



'Tis (Always) the Season

The smartest time to enjoy these vacation spots is when others aren't.

By Nancy Davidson

For everything there is a season. Colorado ski slopes and Florida beaches in winter, the grape harvest in California wine country in autumn and the Hamptons in the summer. But sometimes the best season is the off-season: Traffic is a breeze and lines disappear. Almost every resort offers reduced rates, and minimum night stays are eliminated. Plus, you can see a familiar place in a new way. Walk along a deserted beach, hike the mountains of ski slopes clear of snow, and snag a reservation at that impossible-to-book restaurant.

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Bachelor Gulch, Colo. (2 hours from Denver)

WHEN: April-November

THE DRAW: Hiking in green alpine mountains, golf, kayaking, shopping and hyper-luxurious accommodations at budget prices.

SAMPLE SAVING: King rooms at The Ritz-Carlton, Bachelor Gulch run \$725 on-season and start at \$195 off-season.

Built into a mountainside, The Ritz-Carlton, Bachelor Gulch (www.ritzcarlton.com) has a ski lift right in its backyard. But after the runs close for the season in mid-April, savings reach a feverish pitch. Instead of swooshing down snow-capped peaks, you can hike or mountain bike on lush green Rocky Mountains or take advantage of the melting snow for whitewater rafting. You can also visit the Betty Ford Alpine Garden (bettyfordalpinegardens.org)—the highest botanic garden in the world—and learn about plants that thrive at 8,200 feet. Other activities include kayaking, fishing and golfing. Afterward, soothe your muscles in the spa (the only one in Vail Valley with four Mobil stars) and go to Spago (www.wolfgangpuck.com; 970-343-1555) for Wolfgang Puck's smoked salmon pizza or Colorado lamb chops with Hunan eggplant.

Laguna Beach, Calif. (1 hour from Los Angeles)





WHEN: September-October

THE DRAW: Shopping, fishing, beachfront pampering

SAMPLE SAVING: At Surf & Sand Resort, a king room runs \$600 a night on-season and \$400 off-season.

At Surf & Sand Resort (www.surfandsandresort.com; 949-497-4477), every room has a private balcony with Pacific Ocean views. When you're not on the beach, relax in the Aquaterra Spa (www.aquaterraspa.com) and dine on American coastal cuisine—think Alaskan king crab and Hawaiian ahi—at Splashes Restaurant (surfandsandresort.com; 949-376-2779). Or get out on the water for whale-watching and sport-fishing. (www.lagunabeach.com/danawharf). If you can pull yourself away from the shore, wander into town and visit boutiques, gourmet shops, art galleries or spend an afternoon at the Laguna Beach Art Museum (lagunaartmuseum.org).

For an epicurean experience, join James Boyce, executive chef at Studio (www.studiolagunabeach.com; 949-715-6000), Montage Resort's (www.montagelagunabeach.com; 866-271-6953) signature restaurant. Boyce leads a hands-on cooking class that begins with shopping at the farmers market before you create a multicourse lunch. It's part of a weekend package that includes one night at the resort, chef coats for two and valet parking.

Sonoma County, Calif. **(1 1/2 hours from San Francisco)**



WHEN: January-February

THE DRAW: Hang out with the winemakers while avoiding the crush

SAMPLE SAVING: The Vineyard Suites at Honor Mansion are \$600 on-season and \$475 off-season.

Everyone wants to come to Sonoma when ripe grapes are harvested and smashed, but if you want to visit the wineries and really have a chance to talk to winemakers about their vintages, the best time to visit is in the off-season.

At Santa Nella House (www.santanellahouse.com; 877-869-9488), a bed-and-breakfast, hosts Betsy Taggart and Bob Reeves will take care of you as if you were a long-lost friend, with homemade pastries and evening wine and cheese offerings. They offer advice on the best area wineries, and their off-season packages focus on romance, biking, canoeing, kayaking,

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horseback riding and picnics. They also offer super-saver specials year-round, such as Tuesday night free with a three-night stay.

