHRODER 4. COURTESY WATERMARK ON MAIN 5. COURTESY OF VENTURA COUNTY

Limoneira is a leader in sustainable farming practices, evidenced by an experimental 5½-acre solar orchard. Seven miniature sheep live among the solar panels and function as nature's weed eaters. Along the way, visitors may encounter one of the many film crews that shoot here. Several commercials have been filmed at Limoneira, including the Budweiser 2010 Super Bowl commercial. After the tour, relax with a game of bocce ball on one of eight courts, surrounded by the lemon trees and mountains. www.limoneira.com

4. DINE IN A HISTORIC BUILDING Once housing a bank and dating back to the 1920s, Watermark on Main serves up delicious breakfast, lunch and dinner under soaring ceilings and murals depicting El Camino Real, the California Mission Trail. We enjoyed swordfish tostadas, pictured above, and fresh watermelon salad for lunch, then returned that afternoon to the rooftop, home to the partially open-air W2 Lounge where a small

plate menu is served, and you can often catch live music. Two other restaurants to try are Sidecar, housed in a 1910 Pullman dining car, and Tutti's Off Main, housed in former livery stables, where you can enjoy elegant courtyard dining year-round.

5. SHOP ON MAIN STREET I loved strolling along the palm tree-lined streets downtown, with plenty of cute shops, galleries, tequila bars and restaurants and nary a chain in sight. Vintage shopping is big here, and people flock from L.A. looking for deals among the dozens of consignment and vintage shops that are interspersed with upscale boutiques. Even the Goodwill thrift store on E. Main looks enticing, and its windows display a rotating collection of art created by local artists. *Travelgirl tip: The Ventura Visitors & Convention Bureau has a list of close to 50 stores for vintage shopping.* For that list and plenty more to do in Ventura, visit www.ventura-usa.com

