

# Loose in the Foothills

by Bob Ring

## Columnist Discovers Elder Hostel

I never thought that I'd go on an Elder Hostel trip – bicycle tours and old school dormitories are not for me. But that was the old Elder Hostel, first started at the University of New Hampshire way back in 1975. The new Elder Hostel is not even called Elder Hostel any more; the new name is Exploritas (ex-plòr-i-tas: combination of the word explore and the Latin word for truth, *veritas*) – apparently an attempt to appeal to younger customers.

Today Exploritas is the world's largest not-for-profit educational travel organization for adults. Unbelievably, Exploritas offers nearly 8,000 learning adventures every year in all 50 U.S. states and in over 90 countries around the world. Categories of educational programs include **discovery** of natural and cultural diversity in national parks and cosmopolitan cities; learning new **skills** or brushing up on old hobbies; **intergenerational** tours with your adult children or grandchildren; **liberal arts** adventures in literature, fine arts, social science, history, and philosophy; **outdoor adventures** to celebrated landscapes; and important **service** projects. See <http://www.exploritas.org>. Over 160,000 people enroll in its programs every year.

Two Exploritas enrollees for 2009 were myself and Pat - for the second year in a row, choosing to travel over the New Year's holiday (last year it was to the Rose Parade in Pasadena). This time we journeyed to California's Napa Valley to become students in a educational program called, "Life is a Cabernet, The Wonderful World of Wine," conducted in association with Bay Area Classic Learning. This was our first Elder Hostel Exploritas trip, and I must say, we had a great time, learned a lot, and were very favorably impressed. More Exploritas trips in our future?

It was a six-day course – a combination of classroom lectures, hosted wine-tasting tours along the Napa Valley, and a little free time to explore on our own. We had talks on Napa Valley history, Wine in the Ancient World, Wine and Food Pairing, and Wine in Art. The lecturers were all experts, good "teachers," and obviously passionate about what they were doing.

The Wine and Food Pairing sessions were particularly noteworthy because we were provided samples of different wine varietals and foods to taste – a really practical and fun way to explore all the combinations. We tasted (individually) tannin, acid, sugar, and alcohol – learning to recognize these flavors in wine **and** when the overall taste of the wine is "balanced."

Over the week, we toured and tasted at three (of close to 500 total now) Napa Valley wineries to "apply" our learning. Pat and I visited a fourth winery during one of our two free-time half-days.

We were part of delightful group of 28 people (age range between 55 and 85 is my guess) – many of them singles. At a get together after our first dinner, several attendees introduced themselves as winos – turned out they meant they were part of a club, Wine Investigation for Novices and Oenophiles. As we realized later, others should have introduced themselves as winos too – the other kind.

Our accommodations for the week were the Embassy Suites in Napa – no old school dorm there. The hotel featured an expansive facility, beautiful garden-sculpted grounds, complete with a large pond with resident white and black swans. As at most Embassy Suites, this one offered free cocktails for two hours each evening plus a free substantial breakfast each morning. You should have seen our group stocking up on wine from the cocktail bar to take into dinner each night.

And speaking of dinner, Exploritas shined here too. We had a very tasty menu each night - of very well prepared food, served to us in one the hotel's private rooms.

Our host for the week was an experienced Exploritas person, who was friendly, knowledgeable, and helpful. (Exploritas takes special care to collect any medical data on program attendees that might be required in an emergency.)

For completeness, I mention two negatives. The weather was cold (50 degrees F) and cloudy/foggy much of the time, but that didn't affect our spirits (no pun intended). And we did have a rental car problem; I couldn't get our car's transmission out of "park" from time to time – leaving us fearful of being stranded somewhere. But imagine this: Budget rental Car Company delivered us a replacement car from Oakland Airport, some 50 miles away, on New Year's Eve – now that's service.

Later that holiday evening, we had a New Year's Eve party, complete with crazy hats, streamers to throw, and noisemakers. But, I think most of us non-night-owls celebrated the New Year in our hotel rooms, watching on TV as the Waterford Crystal ball descended at Times Square in New York City. On another night we had entertainment from a good barbershop quartet, and on a third night, a comedian who put on his own Vaudeville show. So it certainly wasn't all books and learning!

So what was the bottom line of our educational experience? As was drilled into us by our instructors, wine is an individual taste; don't let anyone try to tell you what you should like or what wine-food pairings are a no-no. And luckily for our pocketbook, Pat and I decided that with all the great wines we tasted in the Napa Valley (some on the expensive side), we like our inexpensive favorites that we get here in Tucson just as much.



*Whitehall Winery was one of three Napa Valley wine-tasting stops on our Exploritas learning adventure. (Photo courtesy of Pat Wood)*