

Gondolas Above the Vines, Balloons at Sunrise — A 3-Day Napa & Sonoma Wine Country Road Trip

DURATION

3 Days

BEST TIME TO GO

September–October

harvest (“crush”) season, with golden vines and the valley at its most alive — book tastings and hotels well ahead, since this is also peak season; late April–May brings wild mustard blooms between the rows and noticeably thinner crowds

FROM

\$850 USD / person

for 2 people

Napa and Sonoma in three days — California’s original wine country, easy enough for a long weekend from San Francisco: a historic 1857 winery on Sonoma Plaza, a French-style château’s sparkling wine in the Carneros hills, a gondola ride up to a hilltop tasting room above the Silverado Trail, and a sunrise hot air balloon drifting over the vines to close it out. Real wineries, real drive times, and 2026 prices for every stop.

Day 1

San Francisco to Sonoma Plaza

An easy hour north from the airport into Sonoma’s historic square, with an afternoon at wine country’s original winery before a first dinner on the plaza.

Self-Drive — SFO Airport to Sonoma Plaza

~1 hour (45 miles) · rental car required for the loop

Sonoma sits an easy hour’s drive north of San Francisco International Airport via US-101 and Highway 12 — pick up a rental car here, since the back roads between wineries are the whole point of this trip.

Enterprise Rent-A-Car — SFO Airport · +1 833 635 0431 ·
www.enterprise.com/en/car-rental-locations/us/ca/san-francisco-international-airport-23v9.html

Buena Vista Winery — Bar Tasting

~1 hour · \$30 USD / person

Founded in 1857 by Hungarian count Agoston Haraszthy, California's oldest premium winery pours current-release Pinot Noir and Chardonnay in a stone press house built into the hillside, with the original 19th-century wine caves open for a self-guided wander out back.

Buena Vista Winery · buenavistawinery.com

Dinner — the girl & the fig

~1.5 hours · Est. \$30–45 USD / person

A French-countryside bistro anchoring Sonoma Plaza since 1997, known for a fig-and-arugula salad, mussels steamed in white wine, and a cheese course built around small-production local dairies.

the girl & the fig

Overnight — El Dorado Hotel Sonoma

From \$240 USD / night, for 2 people

A restored 1843 adobe right on Sonoma Plaza with 27 rooms above a courtyard restaurant, each with a private balcony looking over the square or a quiet garden courtyard behind it.

El Dorado Hotel · +1 707 996 3030 · eldoradosonoma.com

Day 2

Sonoma to Napa via Carneros

The morning crosses into the sparkling-wine district of Carneros, a market lunch break in downtown Napa, then a gondola ride up to a hilltop tasting room above the Silverado Trail.

Domaine Carneros — Sparkling Wine Tasting

~1 hour, plus a 25-min drive from Sonoma · From \$45 USD / person

A short drive south through the rolling, wind-swept Carneros District — the cool-climate appellation straddling Napa and Sonoma counties — leads to a Taittinger-owned château built to resemble an 18th-century French estate, pouring a seated flight of four sparkling and still wines on a terrace overlooking its own Pinot Noir vines.

Domaine Carneros · +1 800 716 2788 · domainecarneros.com

Lunch — Oxbow Public Market

~1 hour, self-guided · Est. \$20–30 USD / person

A riverside food hall of two dozen stalls in downtown Napa, anchored by Hog Island Oyster Co.'s raw bar — graze a few counters and eat picnic-style at the communal tables or the patio over the Napa River.

Oxbow Public Market · oxbowpublicmarket.com

Sterling Vineyards — Aerial Tram & Tasting

~45-min drive up the Silverado Trail + gondola · Sterling Stroll from \$55 USD / person

The drive north ends at an aerial gondola that carries visitors 300 feet up a volcanic knoll to a stark white, Greek-island-style winery, where the tasting terrace looks the length of the valley floor.

Sterling Vineyards · +1 800 726 6136 · sterlingvineyards.com

Dinner — Mustards Grill

~1.5 hours · Est. \$35–50 USD / person

A wine country institution on Highway 29 since 1983, serving a wood-fired grill menu of Sonoma duck and a Mongolian pork chop, with an onion ring tower regulars order on sight.

Mustards Grill

Overnight — Napa River Inn

From \$220 USD / night, for 2 people

A boutique inn built into a restored 19th-century mill on the Napa riverfront in the heart of downtown, an easy walk to Oxbow Market and the tasting rooms along First Street.

Napa River Inn · napariverinn.com

Day 3

Sunrise Over the Valley & Departure

One last look at wine country from 1,500 feet up, then the drive back to San Francisco to close the loop.

Sunrise Hot Air Balloon Flight — Balloons Above the Valley

~3–4 hours total (about 1 hour airborne) · From \$280 USD / person

Pre-dawn pickup from a downtown Napa hotel, coffee and pastries while the crew inflates the envelope in a vineyard field, then about an hour drifting silently over the valley floor as the sun comes up — most flights close with the balloonists' traditional champagne toast on landing.

Balloons Above the Valley · +1 800 464 6824 · balloonrides.com

Self-Drive — Napa to San Francisco International Airport (Rental Car Return)

~1.5 hours (55 miles) · via Highway 12 & US-101

The drive back retraces Highway 12 through Sonoma before rejoining US-101 south into San Francisco — return the rental car at the airport with time to spare, since balloon landings can run a little unpredictable with the morning wind.

Enterprise Rent-A-Car — SFO Airport · +1 833 635 0431 ·
www.enterprise.com/en/car-rental-locations/us/ca/san-francisco-international-airport-23v9.html

Departure — San Francisco International Airport (SFO)

Self-guided

Closes a three-day loop that ran from Sonoma's oldest winery and a French-style château's sparkling wine to a hilltop gondola ride and a sunrise balloon over the valley floor — check domestic carriers' recommended arrival times, typically 2 hours before departure.

Thanks for traveling with I-Journey — safe travels!