

Napa or Sonoma?

Can't decide between California's best-known wine country regions?
Ella Buchan uncorks the options

Sunlight seeped into the cornflower sky as we billowed gently upwards.

Peering down from the basket, I could see neat rows of vines weaving up hillsides. In the distance, San Francisco's skyline shimmered foggily, while Mount Saint Helena peeped behind dense forest.

On a hot-air balloon ride with Napa Valley Aloft, the vine-striped valleys of Napa and Sonoma seem to merge into one.

The main downtown areas sit 13 miles apart, each county sprawling in opposite directions. Most of Napa's 400-plus wineries are clustered along Highway 29. Stretching to the coast and twice the size of Napa, Sonoma feels less crowded.

Traditionally, Napa's buttoned-up sophistication matched the robust structure of its world-class cabernet sauvignons, quaffed in cavernous cellars or mahogany scented chateaus. Sonoma was the chilled, zesty chardonnay best sipped barefoot on a sunny patio.

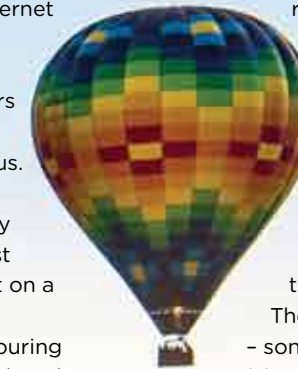
Tasting and touring in Napa still tends to be flashier and fancier, suiting clients wanting a blow-out holiday with world-class wine and food. Sonoma suits couples and families who want a secluded getaway with less traffic and

fewer people competing for a pew in the tasting rooms.

But Sonoma also has its luxury resorts and imposing mansions and, with the redevelopment of downtown Napa and new-generation winemakers loosening their bow ties, the distinctions between the two are more subtle than red versus white.

The tourist board websites – sonomacounty.com and visitnapavalley.com – are useful resources for planning a visit.

Both are around an hour's drive from San Francisco and, like those grapes ripening on the vine, a trip to either area is bursting with possibilities.



► NAPA VALLEY

What to do: It isn't all about wine, but it is a good place to start. Suggest an organised tour to sip without the spittoon. Platypus Wine Tours specialises in small groups and boutique, family owned wineries. We visited four wineries including Flora Springs, weaving through labyrinthine cellars to sample cabernet from the barrel, and Hans Fahden in the Mayacamas Mountains. A day with transport, lunch and a guide (armed with cheeseboard and barrels of knowledge) costs \$110.

For something truly special, The Wine Foundry offers hands-on experiences including barrel tastings and blending sessions to create an exclusive vintage.

Dating back to 1881,





Hayes & Jarvis has seven nights from £1,599, with three nights at the W San Francisco and four nights at the River Terrace Inn Napa. Price includes a Napa Valley Wine Train Excursion, car hire and flights from London, departing April 20, 2018. hayesandjarvis.co.uk

Travel2 offers a 15-day Great Western American Adventure escorted tour of San Francisco, Napa, Sonoma – staying at the Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn – plus Yosemite, Monterey, LA, Grand Canyon and Las Vegas. Prices, including Heathrow flights and private VIP transfers for a May 11 departure, start at £5,149. travel2.com

Attraction World offers a Wine Country Full Day tour to Sonoma and Napa Valley, including hotel pick-up from San Francisco, tastings and a photo stop at the Golden Gate Bridge, from £86. attractionworld.com



LEFT: Vineyards in Sonoma

RIGHT: Kayaking on the Napa River

BELOW: Buena Vista Winery, Sonoma



➔ Oakville Grocery is where locals stock up on cheese, charcuterie meats and doorstep sandwiches. Shoppers can take their goodies next door to newly opened Durant & Booth, which offers various flights or wines by the glass in its dapper tasting room and on the sun-dappled patio.

Or suggest a picnic on the grounds surrounding Old Faithful Geyser in Calistoga. Kids will be fascinated by the resident llama, four-horn sheep and Tennessee fainting goats, which stiffen and topple over when they sense danger.

To balance the wine tasting, suggest kayaking or stand-up paddleboarding with Napa Valley Paddle. Napa River's muddy hue belies the fact it is one of California's cleanest rivers and the calm



Kids will be fascinated by the llama, four-horn sheep and Tennessee fainting goats, which topple over when scared

waters make the three-and-a-half-mile trip through Oxbow Nature Reserve a breeze (\$69 for a two-hour tour).

A sunrise hot-air balloon ride with Napa Valley Aloft costs from \$200 and makes a memorable end to a holiday, especially if rounded off with a champagne brunch for \$25 extra.

