

# Best of the Coast

Bixby Bridge on Pacific  
Coast Highway 1  
(Getty Images)



## Discover the secrets of California's beautiful—and sometimes rugged—Central Coast.



Map by Peter Sucheski

**P**alm tree lined streets. Glittering beaches. Surfboards leaning against fences. It's the classic vision of coastal California you'd expect from a road trip titled, "Best of the Coast." But as you drive from Los Angeles along the western shores of the United States, you'll discover there's so much more to California than just Hollywood glam and beach culture.

Leave behind the star-studded streets of L.A. and head toward the coast, pointing your wheels to the towns of Ventura and Oxnard where you can board a ferry to one of our country's most interesting national parks: Channel Islands.

Surprising twists await as you continue north in all the charming towns along the route to Yosemite, like 18th century history in Lompoc. Curious animals you wouldn't associate with California including emus, zebras and elephant seals live in Buellton and San Simeon. Visit a town obsessed with clams in Pismo Beach and find enough garlic to think the locale has a vampire problem in Gilroy. Before heading to Yosemite, hike around an extinct volcano at Morro Rock and explore one of our newest national parks, Pinnacles.

Along the way, you'll experience all the picture-perfect beaches, surf culture and vineyards your heart desires, with plenty of palm trees thrown in for good measure.

Turn the page to find the best hidden gems of California's Central Coast that prove there's more to this part of the country than you could have ever imagined.



## Joshua Tree

Like characters out of a Dr. Seuss book, the weird and wonderful Joshua trees that give this national park its name speckle the Mojave Desert landscape outside of Palm Springs. These trees are members of the agave family and grow extremely slowly—between 0.5 and 3 inches per year. A period of cold weather is required before the trees can flower and then, only one small insect called the Yucca moth can pollinate them. Because of this, climate change poses a big threat to the trees' survival. You can see Joshua trees in most parts of the park, but the 6.6-mile Panorama Loop Trail is a great place to hike among them.

Joshua trees aren't the only bizarre plant living in the park. Head to Cholla Cactus Garden to see thousands of cholla cacti. These strange looking plants have spines that curl when moisture touches them, making it extremely hard to remove them from your skin. If you have a Camelbak or water bottle that can squirt, get the spines wet from a distance and watch them curl. Remember: Stay on the path and wear closed-toe shoes.

Joshua Tree is a renowned destination for rock climbers, thanks to the many boulders that dot the park. Keep your eyes peeled in areas like Hidden Valley for folks scaling the big rocks.

*Joshua Tree (Bruce Herwig)*

# National Park Photo Contest

2025  
*Winners*



**Jordan Lefler**  
Arlee, Montana

Night Skies Winner  
Glacier National Park



**Tom Fenske**  
Corvallis, Oregon

Wildlife Winner  
Katmai National Park



**Riad Rezaul**  
Bozeman, Montana

Landscape Winner  
Grand Teton National Park

Our national parks are some of the most stunning places on Earth with photo opportunities at every turn. In 2025, our 15th annual photo contest received more than 3,600 exceptional images of landscapes, night skies and wildlife. Judges awarded three winners their choice of a Tamron camera lens, including a 150-500mm, 28-300mm or 50-400mm lens.

To enter the 2026 contest and to see the 2025 winning shots and honorable mentions, visit [nationalparktrips.com/contests/](https://nationalparktrips.com/contests/). To see all Tamron lenses, go to [www.tamron-americas.com](https://www.tamron-americas.com).



**National Park Trips**

# TAMRON



VENTURA COUNTY



Kayaking in Channel Islands National Park (Courtesy of Ventura County Coast)

# Island Basecamp

Explore Port Hueneme, Camarillo, Oxnard and Ventura near the two marinas that offer passage to Channel Islands National Park. You'll find amazing food, wide open beaches and great hiking.

By Mikaela Ruland

## Stay in the Gateway to Channel Islands

The impressive chain of islands 14 miles off the coast of California is one of the country's most remote national parks. The official way to access Channel Islands National Park is via an Island Packers Ferry from the Channel Islands Harbor in Oxnard or Ventura Harbor Village in Ventura. Learn more on pages 22-23.

You'll need at least a day, if not more, to explore the park, so basecamping out of one of the area's hotels walking distance or just a short drive from either marina is convenient. There's a range of options in Oxnard, Ventura, Camarillo and Port Hueneme from chain hotels to luxurious beachfront resorts.

## Taste Amazing Coastal Eats

After you've spent the day on the islands, you're not going to want to go far for dinner. Luckily, there are plenty of great dining options nearby. For authentic Mexican food, check out Oxnard's Taco Trail made up of 15 spots across town to sample quesatacos, barbacoa plates and more. Download the app to receive discounts and complete check-ins to win free swag. At Ventura Harbor Village, grab a table at Andria's Seafood Restaurant & Market for famous fish and chips, or order fresh oysters by the dozen from Brophy Bros. Restaurant and Clam Bar. Afterwards, order the fish shaped ice cream cones from Coastal Cone.

## Find Uncrowded Beaches

Discover a refreshing lack of crowds and space to spread out on gorgeous beaches in Port Hueneme, Oxnard and Ventura. Port Hueneme Beach Park offers tons of sand, a long pier to stroll on, picnic tables and volleyball nets. Farther north in Oxnard, visit Silver Strand Beach where a mile-long stretch of sand and solitude awaits. Bonus points: This spot is dog friendly before 9 a.m. and after 5 p.m. If you're traveling with kids, Mother's Beach outside of Ventura is the spot to set up for the afternoon. It's a bit more lively, but the jetty creates a protected cove with no surf break, making it ideal for little ones to float.

