

The Ultimate California Coast Road Trip



As the plane approached Monterey Regional Airport, passengers rolled up the window shades. It wasn't a command from the flight crew; we just didn't want to miss our descent over Northern California's famously beautiful coastline. For the next four days, my boyfriend and I would find plenty of excuses to do the same, planning our route around the best roll-the-window-down views as we drove from Monterey to Santa Monica, along California's iconic, coast-hugging Highway 1.



After landing, we headed to The Sanctuary Beach Resort (*from \$475/night; www.thesanctuarybeachresort.com*) in Marina, a collection of two-suite buildings with patios overlooking sand dunes speckled with red, yellow, and green vegetation, where we slid down a dune to the ocean, letting the sea-glass-colored waves wash over our toes as sandpipers darted across the sand, skirting the water.

Outlet: Westchester Magazine online

Date: April 24, 2019

Unique Visitors: 187,029

Total PR Value: \$5,204



That evening, storms rolled in, forcing our dinner inside at Beach House, overlooking Monterey's Lovers Point Beach. The next morning the waves still churned, slapping against the rocks outside Monterey Bay Aquarium. A leading voice in ocean-conservation policy in the US, the aquarium draws 1.8 million visitors annually, to see more than 500 species of marine life. Inside, sea otters dove and played; African penguins waddled across rocks; an octopus pressed its long tentacles to the glass; and the multistory kelp forest swayed with the ebb and flow of the tide.



At The Open Sea, the aquarium's largest exhibit, silvery sardines swam circles overhead like an aquatic infinity sign, while sapphire-blue tanks housed luminescent moon jellies and masses of orange sea nettles. At the final 1.2-million-gallon tank, we lingered for a while, watching sea turtles, hammerhead sharks, stingrays, swooping schools of fish, speed-demon tuna, and an alien-looking sunfish.



After a quick stop for lunch in Carmel-by-the-Sea, a storybook town of shops and art-gallery windows filled with images of the coast and nearby Pebble Beach, we began our drive down the most famous stretch of Highway 1 to Big Sur. Foamy waves crashed and broke over rocky cliffs in dramatic fashion; pockets of sandy beach peeked out from alcoves in the rock; and cows grazed on green pastures overlooking the water, unfazed by camera-toting tourists populating the many scenic lookouts.



Past Bixby Creek Bridge, the water disappeared in favor of dense forest. We stopped for the night at Ventana Big Sur (*from \$675/night; www.ventanabigsur.com*), an ultra-luxurious, adults-only resort in an old-growth-forest canyon, complete with a clothing-optional mountain-view pool, fine dining, secluded hammocks, and rustic-chic glamping tents. In our Big Sur Forest Shower suite, I took a steamy outdoor shower in the mist, surrounded by towering redwoods and wispy pines, before settling down in front of the wood-burning fire.



While other early-rising guests were doing yoga, we were packing the car for a drive to Santa Barbara, stopping first in San Simeon. A herd of wild zebra along Highway 1 signaled that we were close to Hearst Castle, the former West Coast estate of media magnate William Randolph Hearst. From the visitors' center, buses transport groups up the winding road to Casa Grande, where waiting docents bring the house to life in lavish detail with stories about glamorous parties, Old Hollywood movie stars, and Hearst's eccentric taste in European antiques and art. San Simeon's other stars are just a few miles down the road. Elephant seals sun on the beach in huge numbers, barking, grunting, fighting, and sleeping in a mesmerizing display.



We arrived in Santa Barbara just before dinnertime. State Street, a wide boulevard of white Spanish Colonial-style buildings, runs from the palm-lined beach up toward the pastel-pink mission with its tranquil cloister gardens. Spanning three corners one block from the beach is the impossibly stylish Hotel Californian (*from \$599/night; www.thehotelcalifornian.com*). Opened in 2017, common spaces sport tons of tiles, geometric patterns, and Moroccan-inspired light fixtures and mirrors, while rooms have leather headboards, more patterned tile, and Juliette balconies.



The next day, we whizzed through some of the city's greatest hits. After a walk through the lush courthouse gardens, a visit to the mission, and a couple scoops at McConnell's Fine Ice Creams, we perused street art in the Funk Zone, where former warehouses have been converted into galleries, boutiques, bakeries, and tasting rooms for the region's famous wineries. Locally produced wines carried over to dinner at Barbareño, where the city's history is the jumping-off point for every dish from the lamb al pastor Especial flatbread (inspired by Julia Child's favorite taco spot in town) to the tender, wagyu tri-tip.



It was still dark when we left for Santa Monica. As we approached Malibu, the sun finally crested over the hills, where banners thanked firefighters for responding to last year's wildfires. At the Fairmont Miramar (*from \$459/night; www.fairmont.com/santa-monica*), we met Chef Jason Prendergast for a tour of the Wednesday Santa Monica Farmers' Market. He doled out breakfast sandwiches and hot coffee to his favorite purveyors as we ate an unconventional breakfast of page mandarins, oro blanco grapefruits, goat cheeses, microgreens, and pale-yellow carrots. Back at FIG at the Fairmont, we ate those carrots roasted with local honey and dukkah, and shaved goat cheese over a kale-apple salad.



Full and tired, we spent the rest of the day watching people play volleyball on Santa Monica's beaches, where the sport was invented. That night, we had a coveted reservation at Felix, Chef Evan Funke's temple to pasta, in nearby Venice, where every pappardelle and strangolapreti is hand-rolled in a glass-encased, temperature-controlled pasta lab in the middle of the dining room. The piquant cacio e pepe took me back to Italy, but walking the Santa Monica pier after dinner reminded me I was thousands of miles away.