

January 6, 2014

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GET TRAVEL NEWSLETTERS:



Has your Christmas Day (or Druid solstice, Kwanza, Hanukah, whatever) been torpedoed? Mine has. The happy, if chaotic, family gathering I proposed months ago is history, ruined by the lure of the open road. As of yesterday, the 22 aunts, uncles, sisters, cousins and kids expected for dinner have made other plans. Some are off to Mexico's white sand beaches. Some will be in Seattle, trimming the tree with the distaff side of the family. My closest cousins are flying to a resort in Brazil. And we in Los Angeles, abandoned without a plan, are lonely and bereft.



Which means just one thing. Halleluiah! We're free to spend a carefree holiday at one of Southern California's fabulous resorts, pleasure palaces dedicated to entertaining lonely people on the loose (make that liberated travelers freed from kitchen duties). I've now narrowed the options to two very different destinations (both of which still have space): the [Four Points Sheraton Ventura Harbor](#), on the Southern California Coast; and the [La Quinta Resort](#), in the [Palm Springs](#) desert area.



If it's the beach that calls, check out the "Seas The Day" holiday package at the [Four Points Sheraton Resort, in Ventura Harbor](#). Offering a breezier and more affordable getaway for kids of all ages, it's priced from \$109 to \$119, per night and includes free use of the resort's tennis courts, fitness center and internet access. [Ventura Village and Harbor](#), now doubly-famous not just as the coast's largest boat harbor but as the gateway to the [Channel Islands National Park](#), has had a complete make-over in recent years.



Walk along the harbor-side promenade for spectacular views of the ocean and boat harbor, or visit the fishing marina, where pelicans hang out, waiting for scraps from boats. Rent a kayak or peddle boat and cruise around the inner harbor, or spend an afternoon in [Ventura Village](#), browsing in the boutiques and art galleries. Try to leave time to visit the historic Mission San Buenaventura, which predates the town. And don't miss the Channel Islands [National Park Headquarters](#), which offers advice on booking a catamaran tour of the islands.

Since the "Seas The Day" package doesn't include dinner, make a reservations at one of the harbor's 17 ocean-view restaurants. Wouldn't you rather have sea food this year?

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My alternate choice is the **La Quinta**, in the Palm Springs area. A combination of ambiance and luxury, its 41 swimming pools and five top-rated golf courses offer a traditional desert vacation, making my decision that much harder. A star in the elite Waldorf-Astoria hotel group, **La Quinta** has been a favorite with the Hollywood crowd -- and their kids -- since it first opened, in 1926. This year's special package, "Chestnuts and Capra," makes sense if your holiday memories happen to include both roasted chestnuts and an evening watching "It's a Wonderful Life." Not only did Director Frank Capra write this and other movie scripts here, but he found a second home at **La Quinta**, spending months on the site.



The "Chestnuts" package, available now through New Year's Eve and priced at \$345 per person, reserves a room or casita (double occupancy), cocktail-hour libations with roasted chestnuts, breakfast at TWENTY6, and best of all, dinner for two at Capra's favorite hangout, Morgan's at the Desert. Bring your golf clubs and pack a bathing suit so you can soak in one of **La Quinta's** umpteen hot tubs. Kids' activities include movies and family-fudge-making and lollipop making classes; most are free or nearly so, all part of the holiday fun. And just so you don't forget what month it is, count on artificial snow to complete the festivities.

Travel Blogger Anne Z. Cooke, always willing to take a chance on last-minute travel, usually succeeds.

All images courtesy of La Quinta Resort and Four Points Sheraton Ventura Resort.

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