

CLIMATE CHANGE

ROAD TRIP TO SONOMA WINE COUNTRY

STORY BY TIM SHARP • PHOTOS BY KRISTIN SHARP

For eight months of the year, Phoenix has one of the finest climates on the planet. However during the warmest months, from June through September, many of us travel to the Northwest or the West Coast to cool off.

For car folks, there is one destination where you can escape the heat, get your racing fix, drive through lush valleys, enjoy savory cuisine and sample superb

wines. Of course, we're talking about the Sonoma Wine Country and Sonoma's famed Infineon Raceway.

From the beginning of June until the first week in October, Infineon Raceway holds a multiplicity of races. While the IndyCar race in August and the NHRA drag race in July are fan favorites, neither event draws a crowd like the June NASCAR Sprint Cup race.

Infineon's NASCAR race is special because it is one of only two road races on the Sprint Cup schedule. Race fans quickly learn which of the NASCAR drivers can brake, downshift, chew gum and turn right simultaneously. "Think Outside The Oval" is Infineon's marketing catch phrase for the NASCAR race. While this is true, the NASCAR boys still attempt to run three-wide through the tight corners. It's fun to see, but no it doesn't work.

For vintage racing fans, Infineon holds two major races each year. The first is the Sonoma Historic Motorsports Festival in early June. The second is the Classic Sports Racing Group Charity Challenge in October. The former is the race which this author husband and photographer wife journeyed to from Phoenix. The trip can either be a leisurely two-day drive or a fast fourteen-hour sprint. It's your call,

but we suggest the two-day option.

If you want to see the finest vintage race cars in America, the Sonoma Historic Motorsports Festival is the perfect place to be. Yes, there are million-dollar Ferraris and Aston Martins. However, there are also 1950s Corvettes, Porsches, MGs, Morgans and the screaming V8 Specials which dominated American road racing back in the day.

One important side note: the Sonoma Historic race has added fashion shows, cocktail parties and wine tasting to its agenda. While you may be a serious race fanatic who spends hours watching races and taking pictures in the pits, you may also like to set aside some time to drive through the Valley of The Moon, to visit the local wineries and to enjoy the historic town of Sonoma. Some time for romance? A great idea.

FROM ARIZONA TO PALM DESERT

Leaving Phoenix and going west on I-10 toward California is rather uneventful. However, the desert landscape is far more scenic on the Arizona side of the Colorado River. In Arizona, Quartzite and Ehrenberg are convenient places to rest and to refuel. Remember, when you cross into California, the gasoline prices will escalate dramatically.

In California, Palm Desert is a perfect place to stop and spend the night before you drive the second leg of your trip to Sonoma. Like Scottsdale in the off-season, room rates at many of Palm Desert's finer hotels are very reasonable. Please check online and make reservations if you plan to stay the night in Palm Desert or Palm Springs.

If you have never visited Palm Desert, be sure to drive up El Paseo. This avenue has a number of hip bistros, art galleries and upscale boutiques. Known as "The Rodeo Drive of the Desert," El Paseo is located off Highway 111, the major artery which continues toward Palm Springs and then reconnects with I-10 west.

Taking the Pasadena 210 Freeway west, off the I-10 Freeway, is your best bet to avoid horrid Los Angeles traffic. Once on the 210 west, you will travel past Pasadena and to The Valley where I-10 will intersect the I-5. Take the I-5 Freeway north over scenic Tejon Pass, where you will pass historic ranchos and lakes.

At the bottom of Tejon Pass, you have a



decision to make: (a) you may continue on the fast route on I-5 toward San Francisco. Or (b) you can take the scenic route, up Highway 99 toward Bakersfield. If you have the time, take Highway 99, where the historic *American Graffiti* towns of Merced and Modesto will add interest to your journey. Some of the best antique stores and examples of early California architecture may be found in these small towns. You may also see some of the coolest hot rods in the Central Valley.

At Manteca, you can catch Highway 132 west to the I-580 west. From this point, we suggest that you consult a California map or your GPS to avoid the afternoon Bay Area traffic. I-680 is a scenic route which will get you to Vallejo and then to Highway 37 west. As you travel west, Infineon Raceway is located at the junction of California Highways 37 and 121. Now, race fans, you are finally in the Sonoma Wine Country.

TOURING SONOMA WINE COUNTRY

Within 5 miles of the Infineon Raceway, heading North on Highway 121, there are a half dozen beautiful wineries, the Sonoma Valley Visitor Center (grab a free *Wine Country Guide Book* here), the Leylan Fly Fishing Farm and the Vintage Aircraft Company where you can soar in a vintage warbird. Curse you, Red Baron.