Just outside the center of Healdsburg, Honor Mansion (www.honormansion.com; 800-554-4667) has private cottages and suites with hot tubs and vineyard views, and bocce, croquet, basketball and tennis courts are on the grounds. Across the street, visit Seghesio Family Winery (www.seghesio.com), known for zinfandel and pinot noir, and check out their pairing classes.

Other nearby wineries include Lynmar Estate (www.lyanmarwinery.com), which has stunning gardens and a blooming chardonnay; Iron Horse (www.ironhorsevineyards.com), known for its sparkling wines and stunning Russian River Valley scenery; Ridge Vineyards (www.ridgewine.com), which boasts world-class grenache and petite sirah; and Bella Winery (www.bellawinery.com), known for its wine caves. For more information on area vineyards, accommodations and restaurants, visit www.wineroad.com.

WHERE: Las Vegas

WHEN: July-August, December

THE DRAW: Fewer conventioners; hiking in Red Rock National Park and National Finals Rodeo in December

SAMPLE SAVING: Suites at Platinum Hotel and Spa run \$249 a night on-season and \$109 off-season.

Just as Las Vegas keeps going all night long, there's no time of year when the city is devoid of visitors. But there is a dip in activity during the summer and in December. During those months, Platinum Hotel and Spa (www.theplatinumhotel.com; 877-211-9211), a nonsmoking, no-gaming boutique oasis in the desert, offers suites where you can get away from it all, including the crowds Vegas is famous for.

In December, the National Finals Rodeo (www.prorodeo.com) comes to town. The championship rodeo is held on the campus of University of Nevada, Las Vegas (www.unlv.edu). After the rodeo, head to Red Rock National Park (www.redrockcanyonlv.org), just 20 minutes from the city, for some great hiking, which is best to do in December. While you're there, discover the bouillabaisse at nearby Vintner's Grill (www.vglasvegas.com; 702-214-5590), a favorite with the locals, or try a flight of fine sipping tequilas at the Mexican restaurant Agave (www.agavelasvegas.com; 702-214-3500).



WHERE: East Hampton, N.Y. (2 1/2 hours from New York City)

WHEN: November-May

THE DRAW: Fall foliage, snowy beaches, hiking, biking

SAMPLE SAVING: The Gardiner Room at The Baker House 1650 runs \$895 a night on-season and \$350 off-season.

The Hamptons are best known as a summer playground for rich Manhattanites, but the dramatic changes throughout the seasons are breathtaking. Take a bicycle ride on Old Montauk Highway to see fall foliage; visit the Lighthouse at Montauk Point (montauklighthouse.com); or investigate Pollock-Krasner House & Study Center (www.naples.cc.sunysb.edu/CAS/pkhouse.nsf), Jackson Pollock's former home.

Rest your head at The Baker House 1650 (www.bakerhouse1650.com). Built in 1648, in the early days of the Village of East Hampton, it's now a luxurious inn with every conceivable amenity.

Toronto



WHEN: November-December

THE DRAW: WinterCity Festival, arts and entertainment scene

SAMPLE SAVING: Double rooms at The Fairmont Royal York run \$339 on-season and \$189 off-season.

While Toronto's winter can be downright cold, the underground PATH system (a 17-mile network of pedestrian tunnels) helps you get around downtown without stepping in slush or snow. The WinterCity Festival brings out the best of the season. It encompasses Winterlicious (www.toronto.com/winterlicious), special prix-fixe menus from fine dining restaurants, cooking demonstrations and other culinary events; The Warm Up Series, special arts programming for kids and adults with discounts on admission to attractions; and the WOW! Series of free shows at Nathan Phillips Square in front of Toronto City Hall, which includes skating, concerts and performances. (See www.toronto.ca for details and coupons.)

The Santa Claus Parade, performances of The Nutcracker, and the Cavalcade of Lights, a series of events including fireworks, add to the holiday feel. But don't miss new developments on the arts scene: Visit the new Opera House (www.theoperahousetoronto.com), Frank Gehry's addition to the Art Gallery of Ontario (www.ago.net).

