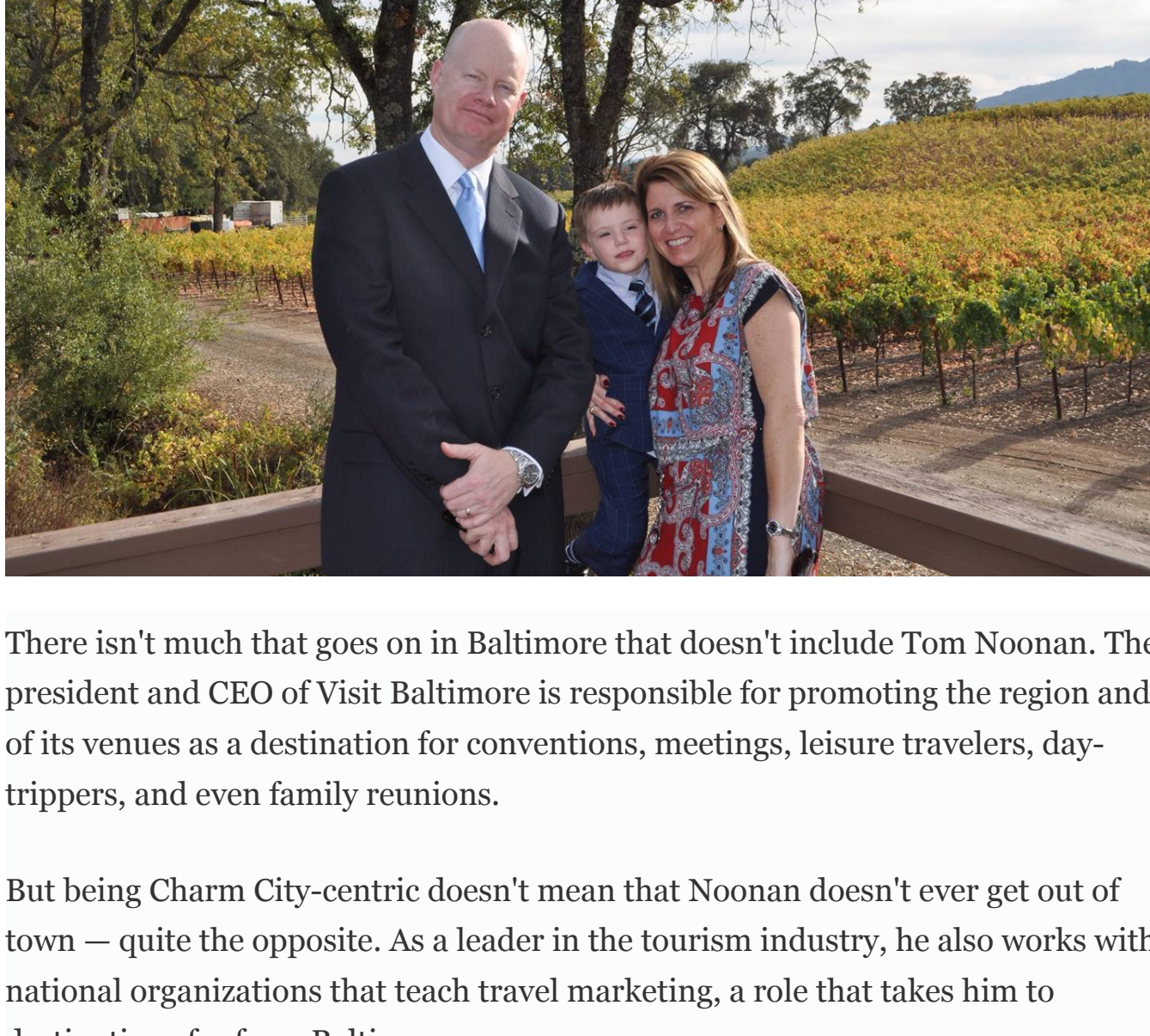


A vintage vacation for Tom Noonan, CEO of Visit Baltimore

By Stephanie Citron



There isn't much that goes on in Baltimore that doesn't include Tom Noonan. The president and CEO of Visit Baltimore is responsible for promoting the region and all of its venues as a destination for conventions, meetings, leisure travelers, day-trippers, and even family reunions.

But being Charm City-centric doesn't mean that Noonan doesn't ever get out of town — quite the opposite. As a leader in the tourism industry, he also works with national organizations that teach travel marketing, a role that takes him to destinations far from Baltimore.

