

71Miles

Northern California edition The definitive guide to weekend trips around major cities.

[Half Moon Bay](#) - the 71Miles Travel Guide

by [John A. Vlahides](#), Executive Editor [11 comments »](#)

Hotel Deals from KAYAK

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- \$215 [Best Western Half Moon Bay Lodge](#)
- \$135 [Comfort Inn Half Moon Bay](#)
- \$116 [Holiday Inn Express Hotel & Suites...](#)
- \$119 [Marriott San Mateo](#)
- \$103 [Country Inn](#)
- \$167 [Crowne Plaza Hotel San Francisco](#)
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Introduction

Deal with it: Fog season is here and it's freezing outside. It seems counter-intuitive, but now is the ideal time to hit the beach. The days are long, and you can linger on the sand till after eight o'clock—provided you're swaddled in woolens.

It's gardening season too, and there's no better place to gather posies and shrubs than at nearby Half Moon Bay, the Bay Area's agricultural capital. Though most famous for its pumpkin patches, HMB is also flower central: local florists come here to fill their trucks. You should too—the garden stores are fabulous.

Downtown is good for a stroll, but the shopping is mediocre—unless you like to buy Christmas ornaments in June. The real money shots lie along the coast. A series of state beaches surrounds the town, with high bluffs, rocky coves, and long sandy shores. Some of them are jaw-droppingly beautiful, the ideal backdrop for a horseback ride or game of golf. Too much work? Spend an afternoon building sandcastles, or oohing and ahing over critter-packed tide pools.

Because it's a mere 30 miles from the city, HMB is a primo day-trip destination, but it also makes an ideal one-night getaway—especially midweek, when you can score terrific deals on lodging. You'll return to work the next morning rested and refreshed, like you've just had a mini-vacation. What better way to spend a night?

Our guide to the rest of the San Mateo Coast is coming next week. Stay tuned.

Why Go?

- Play golf high above the crashing surf.
- Stock up on the season's best produce—right at the farm.
- Kayak protected bays and spot zillions of birds.
- Barge the dunes to Mavericks, site of the famous surfing competition.
- Get far away from the city without the long drive.

How Far?

- 45 minutes from the Golden Gate Bridge.

Drawbacks?

- Limited culinary landscape; eat simple.
- Lackluster nightlife; plan to catch up on your DVD viewing.

See & Do

Beaches are the main draw; pack a trashy summer novel and a blanket. If you luck out and get sunny weather, head north to the locals' fav, [Montara State Beach](#) (aka McNee Ranch), two coves south of Devil's Slide, on Hwy 1. The water is clear, the sand pristine, and the drop-off so steep that whales swim right up to shore (Nov-May). I prefer clothing-optional [Grey Whale Cove](#), immediately to the north, but I like lying on the sand in the buff. If you do too, make this your first choice. Park on the *inland* side of Hwy 1; leave the kids in the car.

Calendar Events

- Jun 09 [Santa Cruz Vintners Festival](#)
- Jul 27 [Gilroy Garlic Festival](#)
- Aug 31 [Capitola Begonia Festival](#)
- Oct 13 [Half Moon Bay Pumpkin Fest](#)

[All Events](#)

On a so-so-weather day, or if you need the amenities of a ranger station (read: you have little kids who pee a lot), choose [Francis State Beach](#), which locals simply call 'State,' as in, 'I'll meet you at State.' It's in the middle of the half-moon crescent of beaches at the edge of town; take Kelly Ave.

To see the site of the famous [Mavericks](#) surfing competition, head to Pillar Point, and hike over the dunes. For the best waves, come after a winter storm. Oh, and Skip Surfers Beach; it's dirty.

You'll feel like Gulliver in the land of Lilliput as you explore the fabulous *tide pools at [Fitzgerald Marine Reserve](#), north of town in Moss Beach. I've never seen tide pools packed with so many teeny-tiny, colorful critters, and they seem to extend forever. Amazing. Wear a pair of non-slip shoes. Tell the kids: Avoid plucking animals from the rocks; it can kill some of them.

Take your daily walk (or bike ride) along the paved **Coastside Trail**, which runs 5mi south from Pillar Point Harbor, about 3mi north of town, to Miramar, just south of town, by the Ritz-Carlton. This is a great route for kids, and you can pick up the trail anywhere along the water. Rent a bike (kids' models too), from [Bike Rec](#), right on the beach, but call ahead for availability.