Where to stay: Napa River Inn is ideally located in downtown Napa's walkable cluster of boutiques, restaurants and tasting rooms. Lovely touches include in-room breakfast from Sweetie Pies Bakery, free bikes, and wine-themed toiletries. Doubles from £230.

The on-site spa proves that wine really is good for you, with in-house products harnessing the healing and anti-oxidant properties of grape seeds.

Suggest Michelin-rated Celadon for upscale comfort food such as double-cut pork chop with fries. A 15-minute walk away is Oxbow Public Market, offering wood-fired pizza at Kitchen Door and ales from Fieldwork Brewing Company. Locals cluster on the public riverside patio at sunset.

On the northern tip of the valley, ➔



→ the laid-back town of Calistoga is renowned for natural hot springs and mud baths. The revamped Calistoga Motor Lodge & Spa has caravan-themed rooms and a retro spa, MoonAcre, inspired by social bathhouses. Quirky in-room features include booth seating areas and knitted armadillos adorning the walls, while downtown's bookshops, tasting rooms and restaurants are a stroll away. Doubles from £200.

SONOMA

What to do: This expanse of wine country is best served lightly chilled. Suggest guests pedal at a leisurely pace between tastings with Sonoma Valley Bike Tours (\$144 for a full day with lunch). Vines are prettier, and easier to photograph, while meandering down backroads at 10mph.

For those short on time, suggest a tour and tasting at Buena Vista Winery to learn the story of founder Agoston 'The Count' Haraszthy and his 1869 death in Nicaragua's crocodile-infested waters. The \$25 fee includes tastings while touring the opulent Bubble Lounge and buttery-lit Champagne Cellars.

Sonoma County has nine cities and of those Healdsburg is a real charmer. Suggest browsing dapper dog collars at Fideaux



In Healdsburg's shops, browse dapper dog collars, rummage for vintage trinkets and nibble cupcakes

RIGHT:
Healdsburg, Sonoma

BELOW:
Fairmont Sonoma Mission

dog boutique, nibbling cupcakes with lemon, lavender and honey at Moustache Baked Goods, and rummaging for vintage trinkets in Swish.

In downtown Sonoma, the girl & the fig is a locals' favourite. The restaurant serves a huge selection of Californian cheeses, own-label wines and dishes such as grilled corn and peach salad in a garden dotted with succulents and strung with lights.

Those craving nibbles with their vino should explore the Sonoma Cheese Trail, linking the county's farms and producers. Near downtown Sonoma, Vella



Cheese Factory offers free samples of award-winning Monterey Jack infused with habanero, pesto or rosemary.

Where to stay: There are plenty of good-value options such as the new Oxford Suites in Rohnert Park (doubles from £130).

But what Sonoma does best is fuss-free luxury. Close to downtown Sonoma, the Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn feels more like an exclusive village than a hotel, albeit one where guests are greeted with glasses of fizz and can access Willow Stream Spa's cabana-lined pools and mineral baths. Doubles from £230.

Regularly rated one of California's top hotels, the Farmhouse Inn indulges visitors with thoughtful details. Checking in, we were offered glasses of local rosé and invited to help ourselves to slices of handmade olive oil soap. Curled around the pool and mineral spa tub, rooms range from cottages to enormous suites with private decks and fireplaces (from £500 per night).

Its Forestville location is surrounded by Sonoma wineries and is half an hour's drive to Napa Valley – making it perfect for clients who don't want to choose between the two. **TW**



Need to know

WINE COUNTRY FIRES

In October 2017, a series of fires hopscotched through Napa, Sonoma, Yuba and Mendocino, killing at least 42 people and destroying thousands of homes. Most of the impact hit residential areas, with fewer than a dozen wineries destroyed – though others suffered damage – and tourism authorities are urging people to return to the area and not cancel any planned trips.

"Everyone knows someone who has been affected by the fires," says Sonoma County Tourism's Tim Zahner. "But 90%

of our county wasn't hit. Now we are spreading the message that we are open and we are here."

In Napa the fires burned in the forested hillsides, barely grazing the valley floor.

"The majority of our more than 400 wineries were open and hosting guests just days after the fires started," says Angela Jackson from Visit Napa Valley.

Visit California has details of why now is a good time to book a wine country visit, at visitcalifornia.com/attraction/californiawinecountrynow

PICTURES: VISIT NAPA VALLEY/ROBERT MCCLLENHAN; DAVID H. COLLIER; SONOMA COUNTY TOURISM/SCOTT CHEBEGIA; MARIAH HARKEY