

# Mission: Santa Barbara

A UCSB alum drives a Maserati down memory lane—and along the American Riviera



Wedged between the sharp peaks of the Santa Ynez Mountains and the azure water of the Pacific, the Central California coastal city of Santa Barbara is justifiably known as the American Riviera. What better vehicle could there be for exploring the region—where I happened to attend college—than a speedy yet sturdy SUV with a Mediterranean provenance: the Maserati Levante S GranSport.

My Central Coast homecoming begins a couple of hours north of Santa Barbara, at San Luis Obispo’s **Madonna Inn**, a motor lodge famed for its themed

rooms. The bakery here is also renowned, so I fuel up for my drive with a sticky pecan roll before gunning out onto Highway 101, which traces the route of El Camino Real, the old road that linked the Spanish missions. An hour later, I take a short detour from 101 to stop at a location from one of my favorite movies. The Windmill Inn actually renamed itself the **Sideways Inn** to remove any possible confusion about where Paul Giamatti and Thomas Haden Church stayed in Alexander Payne’s award-winning comedy *Sideways*. Then it’s on to **Solvang**, a town that was founded by Danes and Danish Midwesterners and styles itself as a Danish village, complete with windmills and a Little Mermaid statue. I half expect to be accosted by fairies and trolls as I walk the cobblestones.

From here, I get back on the highway and fly past **Gaviota** and **El Capitán State Beaches**, catching glimpses of the oil platforms that supposedly inspired Jim Morrison to write “The Crystal Ship,” before stopping at my alma mater,

**UC Santa Barbara**. I can’t ever pass up the chance to stroll around the campus (Davidson Library, where I worked as a student, is twice the size it was back then) and Isla Vista, the unincorporated town where most of the undergrads live. Suffice it to say I’m the only one parking a Maserati in the lot at **Woodstock’s Pizza**, where I order a couple of slices and a pint of locally brewed Firestone 805 for old times’ sake.

Speaking of old times, my next pilgrimage is to the **Old Mission Santa Barbara**, which was established in 1786. In the ensuing 235 years, the mission







#### THE CAR

### 2021 Maserati Levante S GranSport

One could accuse Maserati of being self-aggrandizing when it refers to the Levante as “the Maserati of SUVs,” but the truth is that this vehicle is in a class of its own, navigating the space between SUV and grand touring sedan with élan. Drivers tackling the hills of Highway 101 will find ample power—the twin-turbo V6 puts out 424 horsepower, for a zero-to-62 rate of 5 seconds flat and a top speed of 164 mph—while the intelligent all-wheel-drive system with limited rear slip differential will keep the wheels churning over the dunes at Pismo State Beach. The Levante may have an adjustable ride height, but its sleek lines and iconic trident logo ensure it’ll have a high profile wherever it goes.

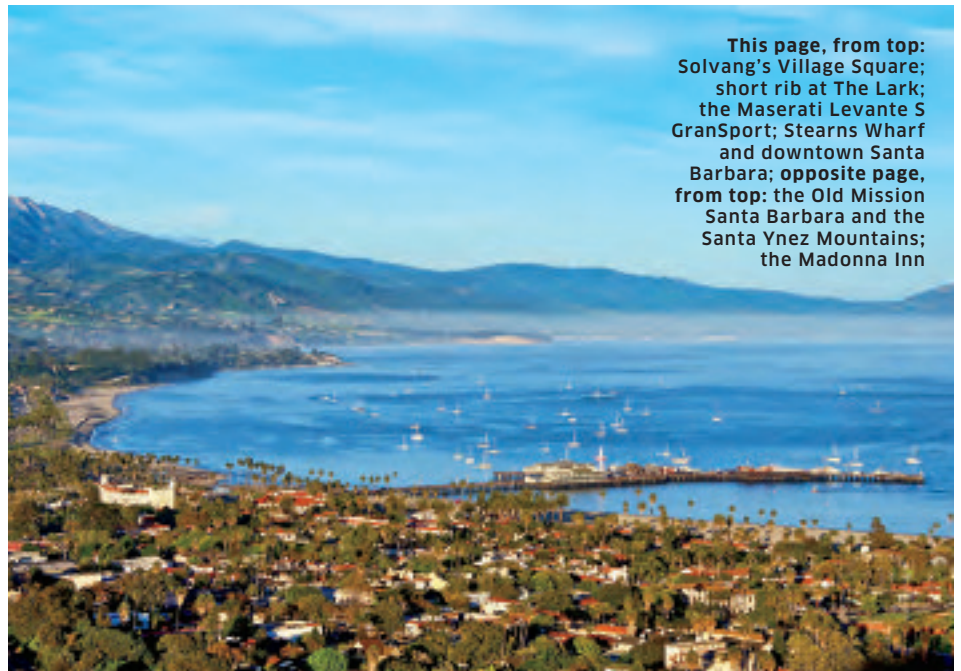
*From \$93,890, maserati.com*



I need a walk after that meal, so I stroll out to the tip of **Stearns Wharf**, which dates to 1872 and is the oldest working wood wharf in California. It’s breezy out here, and I feel an evening chill as I look down at the harbor water. A bit of warmth returns to my cheeks, though, as the setting sun begins to reflect pink on the water. It’s good to be back.

and its community of Franciscan friars have survived a number of disasters, including two major earthquakes and the wedding reception of one of my college buddies. Respect.

My next mission is a slow roll down **State Street**, Santa Barbara’s main drag, where I join the ever-present parade of classic cars cruising through the Spanish-style plazas of downtown. (This afternoon, I’m following in the roaring wake of a Shelby Cobra.) State soon dips below the highway and enters the Funk Zone, a formerly industrial area that has lately seen an influx of restaurants and urban wineries. I pick up a couple of souvenir bottles of syrah and mourvèdre from one of my standbys, **Kunin Wines**, and then score a seat at my favorite restaurant in the city, **The Lark**, where I feast on truffled polenta and pomegranate-braised beef short ribs.



**This page, from top:** Solvang’s Village Square; short rib at The Lark; the Maserati Levante S GranSport; Stearns Wharf and downtown Santa Barbara; **opposite page, from top:** the Old Mission Santa Barbara and the Santa Ynez Mountains; the Madonna Inn

courtesy of Visit California/Andreas Hub (Old Mission); courtesy of Madonna Inn (hotel exterior); delrey77/Getty Images (Solvang); Ali Beck (short rib); Jay Sinclair (Stearns Wharf)