## Go on Stunning Hikes

While you may be in this part of California to hike at Channel Islands, the trails on the mainland near Camarillo shouldn't be overlooked. For a challenging hike that will get your blood pumping, try the 4.5-mile Mugu Peak and La Jolla Valley Loop Trail. You'll start from the beach and gain 900 feet of elevation in less than a mile as you climb up to breathtaking views of the surrounding coastline and the La Jolla Valley.

For a more moderate, family friendly hike with similar views, head to the Hill Canyon Trailhead to hike to Hawk Canyon, a 3.6-mile, one-way trail with welcoming shady patches. While you're in town, don't miss the Camarillo Premium Outlets where you can find discounts on activewear for your adventures at retailers like Nike, lululemon and The North Face.

Learn more at [VenturaCountyCoast.com](http://VenturaCountyCoast.com).



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# COASTAL VIBES

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Welcome to **Ventura County Coast**, where wide-open beaches and perfect year-round weather set the stage for California's Ultimate Playground. Located along the iconic Highway 1 and classic 101 road trip routes, this coastal gem is a must-stop highlight of your journey. Just off our shores, Channel Islands National Park offers bucket-list adventures in hiking, kayaking, and wildlife encounters. With affordable accommodations, luxury shops, local boutiques, and diverse dining — slow down, explore, and stay awhile.



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**1** National Park  
Channel Islands National Park



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# The American Galapagos

Take a day to explore the remote and wild chain of islands off the coast at Channel Islands National Park.

By Tori Peglar

Get an exotic experience without ever leaving California. Home to five islands, Channel Islands National Park offers solitude and beauty. The closest island may be just an hour ferry ride away, but it feels much more remote. In fact, this park is so isolated it's the only place in the world where eight unique mammal species are found, including the island fox and deer mouse. While no one lives here today, the Chumash people inhabited the area for thousands of years, crafting tomols (plank canoes) to navigate between islands.

Today, it takes one to four hours via an Island Packers ferry from Oxnard or Ventura Harbor Village to reach the park. The closest islands, Anacapa and Santa Cruz, are one-hour ferry rides. Along the way, your captain may point out blue and humpback whales during the summer season.

Stretching five miles, Anacapa Island is 14 nautical miles from Ventura. It's a popular spot for harbor seals and California sea lions to rest and breed. The island's iconic lighthouse, first lit in 1932, was the last permanent lighthouse built on the West Coast.

Santa Cruz Island is a one-hour ferry ride from Ventura Harbor Village to Scorpion Anchorage. It's home to a visitor center, picnic tables and the best weather. You can join guided snorkel and kayaking tours with the park-authorized Channel Islands Adventure Co. here.

Santa Cruz spans more than 96 square miles, making it California's largest island. It's home to Painted Cave, one of the world's largest and deepest sea caves. About 1,200 Chumash residents inhabited 10 villages before contact with Europeans led to outbreaks of disease and forced removal from their homes. It was later settled by European descendants who built ranches and brought cattle there.

Santa Rosa is the second largest island in California at approximately 53,000 acres. It's 40 nautical miles from Ventura. Some of its inhabitants date back to the Pleistocene era like the Santa Rosa Island subspecies of the Torrey pine, one of the rarest of its kind. Human remains dating back more than 13,000 years were discovered on Santa Rosa Island in 1959, making them some of North America's oldest ever found.

The smallest island is Santa Barbara, which is only one square mile. Snorkel in Landing Cove or look for California sea lions, harbor seals and northern elephant seals.

The farthest island from the mainland is San Miguel, a former U.S. Navy bombing range where more than 30,000 seals and sea lions give birth and lounge on the 27 miles of coastline. Visitors must be accompanied by park staff beyond the ranger station. It's a four-hour ferry ride one way to get to San Miguel.



## Getting There:

The best way to access Channel Islands National Park is by boat. Island Packers is the park's official transportation concessionaire and offers year round trips to Santa Cruz and Anacapa islands and trips to the outer islands March through November. Reserve your transportation at [IslandPackers.com](http://IslandPackers.com) well in advance, especially during the busy summer season. You can arrange sightseeing trips that don't go ashore, or transportation for day or multi-day trips. Book your Island Packers ride before making camping reservations as ferry access is more limited. Once on the islands, there is no transportation. You'll need to walk or kayak to whatever you want to see. Boats depart from the Channel Islands Harbor in Oxnard or Ventura Harbor Village.

Channel Islands National Park  
(Courtesy of Ventura County Coast)



LOMPOC

# Lompoc's Top 5

Pronounced "Lom-poke," this scenic valley town offers a ton to see and do year round.

By Tori Peglar and Mikaela Ruland

## 1 Take a Leap or a Swing

Get a sky-high view of the coastline, Lompoc Valley and vineyard-dotted hillsides with Skydive Santa Barbara. Go on an exhilarating tandem 18,000, 13,000 or 8,000-foot jump. Or, take in the vistas during a game at La Purisima, a championship golf course designed by world renowned architect Robert Muir Graves.

