

# OutThere

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EXPERIENTIAL JOURNEYS



California  
Cool



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## Hey, how are ya?

Long before there was an American Dream – as famously coined in 1931 by historian James Truslow Adam – of shiny opportunity and limitless prosperity, there was a Californian Dream. Sparked in 1848 by the discovery of gold at a remote sawmill, the Californian Gold Rush steroid-boosted the emerging nation's formative vision of betterment for all, stirring sky's-the-limit aspiration into the mix.

Visitors can still feel that giddy aspiration today in the exceptional natural and cultural experiences the Golden State offers. The land itself seems to express it, with landscapes that vary from snowy alps to beyond-time redwood forests to scorching deserts, via countless golden beaches. It's found too in expertly executed hospitality, from hip pop-up taco trucks to Michelin-starred restaurants to some of the most luxurious experiential stays on earth.

This diversity chimes with the most inclusive demographics and equal rights provision of any US state. A pioneer of liberalisation and progressive lifestyles, California today has a population of which 9.1 per cent identify as LGBTQI+. One in ten California lawmakers is openly LGBTQI+, and in West Hollywood, our community accounts for a miraculous 40 per cent of residents. And trans kids can choose their bathrooms and sports teams in schools.

Right now, rootsy regeneration, with a focus on sustainability, inclusivity and authenticity, is a theme California's rainbow community is putting front and centre. Northern California's back-to-the-land ethos is driving one of most compelling locavore cultures in the world, while LA is rediscovering its punk spirit and reanimating its streets and spaces with accessible, boundary-teasing art. Oakland, meanwhile, has forged perhaps the most intersectional metropolitan community in the world.

But Californian diversity has a much longer history. For thousands of years before colonisation, this land was one of the most culturally diverse parts of the Western Hemisphere, with at least 64 languages spoken here by hundreds of coexisting



native tribes. Colonisation was catastrophic for this population, erasing both countless people and irreplaceable cultural heritage, but today a new agency which began with the start of the Native activism era in 1941 is more visibly than ever a dynamic part of Californian culture. Members of the 100-plus federally recognised tribes in the state are running cultural centres, museums and nature experiences to help rebuild their communities and share their heritage with non-natives seeking an understanding of this region's history and identity.

Compelling new voices from native Californian communities, such as the award-winning conscious rapper Frank Waln and the media empire Native Max, are meanwhile claiming new space in the US' integrated multicultural narrative. And the non-normative gender identities, such as two-spirit and third-gender, which are known to have been part of tribal life and which colonialism did its best to erase, are at last being supported to reclaim their pride and bring an illuminating perspective to broader ongoing same-sex and trans debates.

At a time when we are reminded all too often that hard-won freedoms can be quickly and cruelly rolled back, today's California offers travellers, as well as unforgettable holidaying, the chance to explore and actively support a diversity ecosystem that has the potential to be world-leading. Come help build the intersectionality rush.

### Rupert Mellor

Features Editor

#KeepYourMindTravelling



## Orientation

### North Coast

There's a utopian feel – and a whiff of weed – to this majestic 160km/100-mile stretch of coastline, where redwood forests meet ocean-pounded cliffs. Food and wine producers have elevated hyperlocal seasonal fare, while artists and seekers have been magnetised by unspoiled nature and charming towns like Mendocino and Eureka.

### High Sierra

High Sierra is the Golden State's skyscraping roof, with winter-summer mountain resorts clustering around Lake Tahoe and at Mammoth Lakes. Then there's the legendary Yosemite National Park. Four distinct seasons lay on wildflower meadows, waterfalls and golden autumnal Aspen groves.

### Deserts

Death Valley, Joshua Tree, Mojave... to move through these vast, elemental spaces is to tap into sensations unchanged by millennia. Except in the resorts and communities that have achieved a happy – and deeply luxurious – peace with the climate. Justly famous for its wealth of mid-century modern architecture, LGBTQI+ hotspot Palm Springs is their jewel – and increasingly a place to connect with today's native Californian experience. And nights usher in a zillion stars.

