



Monterey Peninsula

Inspiration for the Ages

by Colleen Birch Maile

Ever wish you could experience the California of yesteryear—without sacrificing 21st-century creature comforts? Time travel of that sort is possible midway between San Francisco and L.A. on the Monterey Peninsula.

It's a place of heart-grabbing beauty—a stretch of earth, sea and sky that inspires the most reticent of souls to wax poetic. Creative types thrive here. At the close of the 19th-century, plein-air artists from Europe and America's East Coast traveled to California to discover fresh subject matter. In Monterey they found a dramatic convergence of waterfront and mountain vista. The scenery enticed many visiting artists to linger. Painters established artists' colonies that evolved into Carmel-by-the-Sea and Pacific Grove. Authors flourished here as well. Robert Lewis Stevenson first visited Pacific Grove in the 1870s. More than a half-century later John Steinbeck found his muse in Monterey's rugged seaport and the farm fields stretching inland. Iconic photographers Ansel Adams and Edward Weston both lived and died here. Today, the peninsula still exerts a magnetic hold on the

senses, while presenting visitors with a world of dramatically different vacation options.

Let's begin with the laid-back possibilities of Carmel-by-the-Sea, a place that remains an artistic vision of fantasy cottages, chalet-style lodges, and inns bedecked with ample gingerbread. Restaurants, boutiques and high-end retailers cram into a friendly-square-mile oozing Old World ambience. Artworks of every medium and genre, including plein-air seascapes, are presented in a host of galleries. Some double as the artists' studios. It's easy to lose an afternoon watching them at work. Among the most fascinating is sculptor Steven Whyte. The British transplant creates large-scale monuments at his Wellington's Gallery on Dolores Street between 5th and 6th. It's relatively easy to find. However, many enterprises cluster Euro-style around off-street courtyards. To make the most of your time, pick up the Official Visitor Guide at the Chamber of Commerce, 5th and San Carlos Streets (there are no street numbers in downtown Carmel). The



San Carlos Borromeo de Carmelo Mission is still home to a Catholic parish



Sculptor Steven Whyte and gallery namesake Lord Wellington

concise handbook makes it easy to uncover hidden treasures. History buffs will want to take in the San Carlos Mission, 3080 Rio Road. The original 18th-century structure built by Father Serra was destroyed by fire. The present church dates to the mid-1800s and is worth a look.



Hofsas House, best bet for Carmel lodging

Strict design ordinances safeguard Carmel's character. A patchwork of cobblestone lines the thoroughfares. (High-heels are prohibited by law; so too, excessive noise and bright lights.) Those looking for peace and quiet will do well to make Carmel the launch point for a Monterey Peninsula experience. This is the high-brow center of the area, home to the exceptional Sunset Center for the Performing Arts, and gateway for a tour of swanky Pebble Beach. There's a fee to access the 17-mile drive that takes visitors by homes of the rich and richer and the posh golf course. The peek into the uber-good life and sweeping ocean views makes it worthwhile.

Despite Carmel village's pedestrian-friendly nature, you will want a car to access Pebble Beach and the rest of the peninsula. That's just one reason I favor the Hofsas House, a historic, family-owned lodge with plenty of off-street parking and ties to Carmel's artistic past. Noted 20th-century artist Maxine Albro, who worked with Diego Rivera, painted the welcome mural a half-century ago. Her work also graces the lobby and one of the guest rooms. All rooms are updated with modern niceties including wet bars. The hotel boasts a pool and fireplaces in most rooms—a concession to Carmel's cool evenings. The village and beach are just blocks away. The lovely stroll winds through Carmel's charming residential neighborhood.

Carmel's mile-long public waterfront benefits from sugary sand, phenomenal views and a kennel club vibe. Dog lovers find nirvana in this canine-friendly community. A beach excursion might be dubbed "pets-on-parade." Many eateries and hotels also welcome four-legged friends adding to Carmel's family appeal. For a canine-free beach experience, head to the astonishingly beautiful Point Lobos Natural Preserve on the way to Big Sur just south of town. This is one of the few places to see the hauntingly beautiful Monterey cypress. It's also a favorite scuba diving spot and a wonderful place to enjoy a picnic.

Carmel's evening entertainment leans toward concerts, theater, piano bars and fine dining. There are dozens of restaurants ranging from the innovative nouvelle cuisine at Mundaka to hearty wood-fired fare at the Rio Grill to mainstays such as the Hog's Breath Inn (once owned by Clint Eastwood). This is not the place for raucous clubbing. Monterey, on the other hand, continues to exude elements of the community John Steinbeck crafted in *Cannery Row*. The book, a tale of fishermen and factory workers, had such an impact on Monterey that once the sardines were fished out, city father's appropriated the name Cannery Row for the former Ocean Avenue. When they invited the great man of



Monterey's monument to John Steinbeck

Monterey



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Jellyfish at Monterey Bay Aquarium



Point Lobos Natural Preserve



Point Pinos lighthouse

letters back to town for the dedication ceremony, Steinbeck commented “They fish for tourists now, and that’s a species they are not likely to wipe out.”

His words proved true. Visitors flock to the seaside village. The modern Cannery Row is an amalgam of history and kitsch. Remnants of Steinbeck’s day punctuate strips of tourist-friendly eateries, bars and tasting rooms. Local wineries are well represented. While plaques and monuments commemorate the author’s legacy, most visitors are more interested in the ample good times. The world-famous Monterey Bay Aquarium remains the focal point. Here, learning about the seldom-seen watery world is effortlessly educational and utterly addictive. Special exhibits explore flamingos, magellanic penguins, turtles, jellyfish and seahorses. (Yes, the males really do give birth.)

All the oceanic wonders aside, one of the best things about the aquarium is its location in the old Hovden Cannery, built in 1916 when Steinbeck was just a teen. There’s a wonderful irony in a structure built to process seafood now dedicated to the preservation of ocean life. The aquarium’s mission spreads beyond its walls. The surrounding area is a marine life sanctuary and a fine place to watch sea lions frolic.

North of Monterey, Pacific Grove retains its quaint Victorian quality. Home to California’s longest continually operating lighthouse at Point

Pinos, it’s worth a day of any visitor’s time. The lighthouse is open for tours Thursdays through Mondays and reveals a fascinating segment of California history. Afterward check into the

Fandango restaurant (223 17th Street) for some of the area’s best cuisine. This eatery, operated by the former head of Pebble Beach Golf Course’s Club XIX, presents an exquisite European-influenced menu. Seafood is a specialty. The lamb is to die for.

From Carmel’s white sand beach to Monterey’s harbor to Pacific Grove’s Victorian homes, the peninsula encapsulates California at its best. Getting there is easy with United Express service by SkyWest directly to Monterey from San Francisco, Los Angeles and Denver. ■

AN EVENT TO REMEMBER

The Steinbeck Festival in Salinas pays tribute to the Monterey Peninsula’s most renowned literary luminary. The annual event, held August 4 through 7 this year, is a celebration of books, talks, tours, food, films and visual and performing arts. All the activities are filtered through the lens of Steinbeck’s work and themes, but you don’t have to be a bibliophile to enjoy.