So what does our local authority on all-things-travel do on his time off? Would you believe us if we told you he travels?

Where is your favorite travel destination?

I just returned from a trip to Sonoma and Healdsburg, California.

Did you go alone?

[I took] my wife Mindy and my 4-year-old son. We were there for about four days. This year it was for a family wedding. We usually try to get out there at least once a year. We used to live in Dallas, and then we would go three or four times a year because it was such an easy 21/2- or three-hour flight, and we were there, versus going all the way across the country.

So now that you live 3,000 miles away, what makes you want to return each year?

I describe it as my wife's happy place. We love the setting, the vineyards, the feeling of Sonoma. We go to buy wine. We like Sonoma so much better than Napa because it's much quieter, with great wineries.

Where do you go in Sonoma?

We love the town of Healdsburg. It's got a great little town square, with nice small shops, restaurants and hotels.

You attended a family wedding?

Yes, my brother got married at the B.R. Cohn Winery in Sonoma. I have this big family; I'm one of 10 kids, and it was great that everyone was out there.

Which wineries did you visit?

Dutcher Crossing [in Dry Creek Valley, Sonoma County]. It's one of our favorites. We had a picnic there. We're members of that wine club and another called Lynmar [Estate] Winery, so we always stop in. Lynmar is known for their chardonnays and they have a couple of pinots. We [also] went to Papapietro Perry Winery, known for its pinot [noir] and zins [zinfandel]. Before [our son] came along, we would go out there and hit a dozen or so wineries in a day and buy a few bottles to bring back. You know, before you could ship to Maryland, you could check it in as baggage, but now that Maryland ships, beginning a few years ago, we signed up for the wine clubs ... and they ship [it home to us].

Are you a collector of wines?

We're not necessarily collectors, we're wine lovers. We probably have 100,150 bottles of wine in the house. We're constantly rotating them until they hit maturity in about five years. You know, if you buy wine from off the shelf of a winery that's a 2012, you probably don't want to drink that for five years. ... The ones we bought in 2008 or 2009 are the ones we're having today.

I'd guess that 150 bottles is at least the beginning of a collection.

Yeah, but there are people with thousands of bottles. We're not doing this as an investment. We do it because we like to open a bottle of wine with friends or family when they are in town.

What else did you do on your trip?

We also went to the park with the ruins of the home of the writer Jack London. The world-famous author Jack London, wrote 50 or so books [in the early 1900s]. He announced [in 1911] he is going to build this 13,000-square-foot lodge [in Sonoma County]. He gets to two or three weeks from completing it and it burns to the ground. He vows to rebuild it, and unfortunately dies before he gets a chance. So the ruins sit there ... and it's spectacular.

The burned-down house ruins are spectacular?

One of the stone walls is still there. They actually do theater in the park right there. They'll put 900 chairs in the ruins; so you can sit there and watch theater in the ruins.

Where do you like to stay in Sonoma?

We used to stay at the Madrona Manor, but this time we stayed at the Sonoma Mission Inn — a Fairmont [property]. It was beautiful.

Where do you like to eat?

The Dry Creek Kitchen ... it's fabulous — amazing fine dining. And you have to go to Oakville Grocery. That's where we got the stuff for our picnic with our son. You can buy wine and cheese and sandwiches ... all those things you want to have when you're off to a winery. There's also an incredible restaurant, Zin, that has these beer-battered green beans. Kind of like a french fry but you feel healthier about it because it's a green bean.

So these restaurants are all in the town of Healdsburg?

Yes, it's a great little town to walk around in. Its got a really charming, kind of old-school town square. There's a nice men's shop where I've bought a few things and really cool antique stores. And there's tasting rooms, in case you don't want to go all the way to the wineries.

So you mentioned also visiting Sausalito. What did you do there?

On our first morning [in California] my son got up at 4 a.m. because it's 7 a.m. on the East Coast. So that's the day we went to Muir Woods [about 8 miles north east of Sausalito]. The sequoia and redwoods are just incredible; they're just massive trees. You can drive a car through one of them. And one of the trees that has fallen over, they've done a time line on it. It's 2,000 years old and they count the rings back and tell you everything that took place ... birth of Christ, Columbus finds America and the Civil War, all these things. My son was looking at these trees and was like, "wow." He's never seen anything so big in his life! Oh, and we had a "Smalltimore" moment: As we're walking through the woods, my wife was wearing a Texas Longhorns hat, and we walked past people wearing Ravens hats. We were like, "You're from Baltimore? We are too!"