### Bay Area

Home to San Francisco, Oakland, Berkeley and Silicon Valley, the Bay Area has a rich history of diversity, creativity, cultural cross-pollination and innovation, as can be seen in architecture, the arts, gastronomy and urban development. At the other end of the spectrum are the serene rolling winelands of fabled Napa Valley.

### Los Angeles County

Yes, all the clichéd Tinseltown attractions are loads of fun. But the big story about today's LA is its remarkable cultural regeneration in recent years. A confident new-California creativity pervades this sun-kissed conglomeration of cities, from Downtown to Santa Monica and Malibu. Art is everywhere, the dining scene is exploding with ideas, and music and performance are pushing thrilling new frontiers.

### Orange County

Full-beam living large is what the OC is all about. Gleaming yachts, flash cars, neon-coloured surfboards and a certain Sleeping Beauty Castle are its emblems, and indulgent leisure is its national sport. For theme park geeks it's a paradise, while Huntington Beach is the place to surf in the wake of some of the sport's titans. There are also stretches of undeveloped coastline like Crystal Cove State Park to explore.

### San Diego County

Blessed with California's most perfectly perma-summer climate, this southwestern corner of the state also boasts a vibrant and diverse cultural offer and an exceptional dining scene. The eponymous city bristles with museums, historical buildings and exhibits, and the colourfully contrasting characters of its various neighbourhoods are no less fascinating. Endless surf beaches and spectacularly located golf courses are other county hallmarks, and Cleveland National Forest and Anza-Borrego Desert are within a short drive, as is Mexico, which makes for a fun day trip.

### Central Coast

The deservedly mythic Highway 1 traces the western edge of this genteel region, linking must-sees such as Monterey Bay Aquarium and Hearst Castle with boho-luxe communities like Carmel-by-the-Sea, and Big Sur. Breathtaking coastline muddles redwood-clad hinterland with plunging cliffs and endless golden beaches lapped by wildlife-rich Pacific waters.









## Inter city

**No longer overshadowed by its storied neighbour across San Francisco Bay, Oakland has harnessed its proud traditions of social justice and the extraordinary diversity of its citizenry to emerge as a vibrant, iconoclastic masterclass in intersectionality.**

Mica Talmor is an Israeli transplant, but she feels like the mayor of her own little part of Oakland. Piedmont Avenue has a distinct neighbourhood feel. People drink and dine outside, shop at farmers markets and support a dizzying array of stores specialising in exotic health foods and fermentation. Mica feels like the mayor, not just because people smile and wave as she cycles to her popular restaurant Pomella, which serves a fusion of Maghrebi, Levantine, North African and Middle Eastern food, but because they saved her.

“I signed the lease in 2019 and we opened in March 2020, just as the world shut down,” she says. Covid couldn’t have struck at a worse time for the chef and restaurateur, but her adopted community rallied round. “I changed to takeaway meals, and they just showed up, week after week. We wouldn’t have survived if the people hadn’t made it a point to support us. And not just us, but all the small businesses.”

There was a time when Oakland stood in the shadow of its more storied, postcard-ready neighbour San Francisco. As that burg’s stunning cityscapes, booming corporate business, rich civic culture and libertarian lifestyles magnetised more and more migrants from all over the US and beyond, spiralling rents and property prices caused many more to settle in the last decades of the 20th century in Oakland as a kind of ‘bridge-and-tunnel’ compromise, still within an easy few miles across the Bay Bridge of the Golden Gate City’s gleaming office blocks and vibrant nightlife. They brought with them aspirations for a less competitive, more community-driven way of life fomented in San Francisco during the hippy 1960s and hedonistic 1970s, and found themselves more able to live by those principles across the bay, in the process shaping an extraordinarily diverse and intersectional citizenry. Not that Oakland didn’t already have exemplary social justice credentials of its own. The Black Panthers were

founded here in 1966, and the city was also an important hub for women’s suffrage and anti-apartheid movements. Today, 125 languages are spoken here, and Oakland’s neighbourhoods both have their own intriguing identities born of their mix of residents, architecture, businesses and geography, and a sense of porous borders, of belonging to the whole city.