## 2 Stroll the Beach

Just 30 minutes from Lompoc, remote Jalama Beach is a popular surfing and kite-surfing destination. It's a great spot to stroll the sand and collect beach rocks, but water can be rough for swimming. Grab a picnic table and enjoy a famous Jalama Burger from the Beach Grill when you get hungry.

## 3 View a Rocket Launch

Lompoc offers the best vantage point for experiencing the excitement of rocket launches from Vandenberg Space Force Base. Visit [ExploreLompoc.com](http://ExploreLompoc.com) to find out when the next missile or satellite is being launched so you can watch.

## 4 Explore a Mission

Founded in 1787, La Purisima Mission is the most extensively restored of California's 21 Spanish missions. History comes alive as guests explore the beautiful buildings, visitor center exhibit hall and 25 miles of trails in this 2,000-acre state historic park.

## 5 Sip Award Winning Wines

Explore nearly 20 boutique wineries, tasting rooms and production facilities at the Lompoc Wine Ghetto off Pacific Coast Highway 1. Or head down Route 246 and sample the region's renowned Pinot Noir and Chardonnay along the Lompoc Wine Trail. There in the Sta. Rita Hills, you'll find award winning wines, elegant tasting rooms and gorgeous vineyard vistas perfect for picnicking.

Learn more at [ExploreLompoc.com](http://ExploreLompoc.com).



La Purisima Mission State Historic Park  
(Cherise Masukawa / Courtesy of Explore Lompoc)

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BUELLTON

# Do I Need a Car?

It's cheap and easy to get to Yosemite by public transportation.

By Mikaela Ruland

There's no lack of amazing routes to create a memorable road trip to Yosemite, but what if you don't want to get behind the wheel? Unlike many public lands throughout the West, this national park boasts a relatively robust network of trains, buses and shuttles leading to it, allowing you to sit back, relax and skip the hassle of parking. Whether you choose to fly into San Francisco and access the park via a mix of train and bus, or park in a nearby gateway town or at a

local hotel and take the YARTS bus into the park, once you're in Yosemite Valley, it's easy to reach trailheads, viewpoints, lodges, restaurants and more on the free park shuttle system. Taking public transportation to Yosemite is less direct than driving, resulting in longer journeys, but it's often cheaper and more climate friendly to get on a bus or a train.

While no train line goes all the way to the park, it's simple to take the Amtrak San Joaquins line most of the way between San Francisco International Airport and Yosemite, completing the very beginning and very end of your trip on a bus, which is all included in your ticket cost. From downtown San Francisco (accessible from the airport by BART train), board the Amtrak Thruway bus to the Emeryville Train Station. Then, hop on board for a peaceful journey through fertile farmland. The train line ends at Merced, where you'll take the YARTS bus the

remainder of the way to Yosemite Valley. From there, use the free park shuttle system to explore.

Yosemite Area Regional Transportation Service, otherwise known as YARTS, offers easy access to the park via bus. Four lines begin in major hubs surrounding the park—Sonora, Merced, Fresno and Mammoth Lakes—stopping in other communities along the way like Groveland, Mariposa and Oakhurst. There's even YARTS stops at major hotels near the park like Rush Creek Lodge. By riding the bus, you'll avoid park congestion and skip the need for a peak hours reservation. Just make sure you plan ahead and buy your YARTS ticket in advance to secure your seat. For a convenient option from anywhere in the U.S., fly into Fresno and hop on the YARTS bus right from the airport. The international airport is served by many major airlines, with flights from big hubs across the country.

# DISCOVER Buellton

Explore the unexpected



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# Scenic Side Quest

By Amelia Arvesen

Along California's Central Coast, Highway 101 occasionally drifts away from the shoreline. One such inland bend carries you into the rolling vineyards and hillsides of the Santa Ynez Valley, where the highway passes through the small and charming city of Buellton.

Framed by the Santa Ynez and San Rafael mountains, plus acres and acres of farmland, the area naturally lends itself to outdoor pursuits. Highland Adventures is home to the biggest and fastest ziplines in the state, plus a new all-ages trampoline sky net, while Santa Ynez Valley Horseback Rides offers family friendly day trips into the hills or across the Santa Ynez River. For other unique animal encounters, feed the strutting emus and ostriches at OstrichLand USA, book a private farm tour to see llamas, alpacas and more at the family owned and operated Zaca Creek Ranch, or visit the petting zoo at the historic Vega Vineyard & Farm.

Up for oddities and whimsy? Stop by the Mendenhall Museum, one family's private petroliana collection, which includes vintage gasoline pumps, road signs and more automobile memorabilia. And if you're a fan of the 2004 hit film *Sideways*, pick up a map at the Buellton Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Bureau to retrace the steps of the leading characters.

Learn more at [DiscoverBuellton.com](http://DiscoverBuellton.com)

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PISMO BEACH



# Serving Up Memories

Monarchs, humpbacks and humans alike migrate to this laid-back beach town where the waves are crankin' and the clam chowder is always fresh.

By Mikaela Ruland

There's an old, black and white photo of the pier at Pismo Beach from the 1940s. Kids hang out next to the railing, a gaggle of women stroll arm in arm and a fisherman casts his line into the water. Fast forward 80 years and if you swapped the clothes and added some modern buildings to the beachfront, you'd get the exact same shot. A trip to Pismo Beach is a timeless tradition loved by generations of human and animal travelers alike. From the feel of the waves lapping at your feet to the taste of clams so famous, even Bugs Bunny talks about them, this is the spot where memories are made.



