

The Central Coast via Highway 1

Description

I lived three years on the Central Coast of California in the early 2000s and, along with subsequent visits as a family, we've gotten to know the area pretty well. The Central Coast is a laid-back sanctuary about halfway between the LA and Bay Area metro areas and a world apart from the traffic gridlock of those metropolises.

On this page I'll go over many of the beaches, trails, historic sites, and museums to visit in this region between San Luis Obispo and Santa Cruz.

I've decided to start in the south and work my way north on this page, though the areas I knew best were in the center region.

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San Luis Obispo



I lived in San Luis Obispo in the early 2000s. I liked the area enough to put up with working at an atrociously crappy software company before moving south to Orange County for much better prospects. With the advent of remote working as a norm, this area will undoubtedly grow enormously (as will most rural areas across the country).

The center of town was the Mission San Luis Obispo de Toloso. The 200 year old mission church is certainly worth a visit and from there the majority of the town is in walking distance.

San Luis has changed A LOT since I lived there and is now comprised of many high-end shopping complexes. To me, this is a big disappointment and really ruins the character of the town, which was formerly the low-key alternative to wealthy Santa Barbara.

Restaurants

I usually refrain from mentioning restaurants unless I've been there recently, but there are a few in San Luis Obispo that have been there for decades and I can still recommend.

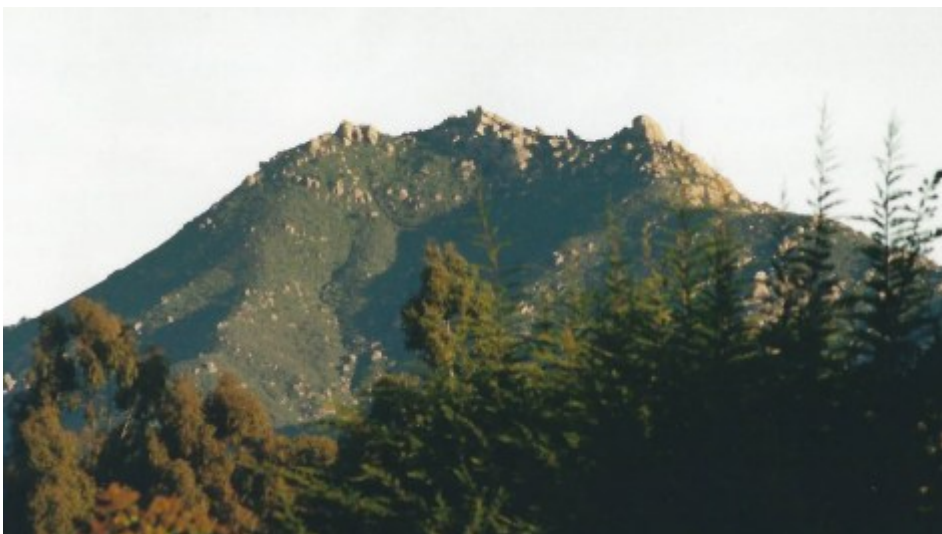
The first is the **Apple Farm** which is also a BNB on Monterey St. Everything at the Apple Farm was delicious, even the butter (seriously).

Another favorite of mine (at least for breakfast on Sunday mornings) was the **Copper Cafe** at the Madonna Inn (I'll come back to that place shortly. The pancakes and waffles were my favorites.

The **Big Sky Cafe** was one of the pricier places to eat at the time I lived there, but the food was really good. I usually am not drawn to places that over-advertise farm-to-table but this is one of the exceptions. There was a giant painting of an eggplant behind the bar. It was a constant source of perplexed conversation. As in "why??" You can tell me if it's still there.

Mo's Smokehouse was the best BBQ by a long shot. In fact when we were last in town we made a point of going there. In the intervening years I've had a lot of BBQ but I still remember this place.

Trails



Bishop Peak

There are a number of minor volcanic peaks that start near San Luis Obispo and travel in a northwesterly direction. I've alternatively heard these called the "Seven Sisters" and the "Nine Sisters".

Two of these peaks are in San Luis Obispo itself and were nice, short hikes to do at really any time of the year. The first is **Cerro San Luis Obispo** which sits next to the Madonna Inn and can be accessed via the Laguna Lake park. Just walk down the pasture between the cows and you'll come to the steep ascent of the trail.

The second and more scenic (in my opinion) is the **Bishop Peak** trail. This trail starts at a parking area off Foothill Blvd and switchbacks up to near the top of the peak. There are three small peaks and the highest actual point is inaccessible without climbing gear.

I used to go to the top before sundown in the summers and watch the fog slowly roll in. It was pretty amazing to see the blanket of fog envelope everything below the peak.

Do be careful of poison oak on this and many trails on the Central Coast. I learned the hard way that even a minimal brush is enough to get an itchy rash.

Morro Bay





This is a quiet beach town that is the first stop on Highway 1 as you travel north from San Luis Obispo. I lived in Morro Bay for a year and **Morro Strand Beach** will always be a sentimental favorite of mine. I walked on it almost daily from end to end.