Or see the beach on horseback on a guided ride at [Sea Horse Ranch](#). Some of the horses look a little less than lively, but they're generally in good shape. No reservations necessary.

I prefer **kayaking**. I've not toured with them, but have heard high praise, from trusted sources, for [Half Moon Bay Kayak Co.](#), which rents boats and guides tours, from sunset paddles to wildlife-viewing trips. Give 'em a try. Reservations required.

The golfing is gorgeous at [Half Moon Bay Golf Links](#). The greens are well tended, and best of all, those on the ocean course are on high bluffs above the churning surf. Though it surrounds the Ritz-Carlton, this is a public course. Hooray.

You probably know about HMB's famous **pumpkin patches** (in season, the best is [Farmer John's](#)), but there's more to the ag scene than squash. Greenhouses and garden shops line Hwy 92, just east of downtown, and they're way better than any I've found in the city. My favorite is the [Half Moon Bay Nursery](#), which has great variety and huge greenhouses to roam. But buy your pots down the street at [Fabbri Statuary](#)—the selection is fabulous. Fabbri also has some cool garden fountains and arbors.

But don't stop at plants: Plan to fill the trunk with veggies and fresh produce too. There are stands up and down the coast, but [G. Berta's](#) tops my list. Arrive early on Saturday to shop the [Coastside Organic Farmers Market](#); it runs till November, 9am to noon. Love those strawberries!

Buy fish straight from the fishermen on the docks at **Pillar Point Harbor**. HMB has the last working fishing harbor between San Francisco and Monterey, and every day boats haul in their catch. For the best selection, arrive before 10am. To learn the day's catch, call 650-726-8724, press 3. (Bookmark this page: as far as I know, other travel guides do not provide this number...but I bet they will now.)

Downtown HMB is cute (follow signs to Main St), but with the exception of five independent booksellers, the shopping is kinda lame. One exception: [Cunha's Country Store](#), a hundred-year-old emporium where you can find everything from canned soup to cowboy boots. Look upstairs—you won't believe the selection of stuff. Alas, the store just sold in the last week of May. I hope they don't change a thing (but you know they will—dammit).

If you're here on a Sunday and enjoy **live jazz**, plan to spend the late-afternoon with the locals, tapping your toe at the intimate indoor-outdoor concerts presented by [Bach Dancing and Dynamite Society](#). Kids are always welcome, but if they're fidgety, sit outside. There's beer and wine, but you can also bring your own. Take a picnic with you too.

Nightlife is so-so, unless you're idea of a good time is ponying up to the bar with a pint of Guinness. The most happening spots on a weekend night are the [Half Moon Bay Brewing](#).

with cathedral ceilings and a roaring fireplace—and there's occasionally live jazz in the bar. Up until recently, I'd have recommended Cetrella without reservation, but a recent vitriolic change in ownership resulted in the ousting of the chef (he's now at Sam's; the former sous chef is running the show), and the dynamic, daily-changing menu is no more. The fritto misto remains (order it), but gone is the fabulous zarzuela (crab stew). The menu no longer changes, and the relationships with local farmers are nothing like they used to be (they even threw out the local farmers market that used to assemble in the parking lot outside—tsk, tsk). I'm going to wait until the transfer in ownership is complete before I give Cetrella another try, but if you want a night on the town, you'll probably do just fine.

If money is no object, book a table at [Navio \(\\$\\$\\$\\$+\)](#), at the Ritz-Carlton. I love the look of the cushy room—the arched wooden ceiling looks like an upside-down ship's hull—and the views of the ocean are superb. In typical fancy-pants R-C style, all the dishes on the French-California menu are highly manipulated and beautifully presented, but they sometimes miss. I had a spot-on creamy asparagus soup, but on my entree salad, the confit of duck had been slightly burned, resulting in a bone-like consistency hard enough to remove a filling. But I'm sure this was a sloppy mistake by the lunch cook. Better to come at dinner, when the real chef is on duty. I'd happily eat here again, but only on an expense account. One caveat:

I detest Navio's corporate hypocrisy. They brag about using local, sustainably grown ingredients, but they also sell caviar from Iran, which is endangered because of over-fishing and water pollution. I hope Navio's chef will soon put his money where his mouth is, and start carrying the excellent, California-grown [Tsar Nicoulai](#) osetra instead. Go the Ferry Building and try it. I just had some last week. It was fabulous, with all the hallmarks of ultra-fresh roe—round, firm, and not at all fishy—and it was sustainably farmed. Now *that's* luxury.