Lay your head at The Fairmont Royal York (www.fairmont.com; 416-368-2511) for a bit of luxury, right in the middle of everything.

San Antonio



WHEN: June-mid-September

THE DRAW: Family-oriented atmosphere, River Walk, The Alamo

SAMPLE SAVING: At The Hotel Contessa, suites run up to \$379 on-season and start at \$139 off-season.

Located on the River Walk (www.thesanantonioriverwalk.com), featuring restaurants, shops and theaters, and in close proximity to The Alamo (www.thealamo.org) and La Villita (www.lavillita.com)—the city’s oldest neighborhood, now an arts village—The Hotel Contessa (www.thehotelcontessa.com) is an ideal dwelling for a summer vacation in the Southwest. With comfortable sleep sofas, two rooms and two televisions in the family-friendly suites, there’s plenty of space and diversions to help keep the peace.

Head to The Alamo to learn about Texas history. Educators dressed in period clothing portray citizens of the Republic of Texas. Families can also enjoy the July 4th Arts & Crafts Show through July 7 on the River Walk. On Aug. 16, more than 90 canoe teams will compete in the FORD Canoe Challenge, which begins and ends at the Chamber of Commerce (www.achamber.org).

WHERE: San Diego

WHEN: September-October

THE DRAW: Extending your summer, California spa cuisine

SAMPLE SAVING: Rooms at the Rancho Bernardo Inn start at \$329 on-season and \$259 off-season.

If you’re not ready for the summer to end, San Diego is a great place to keep it going. Not only does the weather cooperate, the produce does, too. You know you’re going to eat well at Rancho Bernardo Inn (ranchobernardoinn.com; 877-517-9340), home to El Bizcocho (858-675-8550), a Zagat poll “Highest-Rated” restaurant, but you can also enjoy a spa treatment that takes advantage of fresh seasonal ingredients. The Made Fresh Daily body treatment uses local avocados, selected for their healing and rejuvenating properties. The spa also features outdoor treatment casitas and an herb garden.



WHERE: Phoenix

WHEN: June-September

THE DRAW: Destination golf resorts/ spas with dramatic savings

SAMPLE SAVING: Rooms at The Phoenician run upward of \$759 on-season and \$199 off-season.

Heading to the desert in the summer heat doesn’t seem like the most obvious vacation choice. However, with some of the best golf resorts and spas in the country at rock-bottom prices, Phoenix in the off-season makes sense—especially when it comes without the crowded fairways and booked appointment schedules found during the peak season.

Bask in luxury at the legendary The Phoenician (www.thephoenician.com; 800-888-8234), home to a first-rate spa and a sprawling golf complex with three beautiful courses. The Boulders Resort and Golden Door Spa

(www.theboulders.com; 866-397-6520) is also stunning; the courses provide target-style golf at its best. Spa guests are offered poolside muscat grape kabobs, smoothies and tropical fruit treats every hour. Can you think of a better way to beat the heat?

WHERE: Tampa

WHEN: June-September

THE DRAW: Fewer people crowding poker tables, the Latin Quarter

MONEY SAVED: A Rockin' Deluxe room at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino runs upward of \$359 on-season and starts at \$179 off-season.

In a city where the sun shines an average of 361 days per year, even the off-season is pretty appealing. You can beat the heat by splashing around in the pool or chilling out in the air-conditioning at Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino (www.semi-nolehardrockhollywood.com; 866-503-7527), but there are other cool things to check out in town.

Soak up some culture in Ybor City. Tampa's Latin Quarter was once a major producer of hand-rolled cigars and is still stocked with domestic and international stogies. Visit King Corona Cigar Factory (www.kingcoronacigars.com) for food, drinks, live music and a smoke.

Nonsmokers will enjoy Ybor's wrought-iron balconies, brick-lined walkways and former cigar factories, which have been converted into boutiques and clubs.



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