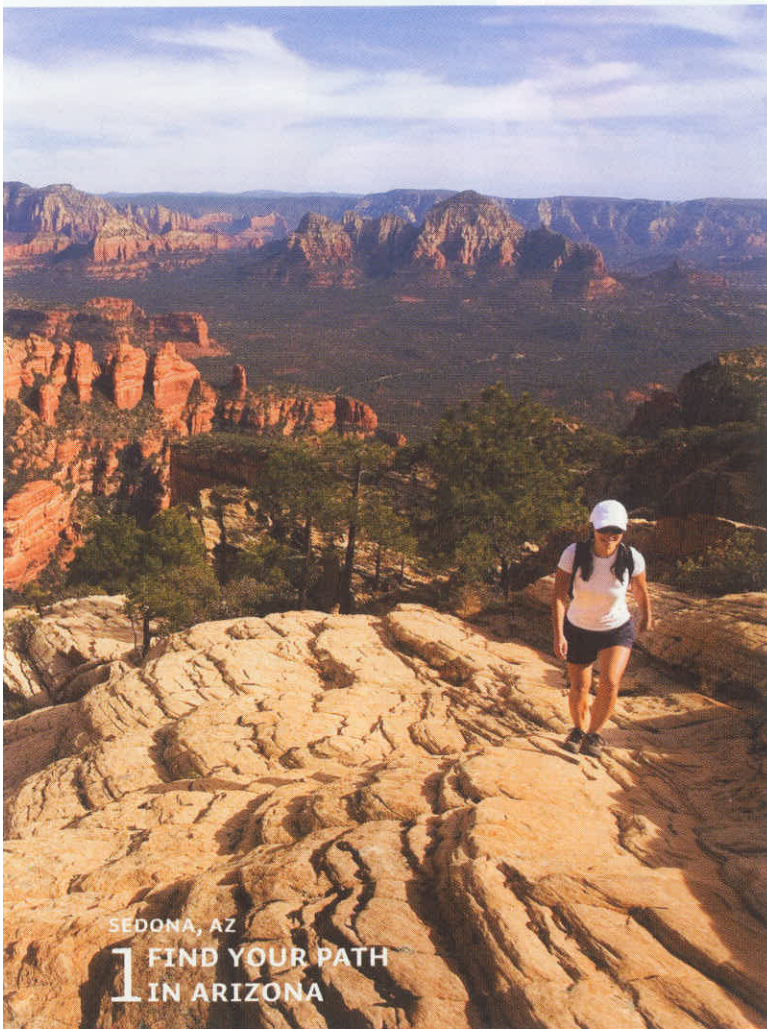


Smart vacations

Come home from your next trip not just relaxed but smarter



SEDONA, AZ
1 FIND YOUR PATH
IN ARIZONA

In Sedona, the path to enlightenment involves hiking boots and yoga mats. Sedona Spirit Yoga & Hiking offers four-day retreats where you'll take guided hikes through red rock wilderness to vortex sites, places where the Earth's energy is supposedly strongest. You'll also learn meditation, experience a Native American sweat lodge, and maybe even nail that eagle pose. Abbreviated three- to six-hour yoga hikes are also offered. **PLAY HOOKY** In between downward dogs and trail switchbacks, check out uptown Sedona's restaurants, which include vegan and raw choices, or browse art galleries. **INFO** Sep–Jun; from \$995, including lodging and breakfast; yoga hikes from \$90; yogalife.net or 888/282-9907. —NORA BURBA TRULSSON

OAXACA, MEXICO **MIX UP MOLES SOUTH OF THE BORDER**

2 Learn to tell your chiles from your *chapulines* (toasted grasshoppers) at Seasons of My Heart, a cooking school in the Oaxacan countryside of southern Mexico that kicks off with some serious market research. Guided by Mexican food maven Susana Trilling, sample and buy local delicacies, then head back to the chopping blocks and stoves of Trilling's spacious blue-tiled kitchen to create complex *moles* and *picante* bisques.

