

weekend getaway

BY AVITAL BINSHTOCK

Doesn't it occasionally seem that planning that fabulous vacation is more effort than it's worth? The airfare to book, the hotels to research, the sights to plan on seeing. The dates to choose, the restaurants to reserve, the activities to schedule... By the time you get there, all you want to do is laze.

So why not scrap the effort and cut to the chase by booking a lovely all-in-one getaway that doesn't require much travel, money or even time? (Even one night should do.) It's a perfect strategy for hyper-busy couples who still want to make time to celebrate something special, professionals who want to reward themselves with a luxurious experience, or families whose members have wildly differing schedules and can only agree on a slim slice of calendar.

It's time to take the stressful planning and transit out of the picture, check in and relax. Here are five perfect properties at which to do just that:

FLY AWAY HOME

As wonderful as traveling to faraway, exotic lands can be, sometimes what's called for is a simple, easy getaway just around the corner.

THE FAIRMONT MIRAMAR HOTEL SANTA MONICA

This four-diamond, five-acre property encompasses the essence of Santa Monica: It's got lush gardens, a fitness center (including an outdoor heated pool and hot tub), 32 recently renovated California-style bungalows (for those willing to splurge) and about 300 other handsomely appointed guest rooms – most with private balconies, and many that overlook the Pacific coastline and the Santa Monica pier; be sure to request such a view.

Though it's only steps away from the lively Third Street Promenade, the Fairmont offers many reasons to stay on property: **The Grille**, a lovely restaurant with an excellent menu creatively constructed by Executive

Chef Jean-Claude Plihon and Food & Beverage Director Vern Lakusta; relaxing **Koi Pond Lounge**; and frequent community gatherings under the hotel's magnificent Moreton Bay fig tree.

Keep an eye out for special packages, as the Fairmont Miramar is masterful at constructing them; for paying a bit extra, you may be able to choose from incorporating culinary lessons, theater tickets, a champagne breakfast, a spa treatment or even a Harley-Davidson ride into your stay.

A tip, though: Parking here is expensive (\$30 per night), so if you can, find parking on nearby streets or in less costly structures. But if you own an eco-friendly car, don't worry, since



many Fairmonts, this one included, provide free parking to overnight guests with hybrids.

www.fairmont.com
101 Wilshire Blvd. (at Ocean Ave.)
Santa Monica (310) 576-7777
Rooms: Approx. \$389-\$559

THE PORTOFINO HOTEL & YACHT CLUB REDONDO BEACH

Redondo Beach's only waterfront hotel is located on its own private peninsula six miles south of LAX. Its 163 guest rooms overlook the ocean.

For romance, book the one-night **Bubble, Berries & Breakfast** package; it includes an oceanview suite equipped with a Jacuzzi, breakfast in bed, a box of Godiva chocolates and champagne and strawberries (served with whipped cream).

If you're traveling with kids, book the **Stay and Save-a-Sea Lion** package instead, which supports the protection of sea lions that live in the local breakwaters. The hotel donates proceeds from this package (which includes a stuffed-animal sea lion and a disposable camera) to MAR3INE, a nonprofit which supports marine mammal rehabilitation.

Check out the property's 233-



slip marina (yachting, anyone?) and restaurant, The Breakwater, which serves up steak, jazz and seafood.

www.hotelportofino.com
260 Portofino Way, Redondo Beach
(800) 468-4292 or (310) 372-1202
Packages start at \$269

THE ISLAND HOTEL NEWPORT BEACH

Newport Beach's crowning jewel is The Island Hotel, a five-star property across the street from the popular Fashion Island shopping center and just minutes from Newport Harbor. Many of its 295 luxurious rooms overlook the islands of Balboa, Lido and – on clear days – Catalina.

Built in 1986 by the Irvine Company, the hotel now features a 4,000-square-foot spa, a 3,000-square-foot swimming pool, a fitness center, outdoor tennis courts – and award-winning dining.

In early June, the hotel's signature **Palm Terrace** restaurant reopened (it was previously called Pavilion) following an extensive renovation. Now with an inventive new menu and rich decor, the restaurant remains under the skillful direction of Chef Bill Bracken, who presents signature



small bites and allows guests to custom-design their own tasting menus.

For evening entertainment, head to the **Palm Terrace Lounge**, where, on Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings, you can take in the spirited sounds of popular vocalist Jimmy Hopper. Order the martini of the day or an island-inspired margarita while you groove to his sound.

www.theislandhotel.com
690 Newport Center Drive
Newport Beach (949) 760-4920
Rooms: Approx. \$225-\$2,000



WESTLAKE VILLAGE INN

This delightful inn spreads over 17 landscaped acres and was founded in 1968 by Westlake Village developer and philanthropist John L. Notter. Earlier this year, the property underwent major renovations which modernized the guestrooms, public spaces and outdoor areas. Today, it consists of seven buildings – with faraway names like Capri and St. Tropez – and 141 French-country style guestrooms.