“The people are this city’s secret sauce,” says Sean Sullivan, who with his partner Richard Fuentes owns the LGBTQI+ venues Port Bar and the recently opened Fluid510. “Yes, you’ve got the weather” – far less prone than San Francisco to ocean fog, Oakland typically enjoys a sunnier, more outdoor-living-friendly climate – “but it’s all about the people. Our selling point is the diversity of our community.”

And, as Mica’s experience attests, that community fosters a mycelium-like commitment to nurturing that diversity, and relishes its rich socio-cultural benefits. “When I first came here, a cashier said, ‘Have a nice day,’ and I thought, ‘What the fuck? I don’t even know you,’” she says. “But now I’m like,





‘Have a nice day,’ to everybody. And I actually mean it.” I’m a more understanding person than when I arrived. My team have been with me for years now, the oldest is 60 and the youngest is 19. The way the young people see the world is crazy. Sexual orientation is almost a non-subject. They can date male, female, whoever. It’s not a black and white thing.”

Home to the most lesbian couples in the US, Oakland doesn’t have an LGBTQI+ neighbourhood as such. Instead communities defined by their sexuality, gender orientation or ethnic background are integrated all over the city, whether in hipster hoods like Temescal and Piedmont Avenue, genteel burbs like Rockridge and the revitalised Lake Merritt or Downtown, which seems always to be hosting some or other festival or parade. Thanks to the city’s compact topography, these neighbourhoods feel integrated too, allowing you to effortlessly stitch a

hike among 150-year-old sequoias in Joaquin Miller Park to an al fresco brunch in the up-and-coming Dimond district to a browse through Uptown’s artsy independent boutiques and a free Friday evening gig at the Oakland Museum of California. And while Oakland may lack ultra-iconic landmarks like San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge or Transamerica Pyramid tower, its streets present a characterful blend of Victorian, Art Deco and street art-rich modern architecture with its own charms, rewardingly discoverable on a range of guided architecture- or mural-themed walking tours. Tours are definitely a thing in Oakland, and visitors can explore the city through a broad range of themed lenses, from black-owned businesses to cannabis, vegan and ale.

Everybody eats, so the dazzling food culture here, which fuses countless global influences with the farm-to-fork ethos pioneered by Alice Waters in the 1970s and 1980s from her restaurant Chez Panisse in the adjoining city of Berkeley, is the most universal expression of Oakland’s extraordinary cultural intersectionality. But the LGBTQI+ scene too breaks new ground, with the US’ first dedicated fitness centre in Queer Gym, first gay-led church in First Congregational Church of Oakland and, in Downtown’s Diving Swallow Tattoo, an ink studio staffed entirely by female and genderqueer artists.

Such is the vibrancy of the community, Sean and Richard have been able to buck the global trend of vanishing gay venues. While the bars of Downtown remained largely shuttered between lockdowns at the height of the Covid pandemic, Port Bar did a roaring trade with local queers and allies determined to sustain the buzzing hangout that is a symbol of the city’s pride, both in its diverse non-heterosexual populace, and its own emergence as a cosmop-



Photography courtesy of Visit Oakland and Greg Linhares, City of Oakland





olis, often compared to Brooklyn, with its own uniquely progressive culture. “People were tired of doing the bridge-and-tunnel thing,” says Sean. “We needed our own place.” Two, in fact, when you factor in Fluid510, the 465m sq/5,000 ft sq bar, restaurant and club he and Richard launched this May.