Restaurant Prices

- \$ = entrées under \$10
- \$\$ = \$10 to \$15
- \$\$\$ = \$16 to \$22
- \$\$\$\$ = \$22 and up

Half Moon Bay Hotels and Inns

I'll start at the top and work down in price. I've not reviewed the generic motels because...well, they're generic. You don't need me to tell you about 'em.

The hands-down top place to stay is the [Ritz-Carlton Half Moon Bay \(\\$\\$\\$\\$+\)](#), a behemoth, vaguely New England-style resort built on bluffs above the ocean. Rooms have all the requisite amenities of a proper luxury hotel—goose-down pillows, thirsty towels, plush carpeting, thick robes, Bulgari bath amenities—but the decor takes zero risks. However I love the bathtubs: though only big enough for one person, they're extra deep and have sexy chrome fixtures—there's even a bath butler on call to draw it for you (but why would you want a valet in your room when you're undressing?). As you'd expect, service is excellent (the R-C credo: 'We are ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen'). The opulent spa is fabulous and has 16 treatment rooms with 40 menu options, including some with Vichy showers. A golf course surrounds the property, and of course there's a pool. If you're willing to spend the money to stay here, don't book a

courtyard-view room; they overlook an ugly, suburban-style gated community. Instead shell out for an ocean view room for maximum romance, but skip the much-touted, patio ocean-view rooms, unless you like living in a fish bowl. Oh, and if you don't like being overly warm when you sleep, request that housekeeping strip the feather bed at turn down.

If you can't quite swing the Ritz, book a room at the [Beach House Inn](#) (\$\$\$\$), the only other lodging in town with ocean-view rooms. The rooms themselves are deep and narrow, with the bed at one end, the living room at the other. All have wood-burning fireplaces and kitchenettes. The pillows could be fluffier, but at least some of them are down (but I suspect duck, not goose). Bathrooms are sparkling clean. Best of all, you can throw open your French doors and gaze out to sea.

If you're into B&Bs, Half Moon Bay has two good choices, both with very visible on-site owners. The [Mill Rose Inn](#) (\$\$\$\$) has the most beautiful gardens in town—a veritable riot of color. The Empire-meets-Victorian decor is frilly and heavy handed, but the beds are ultra-comfy, with high-thread-count sheets and nice big pillows. There's a hot tub too.

The [Old Thyme Inn](#) (\$\$\$\$) occupies an 1898 house, and is simpler in its decor. Some rooms have fireplaces. My favorite is on the first floor, and has a giant Jacuzzi tub. Take breakfast in the charming garden, beside a gurgling fountain.

A high-end motel with extra amenities and lovely gardens, the [Half Moon Bay Lodge](#) (\$\$\$) is under the banner of Best Western, but it was taken over from another company known for its quality furnishings. You'll find left-over details like Spanish tile in the baths and colorful fabrics in the bedroom. Alas, the paper-thin bed sheets suck, and the pillows may as well be stuffed with rags. Still, if you're on a moderate budget, make this your top choice. But bring your own down bedding. Kids love the pool; parents like the hot tub.

Right in town on Main St, upstairs from a bar and restaurant, the [Half Moon Bay Inn](#) (\$\$\$) opened in 2006 and everything looks fresh and clean. The bathrooms are like closets and rooms are tight, but they're exceptionally well furnished, with details like Italian linens and fancy European dressers.

Across the street, the [San Benito House](#) (\$) has frilly Victorian-style rooms, but what a bargain! If you're on a tight budget, you'll do great here. Who cares if the bed's mushy, when you're paying under a hundred bucks? Breakfast included. NB: a few rooms share a bath; ask when you book.

Hotel Prices

- \$ = standard double under \$100
- \$\$ = \$100 to \$150
- \$\$\$ = \$150 to \$200
- \$\$\$\$ = \$200 and up