What else did you do in the area?

We love the town of Sausalito as well — it's just so charming.

Where do you stay around there?

We stayed at a Holiday Inn Express [in Mill Valley]. And they have this amazing Italian restaurant called Frantoio. All the locals go there.

How was the weather?

Oh, 78-80 degrees. It was beautiful. It was even that warm in Sausalito, which it usually isn't. But it's fall ... and everything outdoors is gold and yellow, so it's pretty to look at.

What did you bring back with you?

About three cases of wine [laughs], T-shirts from Muir woods and lots of great memories — family time.

How often do you travel?

For work I travel 18 times a year; at least once or twice a month. A lot of my trips are to Chicago. I'm on a board there. I go to New York City three or four times a year. And I travel to six industry conventions a year. Mindy and I go on one or two big vacations a year. Since we've lived here, we've been to Bermuda a couple of times, Hilton Head, Asheville, North Carolina, and Hawaii. Hilton Head and Asheville were because we could drive to them with our son. I grew up in Minnesota, so we go each summer for a week. My brother has a beautiful lakehouse right outside of Minneapolis and he's got a great boat, so we've spent Fourth of July there the last couple of years; they do a great fireworks show. The summer in Minnesota is 80-85 degrees with no humidity. Perfect weather.

What is the one item you will not travel without?

A movie player for our son. [Laughs.] Something to occupy him on the airplane. I love having my Bose noise cancellation headset. And I've got to have my iPad, something to read, look at or listen to.

Where to next?

I'm 48 and turning 50 a year from December. We want to go to either Australia or back to Ireland, where we've been before. Also on my bucket list is France and Italy, which we haven't gotten to yet.

If you go

Getting there

Multiple airlines offer flights from BWI-Marshall Airport to San Francisco. Restricted fares start around \$325 round-trip. Sonoma is about an hour's drive north of the Bay Area. Various outfits offer taxi and bus service to the area.

Lodging

The Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn & Spa, 100 Boyes Blvd., Sonoma, Calif., fairmont.com/sonoma. Tom Noonan recently discovered this posh Sonoma Valley inn, a lavish, historic resort with world-class amenities. In addition to rooms stocked with deluxe creature comforts, the resort offers a spa featuring naturally heated mineral pools and products made from local lavender and grapes. A picturesque golf course winds through neighboring vineyards. Rates range from \$169-\$400 per night.

Madrona Manor, 1001 Westside Road, Healdsburg, Calif., medronamanor.com. Noonan has also stayed at this stunning and opulent Victorian bed-and-breakfast on a private mountaintop. Rates range from \$225-\$495 per night.

Holiday Inn Express, 160 Shoreline Highway, Mill Valley, Calif., ihg.com. Check out this budget hotel near Muir Woods. It features an outdoor fire pit and complimentary s'mores. Rates start around \$104 per night.

Dining

Dry Creek Kitchen, 317 Healdsburg Ave., Healdsburg, Calif., charliepalmer.com/dry-creek-kitchen. One of Noonan's favorite restaurants is the steakhouse by restaurateur Charlie Palmer, located inside Hotel Healdsburg. The eatery features an expanded menu of local food.

Oakville Grocery Co., 124 Matheson St., Healdsburg, Calif., oakvillegrocery.com. Noonan also recommends picking up provisions here for a vineyard picnic lunch. oakvillegrocery.com

Frantoio, 152 Shoreline Highway, Mill Valley, Calif., frantoio.com. Located inside the Holiday Inn Express, it has been ranked among the best Italian restaurants in the Bay Area.

Attractions

Wine country. Don't miss visiting the world-famous wineries of Sonoma Valley. Along with offering the some of the best sips in the country, many of these wineries are on spectacular estates surrounded by idyllic countryside. Check out Noonna's favorites: Dutcher Crossing, 8533 Dry Creek Road, Geyserville, Calif., dutchercrossingwinery.com; and Lynmar Estate, 3909 Frei Road, Sebastopol, Calif., lynmarestate.com. For information on more wineries, go to sonomacounty.com.

Jack London State Historical Park, 2400 London Ranch Road, Glen Ellen, Calif., jacklondonpark.com. This 39-acre National Historic Landmark, hosting theatrical and musical events, also includes the famous writer's gravesite, ruins of his home, and hosts theater and music events.

Muir Woods, 1 Muir Woods Road, Mill Valley, nps.gov/muwo. A national park dedicated to protecting America's impossibly tall legendary sequoia and redwood trees.