Morro Bay and much of the Central Coast is one of the few places in the entire country that you truly can get by without heating or air conditioning. The temperatures rarely dip below 50 in the winter or above 80 in the summer.

Morro Bay also had a strange meteorological affect of seemingly having a climate the opposite of the rest of North America. It was often hotter in winter than in summer. In the summer months when it was over 100F in Atascadero, only 10 miles inland, Morro Bay was reliably 70F. In Jan and Feb it would frequently be 80F.

The first thing you will see in Morro Bay is monolithic Morro Rock that stands on the edge of the coast. This is actually one of the remnants of the volcanic history of the area along with the aforementioned Sisters. Unlike those near San Luis, this mountainous rock cannot be climbed.

Montana de Oro State Park







This is one of the great, lesser known state parks in California. I discovered it shortly after moving to the area and it became a favorite place of mine to enjoy the coast and do some hiking.

Youâ??ll undoubtedly see California Quail here scurrying along the trails and hiding in the chaparral (good luck getting a photo of one), as well as gulls, pelicans, terns, and (if you are lucky) deer and seals.

There are many miles of trails that cross the coastal bluffs but one hike in particular stands out in my mind for anyone wanting to see great vistas.

Valencia Peak Trail



The **Valencia Peak** trail is only two miles and ascends about 1300 ft from sea level. But the views are worth it. I used to try running the entire length to the summit but never quite had the stamina (I did see someone else complete this feat). There are a number of other trails that lead inland and I did complete a few including the Oats Peak Trail as well.

Morro Bay State Park



Crowned Night Heron



Great Blue Heron and Great Egret



Sandpiper



Herring Gull by bay



Egret on the estuary

The other really good state park is the aptly named Morro Bay State Park. The park protects an area of estuary and park of the bay. This is a great area to see wading birds and to kayak. You can rent a kayak right at the bay shore.

There is also a nice little museum here that covers much of the flora and fauna in the area.

Both parks also offer some good campgrounds, but I actually never camped at either and I never even camped at the many beachfront campgrounds either. Someday weâ??ll do that.

Restaurants

Loloâ??s Mexican Restaurant is both a good and relaxing place to eat. It was always a favorite of ours. Itâ??s a small place, but cozy.

Great American Fish Company occupies a rather large space by the bay near Morro Rock. This was one of several seafood restaurants that we would dine at periodically. living on the Central Coast one gets used to eating a lot of seafood. This is a good place to sit and watch the pelicans.

Cayucos



Cayucos is the even smaller, sleepier town that begins where Morro Strand ends. Cayucos has a nice pier and a series of restaurants, bars, and surf shacks along the main street.

The beach here is calm, though the water is very cold. If you rent a surf board you'll need a wet suit.

Cambria

The scenery gets more rugged and the coastline gets more untamed the further north you go. The next small coastal town is Cambria. There is a nice beachfront park here called Moonstone Beach.

Cambria is known as the place where the pines meet the sea. A very scenic drive travels inland from Cambria to the wine country town of Paso Robles.

It's a fairly steep ascent the first few miles with great views of the coast. The temperature difference between Paso Robles and Cambria can be pretty dramatic in the summer. If it's 60F in Cambria it may well be 100F in Paso Robles.

San Simeon

You will want to stop in San Simeon (if you haven't already). This is a very scenic and interesting place with the most to see and do until you get to Monterey.

Hearst Castle





Hearst Castle was the incredible mansion home of William Randolph Hearst. The main house (Casa Grande) is (at least it was the last time I visited) the second largest home in the United States after Biltmore. With the surrounding buildings, the pools, and grounds it's a place to be absolutely awed.

I did two separate tours of Hearst Castle and I definitely recommend doing at least one. The house was decorated with art and furnishings from all over Europe and it's almost an art museum in its own right.

You can decide on your own whether to follow up your visit with a viewing of Citizen Kane.

Elephant Seals







There are few places where seals are so easily observed and in such numbers as the elephant seal colony at San Simeon. While the babies are certainly cute, the adult male bulls are, well, unique. They are incredibly massive as well.

The area is fenced and gated and you should not try to pass beyond the fence (you won't need to). The males in particular can be aggressive and if you are lucky enough to see them fighting over mating rights, you'll know you stand no chance.

San Simeon State Park





This is a really nice and sheltered beach (and due to the geography its actually a tad warmer here than in the surrounding areas). There is an underpass to walk to the beach from the highway. There is a campground here as well on the inland side of the freeway.

