

California's Coast: Venice Beach to Monterey

by Ellie Campbell

In my *In Good Taste* column last month, I wrote about the culinary experiences my husband and I had during our honeymoon to the coast of California. Although I've already touched on the edible wonders of the state, this month, I'll share a preliminary guide of highlights that the California coast offers its visitors from Venice Beach to Monterey.

We began our trip in the southern region, including Los Angeles, Santa Monica, and Venice. With a view of the stunning Pacific coast from our hotel room at the Casa del Mar in Santa Monica, we were only a short drive away from Los Angeles and within walking distance of days' worth of adventures. One of Santa Monica's unbeatable gems is its farmer's market, held Wednesday, Saturday, and Sunday at slightly different locations. My jaw was to the pavement during our entire stroll to the various stands, and my only complaint was that our hotel room didn't include a full kitchen for us to bring back bag-loads of the incredibly fresh, inspiring produce with which to cook a romantic feast for two. There were countless samples of delicious citrus, pistachios, artisanal cheeses, unique dried fruits, and more. Many regional chefs incorporate the ingredients from this market into their menus.

Also walkable from Santa Monica's "downtown" is the famed Third Street Promenade. Although this pedestrian-only, clean-air street is lined mostly with run-of-the-mill brand-name stores, it is a great spot to people watch while grabbing lunch at an outdoor café before walking only a couple of blocks to the oceanfront boardwalk.

Just down the boardwalk – either a nice walk or short drive away – is Venice Beach. While this spot is noted for its wild street shows, kitschy souvenirs, and the faded Muscle Beach, Venice is far more charming, with a high-end yet laid-back, eco-conscious vibe spreading up and down its main drag, Abbott Kinney Blvd. Venice has something for just about anyone, from shooting around on the public basketball courts made famous by *White Men Can't Jump* to shopping for beachwear at the boardwalk's many kiosks to enjoying macrobiotic casual fare at Seed Kitchen (see last month's article or www.seedkitchen.com). Abbott Kinney itself boasts a fun variety of boutiques, cafés, unique bookstores, galleries, and homes, not to mention the unmistakable California ambiance, attracting everyone from A-listers to the shirtless street performers with their 1980s-esque boomboxes. Make sure to check out The Farmacy of Global Organic Medicine, Firefly boutique (featuring distinctive products from local artists, including clothing, jewelry, books, and more), and J's Kitchen (a casual macrobiotic eatery).

Now to meander a few hours up the Pacific Coast Highway, which is not advised at night unless "perilous, futile" (*Lonely Planet*) drives and panic attacks are of interest to you. A highly recommended site between Santa Barbara and Monterey, which otherwise includes few attractions other than the spectacular coastline, is the Hearst Castle in San Simeon. Although we missed the last tour of the day (and tours are required to see the grounds), many friends told us this was a must-see. We'll be sure to visit the grandiose grounds that were once the home of the Hearst mining family on our next California visit; the nearly 130 acres include a more-than-luxurious 165-room estate, lavish gardens and pools, and artistic treasures.

Monterey and Carmel are the first towns one encounters after the long, windy trek from San Simeon. On the way, I highly recommend a stop in Big Sur, a region built into the cliffs with beautiful homes, a few shops and cafés, and absolutely stunning scenery. This is also the location of the Esalen Institute (see Kathleen Gallen's article on page 38) and The Post Ranch Inn, which I mentioned in my article last month.

As for the Monterey area, although this is a must-visit for any golfer, those of us who don't golf can enjoy the stunning views as well. The 17-mile drive through the Del Monte Forest is breathtaking; on our way to the Poppy Hills Golf Course at 6am, the fog engulfed the views, creating a mystical, chilly forest. However, by late morning, the sun usually shines upon the beautiful landscapes. A stop at Pebble Beach's 18th hole offers a backdrop that appears too good to be true.

The town of Monterey is famous for its waterside Cannery Row, thanks largely to the great American writer John Steinbeck for his



novel of that name. The small street along the picturesque rocky, seagull-lined shore was once inhabited by sardine canning factories. Now it is mostly a tourist attraction, with several chain stores and the impressive Monterey Bay Aquarium at the northern end. If you walk just off the beaten path on Foam Street, there are many pretty houses, shops, and galleries. The Monterey area is a great spot for a weekend getaway amidst a California vacation.

We've only spanned less than half of the California coast, but the stretch from Venice Beach to Monterey possesses endless possibilities for the conscious traveler looking for an ultimate getaway with affordable airfares, simple yet delicious and healthy dining options, and magnificent natural scenery.

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Opposite page: Boutique on Abbott Kinney Blvd. in Venice. This page, clockwise top-left to bottom-right: Santa Monica Farmer's Market, Venice Beach basketball courts, Santa Monica Farmer's Market, Bixby Bridge in Big Sur. All photos by Ellie Campbell.