



Happily horsing around in Temecula

It's great to enjoy equines in the great outdoors safely, with social distancing

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During the pandemic staying safe — and sane — has been challenging for everyone who accepts science. For those who work, love or live to travel, saying the pandemic has been difficult is a vast understatement.

Love for one's spouse, partner or roommate notwithstanding, the walls of even the most comfortable, spacious abode can feel prison-like in the face of 24/7 togetherness.

Like many others, my constant companions have been unending zoom calls, conference calls and in my husband's case, constant pacing during lengthy court calls. This was coupled with colorful, loud expletives when the internet deviated or died. Often during COVID I've marveled at and deeply empathized with parents of youngsters trying to juggle work and family minus all the usual management tools the pandemic has prohibited.

With restrictions easing and outdoor dining reopening, it was time to ditch Dodge while minding safety protocols. Having always loved shiny, speedy things, driving has taken on a new meaning during COVID. Long stretches of highway have provided tedium relief and mountain roads euphoric balm for the pandemic-inspired banality.

Seeking a safe, socially distant escape with plenty of outdoor activities, especially horses and pastoral views, I headed to Temecula, bordered by Murrieta, Pechanga Indian reservation and San Diego County. With its Western, small town feel, Temecula was the setting of the 1996 romantic comedy movie involving a pregnant travel writer, "A Weekend in the Country" starring Christine Lahti, Jack Lemmon, Dudley Moore and Betty White. That there's no shortage of vineyards added to Temecula's allure.

The bed



Gorgeous snow-covered Mt. Baldy, San Jacinto and Mt. San Geronio — the highest peak in California at 11,500 feet — frame the South Coast Winery Resort & Spa, while vineyards and heavily-laden citrus-groves envelop the well-maintained 63-acre property.

The grounds at South Coast Winery & Resort are inviting. (Courtesy photo)

My spacious room had a gas fireplace, seating area, luscious bedding, updated marble bathroom and a bar. A good-sized refrigerator was handy for snacks and takeout leftovers. Being able to park just steps away was a plus, and while several other cars were parked around the

property, buildings are spread out so that in three days I only saw one masked couple taking an afternoon stroll.

Sitting in blissfully quiet solitude enjoying my private hedged patio overlooking the vineyards, a small-engine bi-plane appeared overhead. Seemingly piloted by one possessing a persuasive death wish, the pilot engaged in Paris Air Show-worthy acrobatic maneuvers including multiple, quick succession forward and backward somersaults, sharp horizontal zigzags and several 180-degree vertical altitude ascents and descents. Wishing the pilot well while transfixed by the antics, I hardly inhaled, fearing an imminent fiery vineyard plunge. Later, my small plane allergy largely abated following the premium wine flight in South Coast's outdoor tasting area that three socially distant couples also enjoyed. southcoastwinery.com

The meals

As the outdoor dining ban had just been lifted, dinner was served at South Coast Winery's Vineyard Rose's outdoor patio. Social distancing was firmly in place and only a handful of tables were occupied, but I opted for takeout to continue relishing my lovely patio. Having eaten countless takeout meals with plastic utensils during COVID, this was one of my favorites. Perfectly cooked steak, grilled potatoes and asparagus paired with their Boulder Red 2.0, a smooth blend of mainly petite syrah, petite verdot and tinta roriz made me happy.

If you try only one restaurant in the area, it should be the new Bolero at Europa Village. Two patio tents with outdoor heaters make social distancing easy. Executive chef Hany Ali's inspired creations will astound even the most jaded foodies on both taste and presentation. Without doubt, Temecula's food scene is greatly enhanced by chef Ali's innovative culinary talent.

The Organized Caesar (Japanese sushi rolls, encircled in thin jicama, but with classic, delectable Italian flavor) disappeared in seconds. Other stars of the memorable night: an olive appetizer like no other — spoiler alert, it involves modern chemistry — wild mushroom carpaccio, seared scallops in Romesco sauce and acorn-fed, free-range, 100-percent Black Iberian ham bursting with flavor. [Europavillage.com](https://europavillage.com)

The finds

Air Force Academy graduate, former Marine Corps Officer and all-encompassing badass, T.J. Davis is the owner of Saddle Up Ranch. Her mission is horse rescue, and in the last eight years has rescued 198 abandoned or abused horses — all with volunteer hands. Currently 29 horses reside on her six-acre ranch in nearby Aguanga. Best of all, Saddle Up can accommodate riders of all skill levels, from debutants to advanced. Being able to hill ride amid quiet panoramas, then run with the horses is an experienced rider's wet dream.



T.J. Davis is the owner of Saddle Up Ranch atop Sephira in the hills above Aguanga. (Julie L. Kessler/Special to S.F. Examiner)

Saddle Up also offers sunset, evening and bonfire tours, riding lessons and horse training. And if goats float your boat, it offers goat yoga twice daily with adorable Nigerian dwarf goats. Saddle Up also offers one-, two- or three-winery stop rides departing from Leoness Cellars, where T.J. says, "You can customize your ride time versus your wine time." [Saddleuptours.com](https://saddleuptours.com)

For beginning riders wanting an easy, slow-paced group trail ride, winecountrytrailsbyhorseback.com has 90-minute rides through Maurice Car'rie vineyards.



Patch and Decca of Wine Country Trails nestle before their afternoon ride. (Julie L. Kessler/Special to S.F. Examiner)

For those who prefer her not to saddle up, yet still engage their inner equestrian, an excellent socially distant option is to take a horse and carriage ride amid the vineyards with Temeculacarriageco.com.

Friends, spouses and business partners, Mike and Marika Matson have 11 gorgeous, gentle giant Clydesdale horses and provide one or two-hour chauffeured rides with wine/picnic options. Bookings can be made directly or part of a South Coast package.



Chewy the Clydesdale pulls the carriage with owner Mike Matson of Temecula Carriage Co. at the helm. (Julie L. Kessler/Special to S.F. Examiner)

To engage in another socially distant, though non-seated activity, I jogged alone for four miles through vineyards on dirt-packed service pathways. Few things are more uplifting than running in tranquil solitude with 60-degree weather viewing shimmering snowcapped mountains on the horizon.

After all of that riding and running, a massage at South Coast's just reopened Grape Seed Spa with safety protocols in place was the perfect prescription to potential soreness.

The lesson learned

Though religiously agnostic, I pray to any being listening, potentially available or remotely interested being, that the pandemic ends soon. In the meantime and during this odd time, driving anywhere is oddly comforting. Getting out in nature is always wonderful, but especially now it's soul soothing. And hanging out with horses is always priceless.