Aside from the thriving LGBTQI+ venues and businesses in the city, which include the White Horse Bar, the US’ oldest continuously operating gay pub, Sean puts Oakland’s queer culture’s success down to the large number of community organisations actively supporting LGBTQI+ people to establish their authentic identities and pursue their aspirations as equal citizens, including through myriad public events from trans open-mic nights to queer yoga sessions to the LGBTQI+ fitness and social club East Bay Front Runners and Walkers. With ten years’ experience working with at-risk, homeless and sexually exploited young people, he is well qualified to advocate for these organisations’ agency.

“Oakland incubates with the doors open. You’re going to see it all”

The arts are another barometer of the rude health of the city’s progressiveness. “Oakland is such an incubator for art,” says Thomas Cavanagh, technical director of Bandaloop, an aerial dance company which has been based here for 30 years. “I deal with the state department a lot, getting permits. There’s a cultural diplomacy here. Whether you’re speaking to a property owner or the city, it’s not that they reflexively say yes, it’s that they don’t obtusely say no.” He credits landlords’ support too for ventures

they feel contribute to the city’s unique cultural offer, citing Bandaloop’s below-market-rate rent for their HQ as a vital factor in their survival. Key also is the arts’ scene’s commitment to actively bringing work to the people. “Brooklyn incubates behind a box. Oakland incubates with the doors open,” Thomas says. “You’re going to see it all out in the street. The muralists, the dancers, the food. And the ugly stuff too. You’re gonna see the crime.”

Everyone here talks about the crime eventually. Along with homelessness it’s an inescapable part of Oakland life, but residents’ responses to it tend to be yet another indicator of the city’s open-heartedness. Mica hopes the compassion, empathy and emotional intelligence that delivered her from her own Covid crisis can be extended to a progressive solution, while Thomas’ resolve is heightened to confront social problems through artistic expression. All acknowledge that the kind of creeping gentrification that turned San Francisco from egalitarian hippy Mecca to an exclusive palace of privilege is making inroads into their city – although its proud support for more independent businesses than chains shows encouraging popular resistance – and all are quick to put the city’s issues in the broader global context of inequality and disempowerment of the unwealthy. Most also cite the city’s exemplary record on social justice as a reason for optimism.

Says Sean, “Crime had gone down but came up around Covid again. But I see the commitment among people to change things is strong. Twenty years ago, you could play ball on Broadway. Now there’s a plethora of bars and so much more housing has been built. Things are really looking up.” ☺



## Claremont Club & Spa – A Fairmont Hotel

Berkeley

Coming on like a cross between a fantastical Germanic vanity schloss and a super-tony East Coast yachting club, and with Berkeley's verdurous hills for a backdrop, the 276-room Fairmont Claremont has since 1915 been an iconic feature of the Oakland/Berkeley burbscape (its lushly landscaped 22-acre grounds technically straddle both cities).

Its public spaces, notably the huge lobby, drip relaxed grandeur, and include options for fine dining – the elegant Limewood – and gourmet deli-style all-day grazing in the cute East Bay Provisions café. Décor in the rooms and suites, of which accessible versions are available at all grades (and props are due for extensive accessibility features throughout), is sumptuous if a little staid, and comforts flawless, especially the deep soaking tubs in the marble-lined bathrooms. Nab one with a bay view to gaze at San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge, or take the Tower Suite, and the whole open-air top floor is your private aperitivo perch.

Fitness fetishists are if anything overserved by the huge, handsome outdoor pool complex, vast gym, 10 country club-esque outdoor tennis courts and fitness pavilion. Recently upgraded, The Clu<sup>b</sup> meanwhile is an award-winning fitness centre bristling with state-of-the-art gym equipment and offering over 90 exercise classes a week, including both usual suspects and more esoteric propositions such as Tai Chi Chih and Tahitifit. Guests can also access the nearby private Berkeley Country Club for a scenic round of golf with San Francisco views. No prizes for guessing there's also a very presentable spa on site.

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