## ■ Sample All the Clams You Can Eat

Come October, thousands of people descend on Pismo Beach to celebrate the humble clam. You'll find live music, a kids' zone and a clam chowder cookoff. If you're not lucky enough to experience the festival, you can still get a taste of this town's history at Splash Cafe. Order clam chowder, fried clams or fish and chips at this family friendly institution. If you're looking for ocean views, take a seat on the patio at Wooly's just off the pier and enjoy an order of steamed clams with a side of Pacific sunset colors.

## ■ Stroll the Historic Pier

The historic pier is still the heartbeat of this easygoing beach town. Stroll to the end to look for migrating humpback whales in the fall and spring, or spend the afternoon relaxing on the beautiful beaches. Bonus points: You can bring your leashed furry friend to enjoy the water with you. Pismo Beach is so dog friendly, they host a massive corgi party every September called Corgi Nation Vacation. While the draw is the short-legged pups, canines of every variety are welcome to join in a wine tasting night, luau, beach party and more. Another fun fall event is the November Sand Art Festival where artists from around the world gather at Pismo Beach to create ephemeral designs in the sand.

## ■ Hit the Waves

Surfing is just as much a part of Pismo's culture as clams. Beginners will find mellow waves and a friendly, sandy bottom and shore break to practice in summer and early fall. As the weather turns colder, the waves get bigger, bringing surfing competitions. Stroll downtown and you'll encounter no shortage of surf shops, each with their own vibe and fun merch. Many places in town rent boards and you can sign up for a lesson at Pismo Beach Surf Shop.

## ■ See the Monarch Migration

Pismo Beach is beloved by non-human visitors, too. Each winter, monarch butterflies descend on this stretch of coast. It's one of the largest monarch butterfly colonies in North America. Between late October and February, stop by the Pismo Beach Monarch Butterfly Grove, a half-mile south of town just off Highway 1.

Do what the locals do and visit Pismo Beach mid-week. You'll find practically empty beaches and better deals on lodging.

PHOTOS: Pismo Beach Pier, historic photo from 1940s.(Courtesy of Experience Pismo Beach)

Learn more at [ExperiencePismoBeach.com](http://ExperiencePismoBeach.com).



# Otters, Oysters & Ocean Views

Escape to this quaint coastal community for a slower pace of life.

By Amelia Arvesen

**T**ucked along California's Central Coast, Morro Bay is the kind of seaside town where time seems to slow down. The calls of seals echo across the harbor, fishing boats unload their daily catch and strangers wave you through at stop signs with no urgency to hurry. It's a place that draws families, couples and anyone craving fresh air and wide open views.

The bay itself is the heart of the action. Sheltered from heavy surf, it's an ideal spot to try kayaking or stand-up paddleboarding—especially if you're new to the sport. Rent an electric boat to cruise the harbor at a leisurely pace and watch sea otters floating on their backs or seals bobbing alongside the docks. Outfitters like Central Coast Outdoors even run kayak oyster tours, where you paddle out to Grassy Bar Oyster Co.'s farm to learn about the estuary.

For those who prefer dry land, Morro Bay sits within striking distance of excellent hiking and biking trails. Just south, Montaña de Oro State Park offers everything from the challenging 12-mile Hazard Peak Trail to the more family friendly Rattlesnake Flat Trail (yes, there are rattlesnakes—keep your eye out), which winds gently through coastal scrub.

Within town, the Black Hill Trail makes for a quick, 20 to 30-minute climb that rewards with sweeping views of the bay and the iconic Morro Rock—a volcanic plug that rises dramatically from the shoreline, like Half Dome at sea level. Rent electric bikes to ride the Harbor Walk out to the rock, or simply wander the waterfront at your own pace.

As a working fishing port, boats return daily with rock cod, lingcod and more. Locals line up at Giovanni's Fish Market for casual seafood on the waterfront, while Tognazzini's Dockside, run by longtime commercial fisherman Mark Tognazzini, serves everything from fish and chips and clam chowder to fresh filets cooked to order. On many evenings, live music drifts across the outdoor patio, adding to the festive, salty air.

In January, birders from across the country flock to the Morro Bay Bird Festival, one of the largest in California thanks to the area's rich estuary habitat and prime migration routes. Spring brings the annual Kite Festival, when hundreds of colorful kites fill the beach sky in a free, family friendly celebration.

*Learn more at [MorroBay.org](http://MorroBay.org).*

PHOTOS: Otters, Oysters, Kayaking (Courtesy of Morro Bay Tourism Bureau)





PASO ROBLES



## Savor the Weekend

Sip approachable wine, wander through a sea of lights and take the prettiest scenic drive in Paso Robles.

By Mikaela Ruland

**P**aso Robles may be nestled in the heart of California wine country, but it's also just 25 minutes from the beach with a proud cowboy heritage. It makes for a laid-back spot to spend a weekend soaking in casual luxury from experiencing a welcoming arts scene to taking delightful scenic drives and, of course, sipping some excellent vintages.

