

Great Escapes

Travel editor:

Bari Brenner

(925) 416-4861

Fax: (925) 416-4850

bbrenner@angnewspapers.com

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Experiences can be better than getting more stuff

By Maggie Espinosa
CONTRIBUTOR

THE LAST thing many Americans need is more stuff. Contrary to the popular notion that those with the most toys win, it isn't necessarily so. Experiences, not things, often can be more meaningful.

With the major gift-giving season upon us, perhaps it's time to rethink the piles of tchotchkes we bestow upon our loved ones at this time.

Perhaps we need to re-consider e-gifts — as in electronics. And instead aim for other kinds of e-gifts — as in experiences.

Here are some sources and suggestions.

99 Blue Bananas

Blue Bananas will jump-start everybody's joie de vivre. Activities are intended to appeal to all tastes, ages and budgets. Experiences offered range from adventure, airborne and water sports to gourmet cooking and lifestyle activities.

Customers are dubbed "pickers" and "tasters" — the purchaser and the recipient. After you buy a blue banana experience, the company mails a colorful gift packet to the receiver, who is free to re-

deem the escapade anytime by going onto www.99bluebananas.com and booking the adventure.

Try America's Cup Sailing. This is not your basic pleasure cruise; it is an opportunity to crew an 80-foot racing machine, Dennis Connor-style.

My personal recommendation? Try America's Cup Sailing. This is not your basic pleasure cruise; it is an opportunity to crew an 80-foot racing machine, Dennis Connor-style. Troy Sears, AKA Captain Bligh, mans the mono-hull. He sold his family pest-control business to purchase Stars & Stripes and Abracadabra — both nautical celebrities from past America's

Cup competitions. My fellow passengers and I lined up to board Abracadabra. After briefing us on the maritime dos and don'ts, Sears motored from the dock, onto San Diego Bay, until the coast was clear.

Under the tutelage of three crew members, willing participants heaved the boom ropes to unfurl a massive 114-foot tall main sail, and our girl shot across the water at speeds of 12 knots. Guests shuffled musical-chairs style around the deck, as the boat tacked, jibed and heeled. Those who wanted to were welcome to take the controls.

I tried my hand at the helm. Surprisingly, the steering wheel is touchy. A 2-inch turn sets the behemoth on another course.

The more ambitious seafarers volunteered to operate the winch. Something inside me shouted, "Give it a try," and next thing I knew, I was hunched over a large crank jutting from the floor of the sailboat.

When the captain shouted the order, three people and I thrustured ourselves onto the winch, hands flailing, labored breathing, cranking fast and hard until the boat came about. After what seemed like an hour, but in reality was 30 seconds, we peeled our fingers off the handles and regained our composure.

Abracadabra was pointed toward the shore. We glided into port, having crewed a \$5 million racing yacht.

If water adventures aren't your style, try one of the myriad selections from air to land.

Please see EXPERIENCES, Travel 2



HOLD ON TIGHT: A Marchetti SF260 fighter (above) engages in a simulated dogfight as part of the Ultimate Fighter Pilot for a Day experiential gift offered by 99 Blue Bananas.



CALMER ALTERNATIVES TO A JET: America's Cup yacht experiences (above) include sunset cruises, whale-watching, weddings and corporate events. Introductory dance lessons (right) are another gift option. For the campers — or pseudo campers who demand luxury while "roughing it" — on your holiday list, a stay at Sequoia High Sierra Camp (left) in Giant Sequoia National Monument may be just right.



Adventures on land, sea and air available

▶ EXPERIENCES, from Travel 1

▶ The fighter pilot experience involves instructors performing tactical maneuvers, then letting guests take the controls.

▶ For lesser-adrenaline junkies, the Sail Plane adventure gets passengers airborne and glides at a leisurely pace.

▶ Land lovers may enjoy an ATV off-road spree in Baja, Mexico.

▶ "Dancing With The Stars" fans can learn to tango from a professional instructor with a private lesson.

▶ Those more inclined to drop big bucks can choose from the "Top Banana" category, which includes Great White shark diving, a one-week Harley-Davidson motorcycle tour or driving a Ferrari for the day.

Esotouric

Esotouric is not your run-of-the-mill bus tour — it is a fascinating collision of bizarre and brilliant.

Richard Schave and his wife, Kim Cooper, started the literary tours a year ago. Their mission was to resuscitate the arcane lives of novelists such as John Fante, James Cain and Charles Bukowski.

Passengers visit the authors' old hangouts, which shaped the genius that became manuscripts such as "Barfly," "The Postman Always Rings Twice" and "Ask The Dust." For my tour, bad seemed better. I joined an eclectic group of guests, varying from well-read zealots to eager neophytes, on the "Haunts of a Dirty Old Man: Charles Bukowski's Los Angeles" tour.

Who better to lead our pack as co-host than John Dullaghan, director of the biographical documentary "Bukowski: Born Into This?" Dullaghan fully financed his movie project and devoted seven years of his life to traveling the globe collecting fodder. The expose garnered international attention at the 2003 Sundance Film Festival. We stopped first at the downtown Post Office Terminal Annex — muse for his bestseller "Post Office" — where the tough, cursing Bukowski worked for 12 years. As we stood in the lobby, Schave verbally weaved through those jumbled times, extrapolating minutiae of "Buk's", un-postal behavior, drunkenness and decadent lifestyle.

