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# Santa Barbara, Solvang and Hearst Castle Day Trip from Los Angeles

October 31, 2012 by [Angela DiLanzo](#)

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Hearst Castle has topped my bucket list for years, and Viator.com's [Santa Barbara, Solvang and Hearst Castle Day Trip from Los Angeles](#) surpassed all expectations.

The sunny SoCal climate, eclectic sites and tour stops, and tour guide, Richard, who can entertain non-stop about every topic from early Spanish missions to William Randolph Hearst's young Hollywood mistress, while driving a large van (or minibus) up the Pacific Coast Highway makes this 12-hour tour a must-do for visitors to the City of Angels.

## Santa Barbara



Mission Santa Barbara

Our first stop was Santa Barbara. Between the Spanish Colonial architecture and the morning sun on the Pacific Ocean, the nickname “The American Riviera” rings true for this beachside city. Stearn’s Wharf was a great place to stretch our legs and scope out the boats in the harbor before taking State Street, the shop- and restaurant-lined thoroughfare, to Mission Santa Barbara. We were given plenty of time and information to best navigate the grounds of this beautiful, 226-year-old slice of the Mediterranean, which included eavesdropping on a mass and snapping photos long before the crowds rolled in.

## Solvang



### Danishes in Solvang

We drove through lush Los Padres National Forest and passed the Santa Ynez Reservation for the Chumash Indians en route to our next stop, old-world Danish village, Solvang. Richard joked a previous Danish tourist stated "This isn't Denmark today. It's Denmark 100 years ago!" Between the timber-framed buildings and the windmills, I'm inclined to agree. I waved hello to the Little Mermaid statue, then spent the hour scarfing down cheese danishes and fudge samples, yummmmmm, and musing over beer steins, local wines, and dirndls on display in the shops on Copenhagen Drive. Yes, Copenhagen Drive – quiet, quaint with friendly townspeople, flowers everywhere and more Scandi-themed shops and restaurants than I've seen in Europe! If you think the Danes didn't allow their Northern European peers a spot in Solvang, you couldn't be more wrong. Belgian waffles and Dutch clogs are on every other corner!

Then, north on El Camino Real past the kitschy Madonna Inn and coast-dominating Morro Rock to the grand finale: Hearst Castle.

## Hearst Castle



Lounging by the pool at Hearst Castle

I loved Hearst Castle. William Randolph Hearst plowed through his family's millions in post-World War I auction houses to create the perfect home. From Renaissance Europe to this San Simeon, CA estate, we toured the "Grand Rooms" and saw elaborate tapestries and ornate Catholic Church ceilings juxtaposed with billiards tables, a dining table ready for a football team and a huge party room.

The onsite guide steered us past Hearst's piano into his personal movie theater. We viewed home movies where Hearst had hobnobbed with Hollywood stars, professional athletes and a former US president. Afterwards, we were free to wander the grounds. I lounged by the Roman-style pools, strolled past tennis courts, through endless gardens, and took in his view down the hill of the ocean, nearly a mile below. My favorite part of the Hearst estate was the animals! Once upon a time, Hearst had a zoo (yes, I saw the polar bear tanks!), which his family had mostly donated off to zoos, BUT zebras, long-horned barbary sheep, and cattle still graze on the golden hillside.



Zebras in California

You read correct: Zebras in California’s central coast. Richard saw my delighted response to the striped beasts and said he knew a secret spot only five minutes up the road. As if my heart hadn’t had enough, we pulled over and viewed elephant seals lying on the beach. I even saw a baby elephant seal emerge from the water.

While each stop had its uniquely European presences (Spain, Denmark and Italy all in one day!), the landscape and lapping blue Pacific that always greeted us through the van window were uniquely Californian. Between the animals, the architecture and the cheese danish, I couldn’t imagine a better way to check out the diversity of the Golden State than this day-long jaunt from Los Angeles.

**Suggestions:** Due to the distance covered, a fair amount of time is spent driving. While the stops are the tour highlights, one should prepare themselves to view a bunch of “extras” out the window by having their cameras ready. I would also encourage packing some light snacks, bottled drinks and a sweater so one can self-regulate if they become hungry or chilly between stops. Food options are available to purchase at all stops.

Flash-free photography is permitted inside Hearst Castle. They do not allow publishing of these photos on commercial sites, though.

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- Angela DiLanzo

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