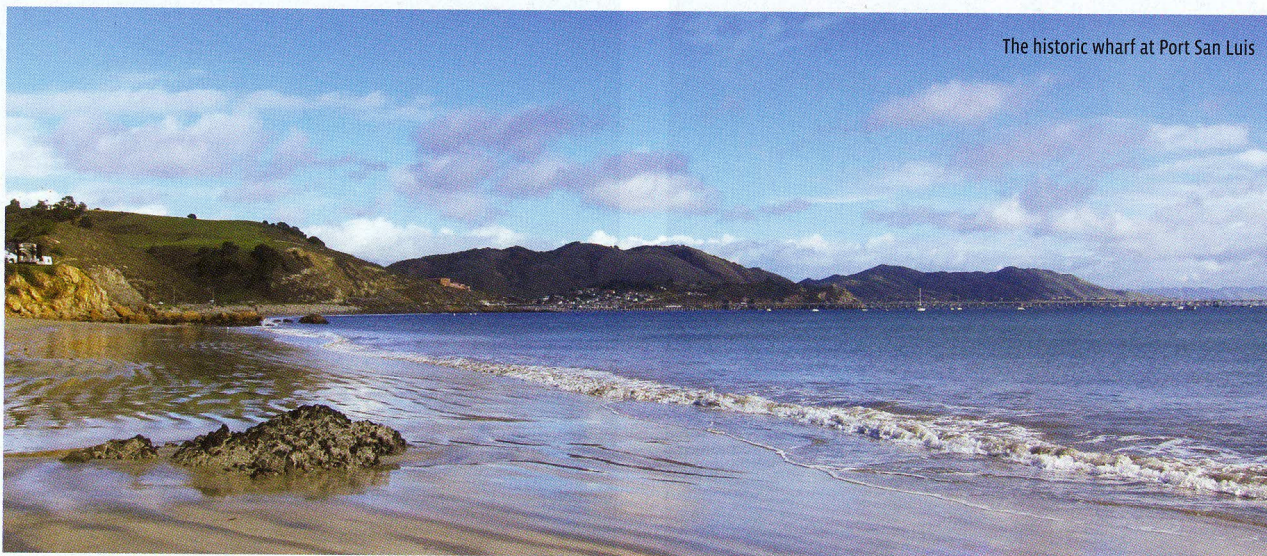


Life In The SLO Lane



The historic wharf at Port San Luis

PHOTOGRAPH BY ADAMS/HANSEN STOCK PHOTOS AND COURTESY OF GRANADA HOTEL @ BISTRO AND SYCAMORE MINERAL SPRINGS RESORT

Do you zoom up Highway 101 on your way to Northern California destinations? Join the club. I'm usually focused on getting to family in Santa Cruz, and, unless hunger strikes, I bypass the home of Cal Poly and Pinot Noir.

However, this past holiday season we opted to meet our "kids" halfway, rather than either of us driving for more than eight hours (or worse — battling airport crowds). And where does a family of five spanning three generations convene on the Central Coast?

Trolling my memory bank, I remembered a brief solo stay at a spa in Avila Beach, about ten miles southeast of SLO, and — sure enough — Sycamore Mineral Springs Resort had a two-bedroom, two-bath suite available. And was I nuts enough to take a four-year-old to a spa? SMSR is low-key and relaxed, and — for the most part — so are we. (www.sycamoresprings.com)