The last vestiges of the author's tumultuous life were what you might expect.

His apartment on De Longpre Avenue, where he lived for 10 years, is now a dilapidated building in a bad part of town. We gazed through a chicken-wire fence surrounding the structure, as Dullaghan recounted Bukowski's nights of inebriated sing-a-longs on the



HIGH-STYLE CAMPING: The Sequoia High Sierra Camp combines wilderness tent camping with the amenities of a deluxe hotel in Giant Sequoia National Monument. Here, a canvas bungalow is lit as the sun sets.

Around the Bay

Here are a few sources for experiential gift possibilities available in the Bay Area. Some have age, height or weight limitations, so check the Web sites or call for more details.

Xperience Days

Information and to book: 866-973-7436; www.xperienicedays.com.

▶ Formula Racing at Infineon Half Day Xperience (Sonoma) — Learn to drive like a professional race-car driver on a road course: \$595.

▶ Air Combat Dogfight 1 (Livermore) — Experience air-to-air combat in fighter jets. \$1,195.

▶ Dancing in San Francisco (Metronome Ballroom) — Choose to learn one of several dance styles, from tango to salsa, hip hop, waltz and more. \$72 or \$140 for two people.

▶ Half Day Whitewater Rafting for Two (departs from Walnut Creek) — Brave the rapids of the Upper "Chili Bar" Trip or Lower "Gorge" Trip. \$198.

Excitations

877-839-2483; www.excitations.com

▶ Intro to Indoor Karting (Fremont) — Includes 10-minute practice session and 20-minute sprint race; also Junior Indoor Karting Experience available for ages 13-17. \$75 each.

▶ Antique Fire Engine Tour (San Francisco) — See the Presidio, travel over the Golden Gate Bridge and tour Sausalito in a fire engine. \$55.

▶ Flying Trapeze (Haight/Ashbury, San Francisco) — Train with a pro and eventually learn to release and catch. \$75.

▶ Acrobatic BiPlane Flight (East Bay South Hangars, Livermore) — Experience acrobatic flight maneuvers in an open-cockpit biplane; accommodates two passengers. \$420.

▶ Small Plates Cooking (Berkeley) — Learn hands-on cooking from tapas to cichetti and dim sum to meze. \$100.

▶ Sunset Sailing for Two (Berkeley Marina) — Take a two-hour sail on the San Francisco Bay. \$100.

Cloud 9 Living

866-525-6839;
www.cloud9living.com

▶ Hot Air Balloon Ride (Napa Valley) — Take a hot air balloon ride at sunrise, capped with complimentary champagne. From \$240.

Signature Days

800-330-4166; www.signaturedays.com

▶ Intro to Kiteboarding (San Francisco and Alameda) — Attach yourself to a human kite, and skim over the ocean. \$50.

▶ Underwater Photography (San Carlos) — Learn to use your camera while scuba diving. \$95.

▶ Tandem paragliding (Danville) — Paraglide with an experienced pilot. From \$180.

▶ Bungee jumping (San Francisco) — Package of two jumps each for seven people. \$720.

Buk's habit of consuming a case of wine a week.

We continued on, with visits to the Los Angeles Public Library's Reading Room, where the talented poet spent endless hours reading, and the Royal Palms hotel, film location of the movie "Barfly," starring Faye Dunaway and Mickey Rourke. And for a grand finale, we got the requisite drop-in to his favorite dive bar, Craby Joe's.

Want more? Esotouric hosts other fascinating trips, including "The Real Black Dahlia" and "Pasadena Confidential" crime bus tours.

Sequoia High Sierra Camp

For those who want to experience the great outdoors without having to rough it, "glamping" may be the perfect best-of-both-worlds gift.

Sequoia High Sierra Camp has married luxury with wilderness, resulting in glamour camping.

This is about as far from pop-up tents and sleeping bags as you can get, without actually staying in a traditional hotel.

Thirty-six private tent cabins, each 330 square feet in size, offer plush-topped beds, down feather pillows, Pendleton wool blankets, as well as a custom dresser, bedside tables, private sitting area, oversized screen windows, concrete floors and daily maid service. A modern bathhouse with private showers are within walking distance of each cabin.

And you can forget about roasting hot dogs over a camp fire. Three daily meals — included in your stay — are prepared by an on-site executive chef. Chef Ryan Solien's Mediterranean cuisine rival's any five-star restaurant. Trained in the United States, Bermuda and Rome, Solien has perfected exquisite dishes such as rack of Colorado lamb with lyonnaise potatoes, braised greens and mustard juice. The camp sits on a privately owned 40-acre site located within Giant Sequoia National Monument, which is on Sequoia National Forest land between California's Kings Canyon and Sequoia National Parks.

In its first year, the tent hotel provides upscale accommodations with an environmental conscience. Sustainable lumber, natural fibers, xeriscaping, low flow toilets, and propane lamps render the facility eco-friendly.

Daytime activities include hiking Mitchell's Peak, Mount Maddox or Horse Corral Meadow and fly fishing for rainbow and golden trout at Seville Lake and Boulder Creek. For a slower pace, guests can explore the 20 acres of wetlands, which along with the remaining property, have been shielded from the inroads of 21st century development.

porch with his landlord and friends. The Pink Elephant Li-

quor and Dell around the corner was a necessary appendage for