The rolling vineyards of the Viansa, Jacuzzi, Cline Cellars, Gloria Ferrer, Schug and Anaba wineries are strung together like emeralds along Highway 121. Stop,



KEEP RIGHT >>





shop, tour and taste, but please have a designated driver. After all, this is a driving tour.

Up the road a bit, turn onto Highway 12 and head toward the historic town of Sonoma. Sonoma has a picturesque old town square, a historic mission, dozens of quaint inns, the TrainTown amusement park, funky shops and more wineries. The Sebastiani, Buena Vista, Ravenswood and Gundlach Bundschu wineries are all close to the Sonoma town center. If you are not into historic inns, you can opt to stay at The Lodge At Sonoma Renaissance Resort & Spa. The Carneros Bistro is on site and its cuisine is superb.

Driving North on Highway 12 through "The Valley of the Moon," between Sonoma and Santa Rosa, you will drive past miles of lush vineyards, beautiful estates, wine caves and yet more wineries. Consult your *Wine Country Guide* and visit the wineries with wine caves. Haven't been in a wine cave? This is something you must experience. Wine caves are how the winemakers stored and age their wines before air conditioning was invented.

If you want a complete list of the wineries along "The Valley of the Moon" drive, log on to www.winecountryguide.com. However, here are a few of the more notable wineries: BR Cohn, Arrowood, Imagery, Kunde, Kenwood, Ledson, Landmark, Chateau St. Jean, Blackstone, Glen Ellen, Adler Fels, Kaz, Mayo, VJB Cellars, St. Francis and Valley of The Moon wineries. Kunde has a wine cave and Ledson is a most impressive estate winery. However, some of the smaller wineries may have the wine you like best.

OTHER WINE COUNTRY OPTIONS

Don't want to drive from winery to winery? Don't want to taste, swirl and spit superb wine into a vase on the bar? The solution is to take the Napa Valley Wine Train. Just a hop, skip and a jump from Sonoma, the Napa Valley Wine Train is an old fashioned "Dome Liner" which travels leisurely through wine country, stops at wineries, provides wine tasting and serves killer cuisine. Call 800-427-4124 or go to winetrain.com for more info.

TO INFINEON RACEWAY AND BEYOND

What once was called Sears Point is now Infineon Raceway. In the 1980s, your correspondent won a couple of Pacific Coast Road Racing Championships driving for Porsche on the challenging Sonoma road racing circuit. However, if you have not visited Infineon Raceway in the past decade, you will not recognize the place.

Infineon is the most improved, best spectator road racing facility in the West. From its well-positioned grandstands to its modern Audi Motorsports building, Infin-

eon has surpassed every road racing circuit on the West Coast. After an eighty-million-dollar reconstruction program by Speedway Motorsports Inc. (SMI), it boasts the best seating and amenities in the West.

We enjoyed the NASCAR races at Infineon in 2009. However, we liked our visit to the less crowded Sonoma Historic Motorsports Festival even more. No crushing crowds, no problem getting hotel reservations, no traffic issues exiting the race track. Furthermore, we got to watch the vintage NASCAR "drum brake" stock cars race, and we saw the most beautiful sports cars from the 1930s to the 1980s run wheel to wheel.

We also cruised the pits, talked with the drivers and learned the amazing histories of these race cars. Some men were famous drivers with cars which had won Le Mans. Some were locals who had meticulously restored their vintage race cars themselves. Other racers were captains of industry who had amassed large fortunes. Funny thing though, each driver spoke lovingly about his race car as if it were the coolest machine on the race track. These folks were unpretentious, genuine car guys, and we really liked that.

In all, we took a leisurely drive from Arizona to Sonoma in our Porsche Boxster S. Once in Sonoma, we enjoyed our cruise through "The Valley of The Moon," sampled some great wines and some excellent food. We also had time to visit with our good friends the Croziers, who have live in wine country for decades. However, what was most memorable was that the Sonoma residents treated us as though we were old friends. Yes, we like that, too, and would heartily recommend this road trip. ■

After 20 years as a race driver and automotive executive, **TIM SHARP** has been an automotive journalist or editor for two decades, writing for national automotive publications. Experiences as a professional driver, team manager and auto executive afford insight into motorsports and the auto industry. Sharp is a past president of the Phoenix Automotive Press Association (PAPA) and a vintage race driver.

When your husband races sports cars for years, you learn to take some good photographs. When your son also races BMX bikes, motorcycles and race cars, you will learn to take some great photographs. **KRISTIN SHARP** has covered everything from the Rolex Grand-Am Series, to the Monterey Historic Races, to the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance in national motorsports publications, and is a member of PAPA.