Whether you take a drive through the countryside to check out the vineyards themselves, or stop by one of the city's many tasting rooms, you'll find unique experiences from horseback rides through rows of grapes at CASS Winery to e-bike rides with Vine Cycle Tours. If you're a wine newbie, Tin City is the place to start your visit. This warehouse district turned collective marketplace is home to more than 40 businesses featuring some of Paso's most passionate artisans. The catch? Their masterpieces are meant to be consumed. Start at Hubba Winery, a cozy spot that feels approachable even for casual wine drinkers. Wine isn't the only beverage to sample in Tin City. Stop by Tin City Cidery, BarrelHouse Brewery or Tin City Distillery. Be sure to check out Etto Pasta, with a market specializing in Italian and local goods, plus unique pasta shapes. You can take a behind-the-scenes tour to see how the noodles are made, then pop into the sit-down pasta



bar next door for dishes like cacio e pepe, pesto genovese and lasagna.

Move from edible arts to visual arts at the non-profit Studios on the Park, an old auto garage turned collective which houses studios featuring 15 different working artists. You can peruse galleries, see creatives at work and buy your new favorite piece. To see Paso Robles' most immersive art experience, you'll need to wait until the sun goes down. Sensorio showcases more than 100,000 solar powered spheres, creating a massive, stunning field of colored light to walk through. In recent years, artist Bruce Munro has added light towers made of more than 17,000 wine bottles which shift colors in time to music, plus a floating installation of "fireflies" and an exhibit evoking the contemplative quality of fishing. It's open Thursday through Sunday, and it's worth planning to spend the whole evening.

Paso Robles is home to incredible dining from Michelin-starred restaurants to the new Grace & Rose, located in a unique 1915 farmhouse. The menu matches the aesthetic, with farm-to-table fare like a pasta dish that combines locally made Etto trombe with also-local Mighty Cap Mushrooms in a creme sauce with calabrian chile and breadcrumbs. For an equally memorable, but more casual,

night out, head to Libretto. The intimate jazz lounge was opened by the owners of AMSTRDM Coffee (another must visit) and is housed in Paso Robles' old opera house. The spot features an extremely rare 2012 Steinway & Sons Model D piano and hosts Grammy-winning musicians multiple nights a week. Buy your tickets in advance.

After a night out, tuck into one of the city's personality filled stays. The new Ava Hotel (a Hilton Curio Collection) offers a fresh, upscale option in the downtown area, plus three restaurants. If you're looking for a very unique stay, book a vintage travel trailer at Vinyl Vineyards for a brilliant glamping experience. Tucked into the organic grapevines, each lodging option is themed after an American musician.

On your way back to the coast, take Highway 46, a spectacular scenic drive that showcases the best of this part of SLO CAL. You'll pass through vineyards, green rows of grapes marching up the hillsides in straight rows, ranches with cattle grazing and a breathtaking overlook where you can see miles of coastline including the unmissable shape of Morro Rock.

*Learn more at [TravelPaso.com](http://TravelPaso.com).*

*PHOTOS: Etto Pasta, Sensorio (Courtesy of Travel Paso)*



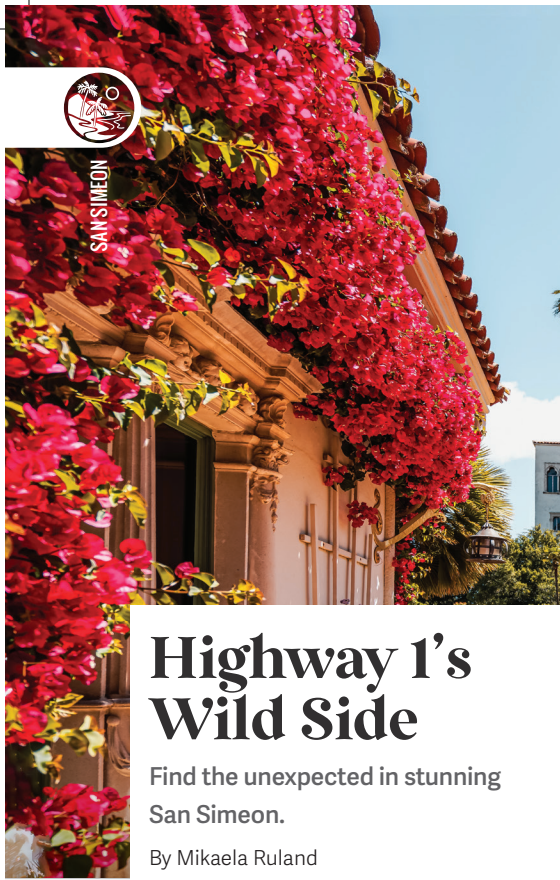
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## Highway 1's Wild Side

Find the unexpected in stunning San Simeon.

By Mikaela Ruland



Hearst Castle in San Simeon (Christopher Petro for Visit SLOCAL)

If a stroll along a beach to watch elephant seals in the morning and a drive through a zebra herd to tour a castle in the afternoon sounds like a fantasy, think again. In San Simeon, this is just another day on a perfect weekend getaway.

Located on the southern edge of the Big Sur Scenic Drive, just an hour from the famous Bixby Creek Bridge, San Simeon is a serene and family friendly small town nestled along the Pacific Ocean. Here, you'll find an excellent value coastal vacation. It's also the home of Hearst Castle, built by the media tycoon William Randolph Hearst from 1919 to 1947, to fulfill a lifelong dream to build an estate that echoed those he had seen during his travels in Europe. He left in 1947 because of poor health, with the blueprints of architect Julia Morgan not yet completed.