PLAY HOOKY While you're in Oaxaca, ascend the ruins of the ancient city of Monte Albán for spectacular vistas of Oaxaca Valley. **INFO** Year-round; \$75 for full-day class, including transportation from Oaxaca City; seasonsofmyheart.com —EDIE JAROLIM

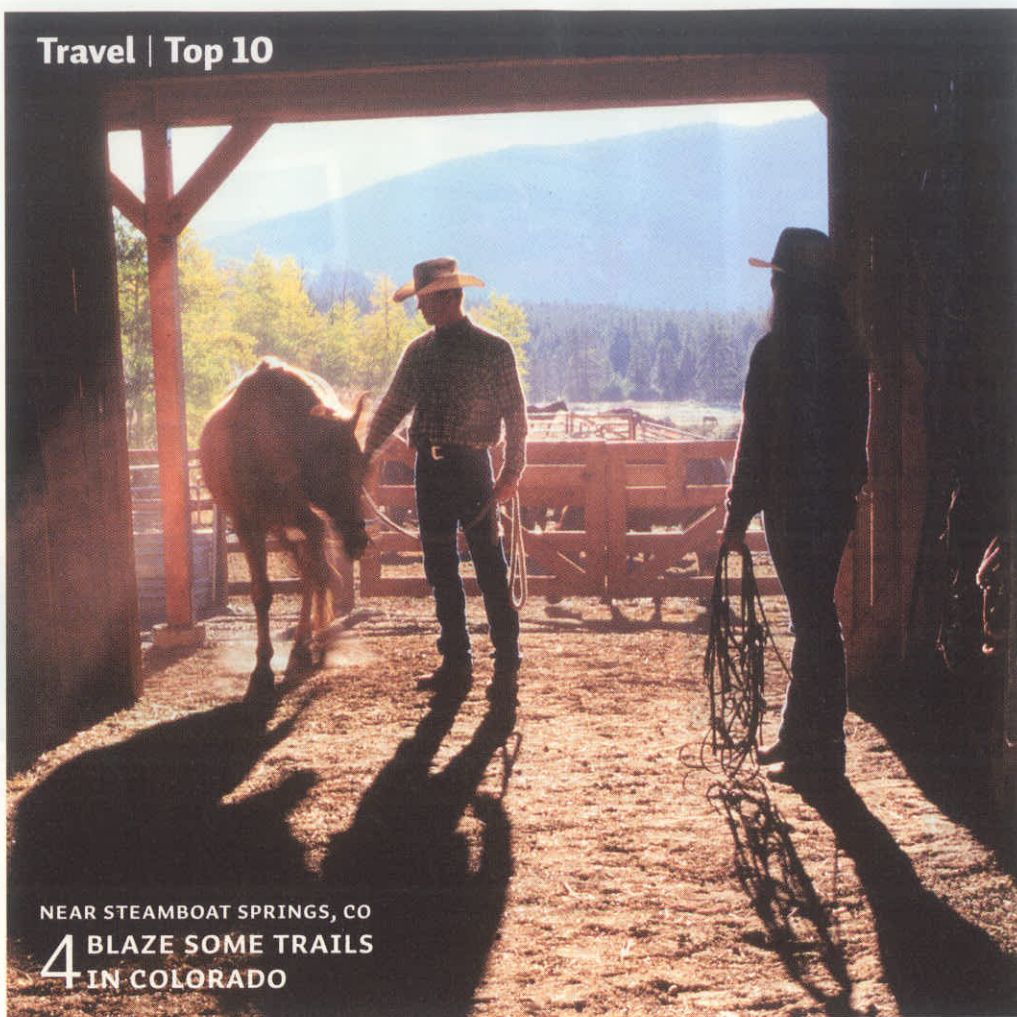


ENSENADA, MEXICO **SPEAK SPANISH IN BAJA**

3 Get beyond your Mexican-restaurant-level Spanish without going back to school by spending a week at the Baja California Language College in Ensenada, Mexico, where there are no exams or grades. Thursday afternoons are set aside for excursions to a winery

or a local taqueria to learn the difference between *salsa verde* and *pico de gallo*—*en español*, of course. **PLAY HOOKY** Afternoons and evenings, you're free to surf, explore the area's burgeoning wine region, or practice your language skills at the harbor's fish market as you search for the

perfect *tacos de pescado*. **INFO** Year-round; \$279 for week-long classes in which you log 30 hours; bajacal.com or 877/444-2252. —DAVID LANSING