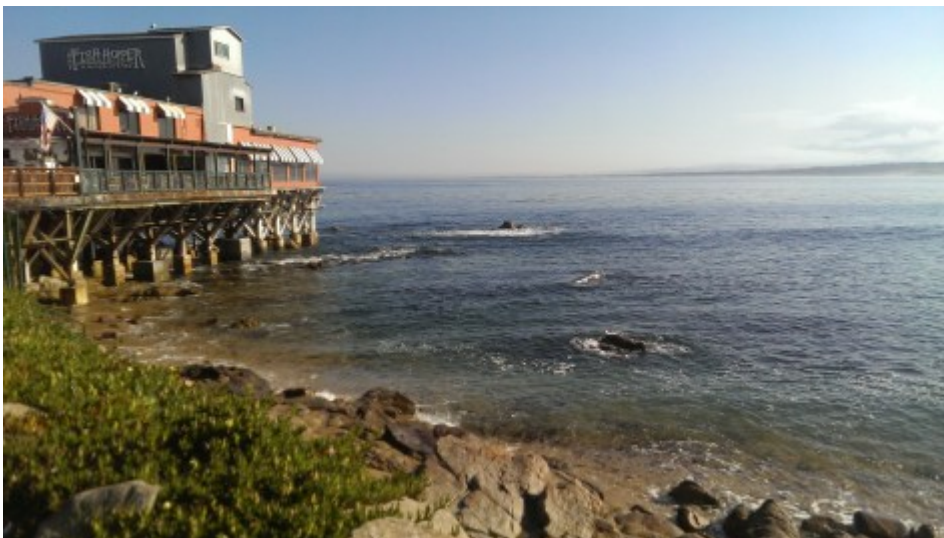
Ragged Point and Big Sur



The next 90 miles are a long, slow windy but very scenic cliffside passage. You'll be forced to go slow even if you don't want to owing to the constant curves and possible fog. Take the pullouts and enjoy the views.

Along the way you'll want to stop for a photo of the Bixby Bridge. If you have time you'll also want to stop at the Julia Pfeiffer Burns Big Sur State Park. Somehow I never made it there but will next time I travel this road.

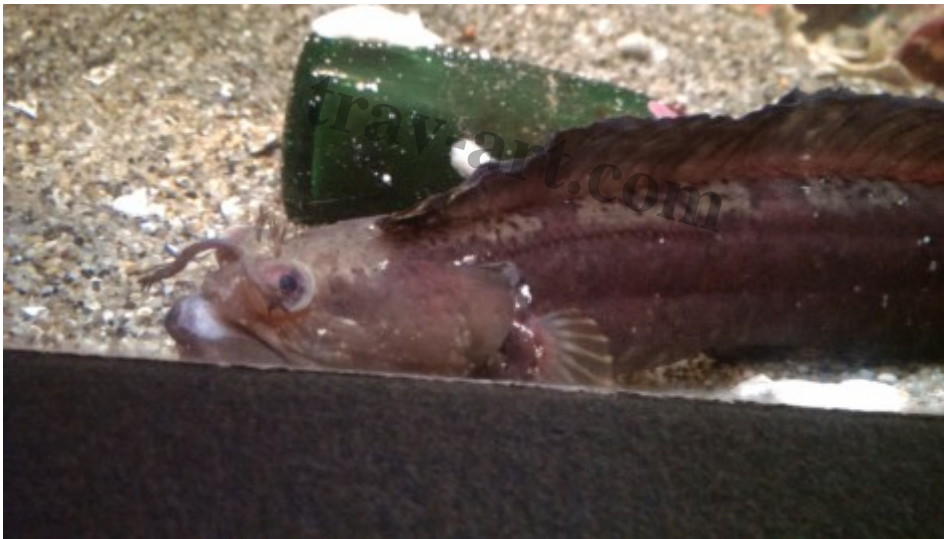
Monterey



Monterey is full of fun stuff to see and do, starting with the Monterey Bay Aquarium. This is the big city of Highway 1 south of the Santa Cruz and the Bay Area.

Monterey Bay Aquarium





These few cell phone pictures don't tell the story about this aquarium. It really is the best aquarium I've ever been to (although there are many close seconds). Monterey sits above what amounts to a grand canyon below sea level that is brimming with sea life.

Monterey could easily cover a page all to itself. Instead of going over all there is to see and do in this terrific city, I'll continue up the road to highlight the lesser known spots.

Elk Horn Slough









If you really want to get up close and personal with sea life, this inland slough (pronounced "slew") is a great place to do it. Just rent a kayak and gently paddle up the inland waterway. You'll see seals, sea otters, pelicans, and more from a different perspective.

Maresa and Seacliff State Beaches









A you pass north of Elkhorn Slough the beaches become sandier and wider. There are two nice ones here in Manresa State Beach and Seacliff State Beach. Seacliff is interesting in that there is a wrecked concrete (yes, concrete) ship sitting at the end of the pier.

Santa Cruz

I wonâ??t try to cover all of Santa Cruz here. Instead Iâ??ll just focus on a couple fun outdoor spots I can recommend.

Natural Bridges State Beach









There is a cool natural bridge in the surf at this very nice beach just outside Santa Cruz. The surf was a little rough compared to Manresa and Seacliff, so be careful about entering the water.

Roaring Camp Railroad





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For kids I highly recommend driving up to the Roaring Camp Railroad or taking the Santa Cruz Beach train. The Roaring Camp train takes you amid the coastal redwoods. Great way to enjoy a fall day, in particular.

Date Created

August 2, 2022

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