The castle itself is worthy of an all-day excursion. This incredible 165-room home and its accompanying grounds are covered by 12 different tours, and advance reservations are recommended. After you park, you'll ride a shuttle up to the castle where the tour starts. A visitor favorite? The lavish pools and extensive gardens, which can be seen during your tour. If you're visiting in autumn, check out the Art Under the Moonlight Tour, a nighttime offering on select Fridays and Saturdays that showcases Hearst's incredible art collection in a unique way. Check the schedule for other seasonal tour offerings.

For an action-packed stroll, head to the Boucher Trail at Piedras Blancas. This flat trail will bring you past the most accessible elephant seal colony in the world where docents from Friends of the Elephant Seal will help you learn more about these massive creatures. It's a great no-cost activity to add to your trip. The seals are visible on the beach year round, but January, April and October are the peak times to see them.

Keep walking down the 4-mile roundtrip trail to see the Piedras Blancas Light Station. Year round tours of the beautiful lighthouse are available to access the grounds, but reservations are required.

Or, for a more challenging hike, head north to Ragged Point where the 0.8-mile Black Swift Falls Trail will bring you to a black sand beach featuring a dazzling waterfall. The trail may be short, but it's made mostly of steps that descend a slippery, 300-foot cliff so hike with caution. You can extend your hike with other connecting trails in the area.

For lunch stop at the Ragged Point Inn where you can grab a sandwich, burger or milkshake and take in seasonal live music on summer days. From here, it's just a 20-minute drive to Bixby Creek Bridge, the iconic viewpoint along Big Sur where you can see the 80-foot-high McWay Falls. After a morning spent hiking, head to the

newly renovated Hearst Ranch Winery in Old San Simeon Village where you can sip local wines while enjoying views of the bay and Hearst Castle in the distance. As you drive Highway 1 to the winery, keep your eyes peeled for herds of wild zebras and elk mingling, these creatures left over from Hearst's zoo that was once the largest private zoo in the world. Like many places in San Simeon, dogs are welcome at Hearst Ranch Winery. Don't forget to take your pup to the off-leash San Simeon Cove Beach for a sunset stroll afterwards. Pick up fresh salads, charcuterie boards and sandwiches from Seaside Deli inside neighboring Sebastian's General Store for a picnic, a historic gem that also sells souvenirs. On weekends you'll find The Cruiser Food Truck on site at Sebastian's offering an elevated grill menu including burgers, lobster rolls and fries. There's a nice outdoor dining space to savor your lunch.

Don't miss Cavalier Coastal Kitchen for a relaxing meal. It serves fresh seafood, like mouthwatering salmon, with views of the water, and you can end the meal at the fire pits, toasting marshmallows for s'mores.

When it's time for bed, check into one of San Simeon's many oceanfront properties, with options for all price points, and fall asleep to the sound of the tides.

Learn more at [VisitSanSimeonCA.com](http://VisitSanSimeonCA.com).



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## Arrive at the Rock

This rock has guided generations of fish captains home, holds brimming with the freshest California catch. It peels off perfect Central Coast waves, delighting surfers and young whitewash adventurers alike. It's a salt-rimmed beacon, the guardian of fresh oyster beds, home to seals and sea birds.

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Elephant Seal Vista Point

# Local Flavor

Visit the Garlic Capital of the World on the way to Pinnacles National Park.

By Tori Peglar and Kristen Arendt

Not far from the giants of Silicon Valley, you'll find the quaint town of Gilroy. With its central location and budget friendly hotels, this welcoming spot has small town roots that give it an easygoing vibe and make it the perfect place to spend a long weekend.

While you're in the area, you can drive to many boutique wineries, take a hike on the local trails, explore a children's theme park and dine in what's known as the "Garlic Capital of the World." Located close to San Jose, the Bay Area and the Central Coast, Gilroy is 150 miles east of Yosemite and just 45 miles north of Pinnacles National Park, making it a great hub for all sorts of outdoor adventures, whether you want to escape to the mountains, explore the coast or do a little bit of both.

You don't have to go far for fresh air. Within a short drive of downtown, you'll find 30 county parks and three state parks where you can hike, bike and run to your heart's content. Mount Madonna is one popular option with trails that take you on a tour beneath California's magnificent redwoods.

Once you've worked up an appetite, get a taste of Gilroy's famous garlic scene by following its Road to Garlic map. It covers where to eat, drink and shop all things garlic. Opt for garlic soup and garlic ice cream at the casual Garlic City Cafe. At Old City Hall, you'll find fine dining, delicious garlic dishes and restrooms complete with jail bars from the days when the building housed the city jail.

Gilroy is also known for its delicious Mexican food. Your culinary adventures can continue along the Gilroy Taco Trail—choose from nearly 30 authentic Mexican restaurants, many of which are family owned and operated. Sample the sizzling fajitas and mouthwatering chile verde at Cielito Lindo, sip on a cold horchata and take in the Casita-style decor at Carnitas



Hiking in Harvey Bear Ranch County Park  
(Courtesy of Visit Gilroy)

Michoacan or fill up on homemade salsa at Los Pericos Taqueria.