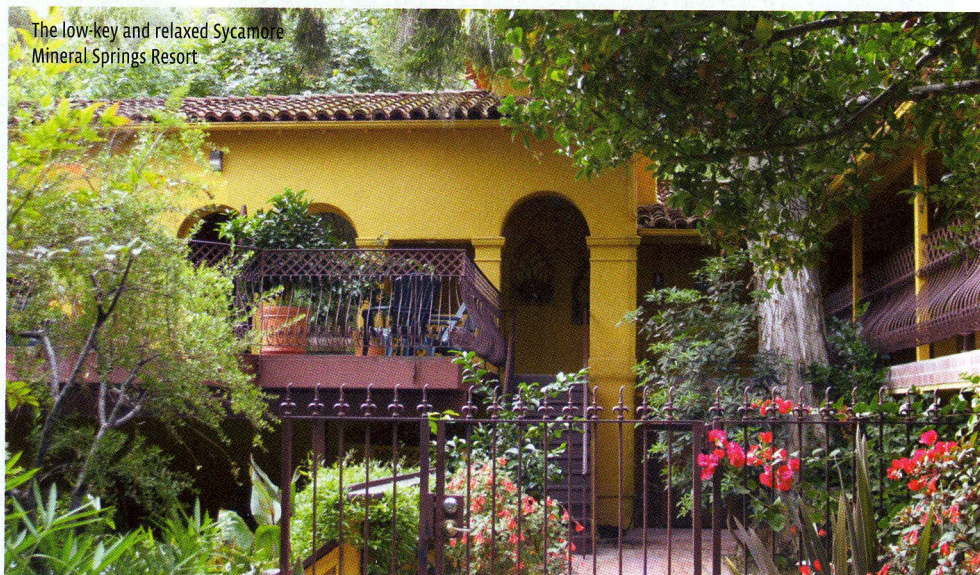
We all loved the hot tub on our deck and the fireplace in the living room, and some of us took advantage of the Pilates and yoga classes. I actually

think our preschooler got the point of the meditation garden and she definitely enjoyed walking the labyrinth.

The big highlights for all of us, however, were the walking trails in the area, which I hadn't felt comfortable exploring on my own. Christmas morning we walked the Sycamore Crest Trail that winds uphill through a majestic oak forest to a panoramic view of the Pacific. From that point we could see three piers jutting into the ocean, a long stretch of sand, and the tiny village of Avila Beach.

We also really enjoyed the Bob Jones Trail, which meanders through a sycamore grove, follows the course of San Luis Obispo Creek, crosses several bridges, and passes a golf course before reaching a beautiful wide beach with a playground for the kids.

From there we continued walking to the historic wharf at Port San Luis, built in 1873 by an early settler who used it to offload schooners. The Olde Port Inn on the end of Harford Wharf provided the most memorable meal of our five-day stay in the area. The >>



The low-key and relaxed Sycamore Mineral Springs Resort



The Granada Hotel & Bistro imports around 80 percent of its wine list



The bedrooms in the Granada Hotel & Bistro hold an eclectic history with their exposed brick walls from the 1920s, fireplaces, and oriental rugs

« glass-top bottomless tables made it possible for us to actually watch for marine life beneath the pier while we ate our lunch. My warm Greek salad with fresh-caught rock cod was delicious, and the others felt similarly about their crab sandwiches and fish and chips. (www.oldeportinn.com)

In direct contrast, we ventured into SLO for the Thursday night market, where haute cuisine was in short supply. (Think Del Mar Fair food.) In the vendors' defense, they did have local honey, olive oil, and produce for sale.

My husband and I returned to SLO another day because I couldn't resist taking a sticky beak at the eight-week old Granada Hotel & Bistro. There is nothing that lures a travel writer like an unexplored hotel — and this one was really memorable. Housed in a 1920s exposed brick building with a checkered past, the hotel offers 17 rooms and suites furnished with queen beds and an eclectic assortment of chests, lamps, and bedside tables. The armoires, for instance, are re-purposed safes from Russian Navy ships. I really liked the exposed brick walls, fireplaces, and oriental rugs.

(www.granadahotelandbistro.com)

Lunch was equally innovative. My Caesar salad included tiny flavorful croutons and Boquerones anchovies. My husband's grilled panini was filled with unusual artisan cheeses. What surprised me the most about the Bistro was the fact that here — in the heart of one of California's great wine regions — 80 percent of the wines on the list are imported. The explanation: "Every other good restaurant in San Luis Obispo serves popular local wines and we want to be different."

After lunch we headed west to the coast and treated ourselves to a drive through Montana de Oro State Park, where we admired stunning views of rugged cliffs, sand dunes, secluded beaches, and big surf.

By the time we returned to the resort it was dark, and "Papa" stayed with the youngest among us while my husband, daughter, and I headed off to the spa. We soaked in mineral water under a canopy of sycamore trees that blew in the wind, exposing fleeting views of a full moon and starry sky. At the appointed hour, we kept our dates with three highly-skilled massage therapists.

Life in the SLO lane was never better.

ELIZABETH HANSEN



A golf course alongside the Bob Jones Trail. This path lies next to the San Luis Obispo creek and takes you straight to Avila Beach