Though no two rooms are exactly alike, each one features spacious private terraces, flatscreen TVs, Matteo bedding, Bose radios, original artwork and nightly turndown service. The price of the stay includes continental breakfast, an afternoon snack buffet and use of WiFi, bicycles, a swimming pool, fitness room and 10 lighted tennis courts.

The hotel's beautiful setting has made it a popular filming location; most recently, it was the backdrop for *Desperate Housewives* scenes. Despite its low profile, WVI draws high-visibility guests like Greg Norman, Arnold Palmer, Julio Iglesias, Hulk Hogan, Condolezza Rice, Dick Cheney and Sean Connery. Ronald Reagan was such a regular that he appointed one of the master suites the **Ronald Reagan Suite**; it's still adorned with his memorabilia and photos.

Though the property doesn't have a spa, in-room massages are available, as is in-room dining for breakfast and dinner. Take advantage, too, of the wonderful ambiance and fresh, seasonal fare at **Mediterraneo**, the onsite restaurant (opt to sit outdoors for the lake view). After dinner, hit **Bogie's** for its cocktail menu and, on weekends, live music and dancing.

www.westlakevillageinn.com
31943 Agoura Road, Westlake Village
(800) 535-9978 or (818) 889-0230
Rooms: Approx. \$189-\$235
Suites: Approx. \$245-\$600



LE MERIGOT SANTA MONICA

Another four-diamond Santa Monica seaside property is Le Merigot, which is walking distance from the Santa Monica Pier and Third Street Promenade

This property is family-friendly; when kids aren't staying in one of this JW Marriott property's 175 luxurious rooms, they can swim in a heated outdoor pool overlooking the ocean, go to the beach (just steps away) or ask the wonderful concierge staff to arrange entertainment including event tickets, tours, surfing, tennis, even SCUBA. Bring the four-legged members of your family; they'll be lavished with special treats.

For the adults in your party, there's a soothing spa and the phenomenal **Cezanne** restaurant, which just unveiled a new, healthier menu. Chef Desi Szonntag and experienced sommeliers guide diners through a true taste and ambiance experience, making the restaurant's name appropriate; eating there is like taking in an impressive work of art. The view of the pier's ferris wheel alight with color adds excitement, as does the delectable food.

Le Merigot's 175 guest rooms are elegant yet comfortable. Many offer breezy balconies with sweeping ocean views, and the Euro-California design is classy but not ostentatious.

The staff, too, is distinctive, and it's the small, unique touches that make Le Merigot noteworthy. Instead of finding a mint on your pillow, you'll find a polished conch shell. You might get a bowl of fruit in your room one day, tulips the next. Staffers go out of their way to help. Ask the concierge for directions to some part of the hotel, and you won't just get pointed somewhere – you'll get escorted.

www.limerigot.com
1740 Ocean Ave., Santa Monica
(310) 395-9700 or (888) 539-7899
Rooms: Approx. \$320-\$610



DISNEY BRINGS BACK THAT CLASSIC MAGIC TOUCH The Submarines Resurface With Finding Nemo

By Brian Spero

There's never been a better time to go to Disneyland. Summer's here, school's out, it's Disney's "Year of a Million Dreams" (so the park holds all kinds of delightful surprises) – and the brand-new Finding Nemo attraction is out of (or under) this world. On June 11, the Finding Nemo Submarine Voyage ride, inspired by the Pixar film, opened to smiling faces and thunderous applause.

Disneyland fans, besides the very young, probably remember the classic Submarine Voyage ride, which closed in 1998. The new attraction uses the original submarines at the same Tomorrowland Lagoon location, but they've gotten a fresh coat of yellow paint and now run on eco-friendly electricity instead of diesel.

Themed on one of the most popular animated films of all time, these subs have taken center stage this summer; guests from far and wide are lining up for a close-up look into the exciting world of Australia's Great Barrier Reef.

As riders embark on their underwater voyage, they're treated to a visual display that captures the beauty of a real tropical reef, including a volcano erupting onto the ocean floor and sunken ancient ruins. The irresistible characters from Finding Nemo make it all entertaining.

As the subs "descend" deep below the surface, the captain switches on a device called a hydrophone, which allows humans to hear the fish talking. Thereby, riders get drawn into the storyline, which centers on the fact that Nemo is once again missing.

Highlights of the adventure include cruising the East Australian Current with sea turtles Crush and Squirt, run-ins with anglerfish and stinging jellyfish and the sharks Bruce, Anchor and Chum, who navigate a sunken submarine and mines. All these characters are represented in a gorgeously executed set, and in the context of digital imaging, which is incorporated seamlessly into the environment.

For Nemo and his friends, it's just another day on the reef, but for us land-roaming thrill-seekers, the Finding Nemo Submarine Adventure is a rare treat that's fantastic and fun for the whole family. ♦