Lovers of California grapes won't want to miss the Santa Clara Valley Wine Trail. This tour takes you through the area's gorgeous landscape while giving you the chance to sample the vintages of more than 35 local wineries. And while the offerings are sure to be just as tasty as the much-touted varietals of Napa Valley, you'll find that the atmosphere is far more casual here—there's a good chance the person pouring your wine might be the owner of the vineyard.

If you're looking for kid friendly fun, Gilroy Gardens Family Theme Park shouldn't be missed. You can choose from more than 40 rides and attractions—including the super splashy Water Oasis play area which everyone will love on a hot summer day. The theme park is also known for its beautifully manicured gardens including the park's iconic "Circus Trees" which were originally grafted and shaped in the 1920s and now serve as fabulous living sculptures that you can find throughout the park.

Gilroy is also home to a burgeoning craft beer culture. Settle Down Brewery and Taproom, located in the historic downtown area, is a family and dog friendly scene where you can pick a pint off the rotating draft list and the family can get stoked for free popcorn and foosball. Promise Land Brewing, also in downtown, serves up a variety of handcrafted beers on draft—you can't go wrong with their best-selling Bread and Circus Pale Ale or Diamond Blonde Ale, or you can order a flight to sample several of the brews.

Still need some gear for your national park adventures? Swing by the Gilroy Premium Outlets where you can shop and save 25-65% on outdoor recreation brands like Columbia, The North Face, Eddie Bauer and Timberland. The Gilroy Welcome Center is also located in the building and is a great place to pick up maps, guides and event information and shop for local Gilroy gifts and souvenirs.

Learn more at [VisitGilroy.com](http://VisitGilroy.com).

# PINNACLES BY DAY

# Gilroy by Night



**Spend the day trekking talus caves and spotting condors at the Pinnacles, then come back to Gilroy for the flavors, fun and friendliness that make your trip unforgettable.**

## LOTS TO EXPLORE IN GILROY

- A walkable downtown for your Pinnacles wind-down
- Wine tasting on the Santa Clara Valley Wine Trail
- Fun for all ages at Gilroy Gardens Family Amusement Park
- Authentic Mexican food along the Gilroy Taco Trail
- Shopping at Gilroy Premium Outlets
- Easy access to Monterey Bay and other nature hotspots



**Find affordable hotels and  
RV parks at [VisitGilroy.com](https://www.VisitGilroy.com)**





Taking in the sunset (Courtesy Visit San Benito County)

## Cowboys & Vineyards

Basecamp among grapevines and working ranches just 30 miles from Pinnacles National Park's east entrance.

By Mikaela Ruland

**A** landscape formed by ancient volcanoes, featuring towering rock spires, intriguing caves and beautiful woodlands, Pinnacles is California's newest—but also one of its least visited—national parks. You'll want to add this hidden gem to your bucket lists ASAP (pg. 38). For easy access to the more developed east side of the park, basecamp in the gateway communities of San Juan Bautista, Hollister, Tres Pinos and Paicines. You'll find a quiet and scenic getaway full of intriguing history, cowboy culture and relaxed vineyards.

As you make your way inland, stop in San Juan Bautista. Once the largest town in central California, the townsite is now a state historic park with several structures from the 1800s that have been turned into museums. Next to the park you can also

visit the Old San Juan Bautista Mission, which still holds weekly mass. Don't miss seeing the unique two-story outhouse. Women used the top floor while men had to "walk the plank," so to speak. Afterwards, stroll the modern-day town of San Juan Bautista which is full of cute antique shops. Stop for lunch at Jardines de San Juan, a Mexican restaurant started more than 40 years ago by the Santanas, a couple whose storied dinner parties hosted the likes of Ray Bradbury and Huey Newton. It's still owned by the family today. Ask for a table in the lovely garden.

The pastoral landscape of San Benito County is the heart of California's cowboy country, and the best way to experience it is by staying on one of several guest ranches. At Bar SZ, tuck into a log cabin or glamping tent and take advantage of the trail rides, mustang training sessions and marksmanship opportunities offered for guests. Paicines is a ranch focused on regenerative agriculture and a highlight of staying in one of their rooms or cottages is a meal featuring pasture-grazed meats. Even if you aren't spending the night, stop by their food truck at Highway 25 and Cienega Road on your way to Pinnacles to grab a lamb burger and home fries to go.

Gear up for your stay at Boot Barn in Hollister, or get a peek into local life at

McAbee Feed which also sells Western wear. If you're visiting in June, make plans to see the San Benito County Saddle Horse Show & Rodeo which is opened with a parade in downtown Hollister where longhorns are herded through the streets.

Experience a very different side of San Benito County's agricultural heritage when you cruise the Cienega Road Wine Trail near Hollister. "It's like driving through a Pinterest board," says Irene Davis with Visit San Benito County. It's just that gorgeous. Some vineyards here date back to 1849, making this one of California's most storied growing regions, as well as one of its most relaxed. You won't need a reservation to visit the tasting rooms along the trail. At Eden Rift, sip wines from California's oldest continuously producing vineyard at the Dickinson House, designed by a colleague of Frank Lloyd Wright. From Calera Winery, take in the stunning views of the surrounding mountains and feel like you're in another country. DeRose, tucked into an oak and chaparral forest, has a huge selection of wines, perfect for any taste. Enjoy a glass of wine in a picturesque setting after a morning spent on the trails at Pinnacles as the ultimate way to cap off the day.

Learn more at [VisitSanBenito.org](http://VisitSanBenito.org).

