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WEEKEND ESCAPE

3 mommies minus their 'me's Friends head to Atascadero to relax and catch up during a stay at a renovated hotel and a visit to the wine country.

By Kelly Scott, Times Staff Writer
April 2, 2006

IS there a bond stronger than the one between women who survive "Mommy and Me" class together?

I think not, and my friends Sara and Patricia agree. From that early connection though our first-born sons, we quickly found we had the same mordant sense of humor about motherhood, a path fraught with issues for three working moms.



PHOTO GALLERY
Atascadero

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When the kids were little, we compared notes while they played in a local park on Saturday mornings. Now with seven kids spread among three school districts, even with one of us working part time and another in business for herself, it's hard to find time. We meet for breakfasts on our birthdays and yak for hours, but it never seems enough.

Apparently, we're not alone in this time deficit. In fact, we're a whole segment of the travel industry, where the "girls' getaway" has joined the "romance weekend" on the standard list of hotel packages. They typically push shopping, martinis or yoga. We have nothing against those things, but all we really needed was time to talk.

Of course, securing a weekend when all three of us could leave town was another challenge. Our getaway was shaved to an overnight — 36 hours, to be exact — but at least our destination to the wine country around Paso Robles would provide hours of car conversation.

In Sara's minivan Saturday morning, we started by dissecting our sons' soccer seasons and wondering what they really get out of sports. Two of us were facing the pressure from our oldest, about to enter middle school, for cellphones.

Before we could even start complaining about our husbands, we were in downtown San Luis Obispo in time for brunch. At the Big Sky Cafe, a busy, roomy restaurant with Western décor on a little side street, we had some strong coffee, omelets and sandwiches.

From there, it was a short hop to Atascadero and the Carlton Hotel, a historic three-story terra cotta-colored building that reopened 18 months ago after extensive restoration. Its spotless lobby is compact but plush, with plum, burgundy and gold upholstered furniture and marble floors and counters. The ground floor also holds a coffee shop-bakery and a spacious restaurant with windows on the main intersection.

Our room had two queen beds in the deep pillow-top style, with abundant pillows and shams, and the rollaway we'd requested was already in place. French doors opened onto an interior courtyard (there is no pool) with tables and umbrellas that looked like a lovely spot to lounge in sometime other than late February. The spacious bathroom had a whirlpool tub and separate glass-walled shower, as well as a sliding door to close off a toilet alcove. Patricia pointed out the high-end Frette towels.

The hotel staff, however, was a little more tattered around the edges, unable to provide directions ("I don't live here," one clerk said). In one case, a clerk couldn't tell us how to find the day spa a hotel staff member had recommended over the phone before we arrived. When we asked for hiking routes, a 20-ish desk clerk was clueless until we found a map in a display rack in front of him.

Paso Robles millionaire David Weyrich spent \$12 million renovating the Carlton; a front-desk clerk said only the exterior walls were original. Weyrich has said a reinvigorated downtown will help make Atascadero a "destination," rather than a synonym for the state psychiatric hospital.

The hotel's corner of the Camino Real is a block from city hall (also being restored) and a small park. Newish-looking shops — mom-and-pop flower, dress and antiques stores —

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What Atascadero does offer is easy access to the wine country of San Luis Obispo County. Our first outing was down California 46, a rolling, winding two-lane road with overhanging oaks, toward the Tablas Creek Vineyard. The wines had been highly recommended to us, and we found the large tasting rooms hopping, with at least five stations of pourers at work.

From there, we headed to the cozier Adelaida Cellars vineyard, where Van Morrison was playing on the sound system and tasters were lined up at a single granite bar under soft, flattering lighting. We found a narrow place to wedge in and tried the Adelaida and Adelaida SLO labels.

We had to hurry back to the hotel, because Patricia and I had appointments at the Heart and Soles Day Spa before dinner. Sara napped while Patricia and I walked the four blocks — not particularly scenic ones — to the spa, where I had a pedicure and she had a facial that somehow incorporated red wine.

For dinner, we ventured the 10 minutes north on U.S. 101 to Paso Robles, which clearly represents Weyrich's ambitions for Atascadero. The park in the town square is lined with shops and restaurants. We ate at Villa Creek, which emphasizes on the menu its patronage of local farms and suppliers who practice organic or sustainable farming. Sara chose a Niman Ranch pork chop, Patricia a Niman Ranch beef bavette (a thin loin cut), and I had a chile relleno stuffed with braised brisket. We asked the waitress to suggest a wine in our price range, and after consultation with her manager, she opened a Sheldon Petite Syrah from a vineyard in Lodi.

We enjoyed the wine and the meal. The conversation was fast, funny and revealing, but it was not to be a perfect evening. There we were, three runaway moms out on the town, and we were seated opposite a family with four young children. To put it more tactfully than they deserve, the children were not using their inside voices, and neither parent seemed to care about the disruption to surrounding tables.

Of course, this gave us something else to talk about.

The next morning, after a quick muffin and coffee from the downstairs bakery, we put on our gym clothes and headed out to Lake Atascadero for a walk along the two-mile perimeter. It's clearly a local favorite for dog walkers and stroller pushers, and we made two circuits.

Then we were ready for a real breakfast, but the options on Sundays at the Carlton are either the \$35 buffet (\$25 to hotel guests) or the baked goods in the coffee shop. We wanted something in between, but you can't get a simple hot breakfast at either place. When we asked at the front desk for an alternative, the young clerk motioned with his head in the direction of a place down the street, and I thought he said "Hooters." Just where three middle-aged women want to go, I thought — but he was referring to a bar-diner a few blocks south called Hoover's.

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