NEAR STEAMBOAT SPRINGS, CO

4 BLAZE SOME TRAILS
IN COLORADO

Connect with your inner cowboy at the Vista Verde Ranch on the flanks of the Continental Divide. With 80 horses, daily clinics, and morning and afternoon rides, greenhorns and seasoned equestrians can develop their skills in the arena and on trails threading through the aspen forests. Plus, resident horse-whisperer Orval Bedell teaches rodeo tricks such as how to rope a calf. **PLAY HOOKY** Soak in 105° mineral waters at the Strawberry Park Hot Springs (\$10; 7 miles north of Steamboat Springs; 970/879-0342). **INFO** Jun–Sep; from \$3,200 per week, including meals, lodging, and activities; vistaverde.com or 970/879-3858. –JAD DAVENPORT

SALMON RIVER, CA
MASTER WHITEWATER PADDLING

5 Get command of whitewater paddling basics at Otter Bar Lodge Kayak School, a wilderness hideaway on Northern California's Salmon River, about 112 miles northeast of Eureka. You'll start by practicing

stroke technique, wet exits, and rolling in the lodge's flat-water pond before graduating to day trips on the warm class I–II water of the Salmon and Klamath Rivers. Don't sweat it if you can't master a roll on the first day: Otter Bar's instructors shadow your every paddle stroke, and if you go over, they're more than

happy to right your boat (in kayak-speak, the "hand of God"). **PLAY HOOKY** The wood-fired sauna and on-call massage therapist can work out your paddling kinks. **INFO** Apr–Sep; \$2,190 per week, including meals, lodging, and gear; otterbar.com or 530/462-4772. –KATIE ARNOLD

KAUAI, HI
ROCK OUT IN HAWAII

6 Dig beneath the surface with geologist Chuck Blay of TEOK Investigations on hikes all over Kauai, including a kid-friendly amble to wild Maha'ulepu Beach. **PLAY HOOKY** See a reverential torch-lighting ceremony at the Grand Hyatt (808/742-1234). **INFO** From \$100 (\$75 ages 5–12), including lunch; teok.com or 888/233-8365.

–HARRIOT MANLEY

NOOTKA ISLAND, B.C.
SURF OFF AN ISLAND

7 What better place to learn to surf than at a lodge set in a coastal rain forest with views of bears, eagles, and whales? On Nootka Island, off British Columbia's Vancouver Island, Tatchu Surf Adventures

offers instructors, water temps in the 60s, and beginner-friendly waves. **PLAY HOOKY** Sip scotch in the sauna. **INFO** May–Oct; \$2,218 U.S. per week, including meals, lodging, and gear; tatchuadventures.com or 250/934-6600. –STEVE HAWK

DENALI NATIONAL PARK, AK
UNRAVEL MYSTERIES

8 Understand what makes the Northern Lights so spectacular at Alaska's 18-cabin Camp Denali. The retreat hosts a space expert who teaches about the aurora borealis and other celestial events. **PLAY HOOKY** Spot moose and caribou. **INFO** Book now for Sep 2009; from \$1,425, including meals and lodging; campdenali.com or 907/683-2290. –MATT VILLANO

YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK, CA
DRINK TO BEAUTY

9 Learn about California wines on Vintners' Holidays at the Ahwahnee hotel. **PLAY HOOKY** Hike to Mirror Lake and play in the snow-dusted Yosemite terroir. **INFO** Annually in Nov and Dec; from \$1,008 for seminars, tastings, gala dinner, and two-night stay; yosemitepark.com or 801/559-4884. –SARA SCHNEIDER

BISHOP, CA
SNAP TO IT IN THE SIERRA

10 Paint alpine meadows with pixels in the eastern Sierra Nevada during Mountain Light's three-day photographic workshop in Bishop. **PLAY HOOKY** Sneak next door for coffee cake at the Black Sheep Espresso Bar. **INFO** Classic Workshop: May 8–11, Sep 25–28, Oct 2–5 and 9–12; from \$1,395, including meals and lodging; mountainlight.com or 760/873-7700. –J.D.