# Explore PINNACLES NATIONAL PARK

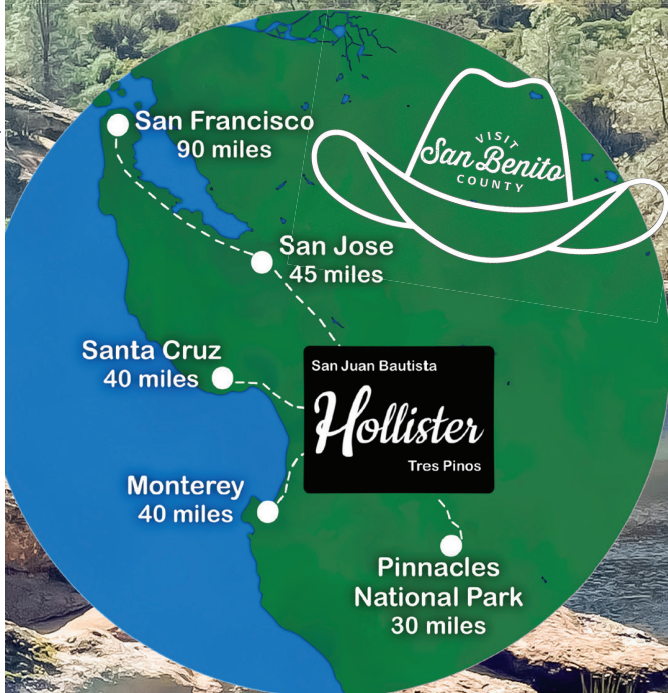
Trek to the High Peaks, a volcanic labyrinth of jagged pinnacles and spires, hike through caves and see majestic condors soaring above you

Come to San Benito County in California, home of Pinnacles National Park.

San Benito County offers unique places with wide open spaces to relax and play the cowboy (or your) way. We are the home of the Pinnacles National Park and we welcome you to explore:

- Wine tasting on the Cienega Valley Wine Trail
- Lodging from traditional hotels to eclectic ranch stays
- Golf on a championship 18-hole golf course
- Great restaurants, wine bars and craft beer in Hollister, Tres Pinos and San Juan Bautista
- Visit historic San Juan Bautista Mission and shop in the quaint antique and novelty shops

[SanJuanBautistaCA.com](http://SanJuanBautistaCA.com)



Plan your unique stay at a farm, ranch or hotel in one of our historic towns!

[VisitSanBenito.org](http://VisitSanBenito.org)





# Pinnacles Perfect 6

Here are some of our favorite things to do in this park, from hiking impressive trails to exploring a cave.

By Tori Peglar

## 1 Go Spelunking

On the 2.2-mile Moses Spring to Rim Trail Loop at the Bear Gulch Day Use Area, you'll pass rock formations, a reservoir and Bear Gulch Cave which is open seasonally. Don't forget a flashlight to explore inside.

## 2 Admire the High Peaks

Head to the High Peaks to Bear Gulch Loop that's a strenuous 6.7 miles roundtrip with 1,425 feet in elevation gain. You'll hike into the High Peaks and then descend the ridge, passing through meadows and stands of sycamore and oak trees.

## 3 Spot a Condor

The park's California condors live in rocky cliffs on the High Peaks and Balcony Cliffs trails, but you can often spot them from the Chaparral and Bear Gulch parking lots. Early mornings are the best time to see them roosting. Condors have a 10-foot wingspan, the largest in North America.

## 4 Attend a Ranger Program

The park's rangers offer fun, educational programs, so check in at the visitor center for a program schedule. Otherwise, spend the evening watching the sunset from the west side of Prewett Point Trail.

## 5 See Iconic Rock Formations

From the Pinnacles Visitor Center, hike to Balconies Cave, a 9.4-mile roundtrip moderate hike. Along the way you'll see Balconies Cave (bring a flashlight) and the largest rock formations in the park.

## 6 Camp in the Park

Spend the night at Pinnacles Campground which can only be reached from the East Entrance of the park since there are no connecting roads between the two park entrances. The campground offers tent and RV sites, along with an in-ground pool.

Pinnacles National Park  
(Getty Images)



## Whose Land Am I On?

Humans have lived in Yosemite Valley for up to 8,000 years and by the early 19th century included the Southern Sierra Miwuk, Mono Lake Paiute, Mission Indians, Chukchansi Yokuts and Western Mono people. When white gold miners flowed into the valley in 1849, they were ruthless in their pursuits and killed many of the Indigenous people living there. In 1851, the state-sponsored Mariposa Battalion raided and destroyed the Indigenous villages to make room for miners. As conflicts increased, the state sent these people to live on reservations.

In this vacuum, John Muir visited Yosemite and began his campaign to turn it into a national park, which succeeded in 1890. About 15 Miwuk and Paiute families continued to live in the valley even after it was designated a park. The village was seen as employee housing, since many worked in the park. By 1969, the Park Service decided to destroy the village. It wasn't until 2019 that the Southern Indian Council of Mariposa County (formed by the Miwuk people) won a proposal to build a village inside the park to showcase their history and use for cultural practices. It can be found near bus stop #5 in Yosemite Valley. The Southern Indian Council of Mariposa County is still petitioning the government for federal recognition. *See pg. 48.*

Half Dome view at sunset  
(Grant Ordelle)