

Half Moon Bay

Idyllic beach retreat just half-hour from Bay cities

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If San Francisco conjures up the image of a metropolis with crowded streets and dense population, you'll be surprised to learn that just a few miles south and west you will find Half Moon Bay, a rural oasis of charm set along a scenic stretch of pristine California seashore.



It's in this small village that you'll find quaint shops and a little more laid-back pace than the bay cities less than a half-hour drive to the northeast. There are lighthouses and farms nearby, flower markets, spectacular tide pools, and a harbor with the freshest of crab, salmon and halibut that find their way onto tables of some excellent local restaurants.

Half Moon Bay is indeed special, and it's probably all due to its name — how could a place named Half Moon Bay be anything but a dreamy little enclave with almost fairy-tale views of the sea?

Our most recent visit to Half Moon Bay was enhanced by our accommodations — a place called the Beach House that offers 54 colorful loft suites perched on a scenic cliff overlooking the coastline. The suites are spacious and inviting, designed as open studios to take advantage of the ocean views. Each unit includes a private patio or balcony as well as separate bedroom and living areas. All the conveniences are there: wood burning fireplaces, wet bars, microwaves, refrigerators, goose down comforters — you name it.

With its Cape Cod styling, the Beach House blends perfectly with the windswept beach just below the hotel and the dozens of sailboats anchored just inside the breakwater. Wide trails take you down to the beach or to the nearby marina, which adds to the nautical flavor and the overall sense that you're much farther away from the Big City than you really are.

Of course the hotel's spa services will remind you that you're not exactly in Kansas — there is a whole menu of spa enhancements available including the signature Parisian Lavender Wrap, Reiki Massage and Aromatherapy.



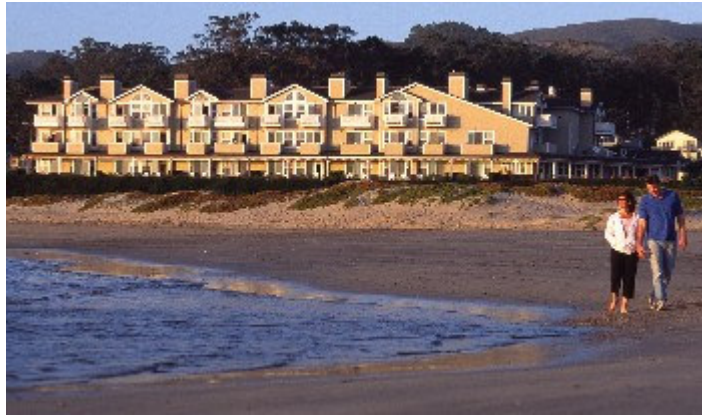
Just a five-minute drive from the hotel is the downtown shopping district of Half Moon Bay, a place to meander and explore while you look for that special something to take back to friends and family. Numerous boutiques, restaurants and cafes are along Historic Main Street, not to mention more bakeries per capita than any small city we have visited.

A restaurant called Cetrella was recommended to us and is described as a casually elegant Mediterranean bistro with perhaps the newest and most impressive building in the downtown shopping area. The menu was amazing in its variety, yet it still offered simple choices between seafood, beef, pork, lamb and even rabbit. Among our favorites were the mesquite grilled dry aged Creekstone Farms Black Angus ribeye and the seared Cypress Island salmon — both cooked to perfection. Vegetables, served in a dizzying array of different dishes, were the freshest we can remember — which should come as no surprise considering there are farms within walking distance of the restaurant. All and all, Cetrella was a hit with our family and apparently with everyone else in town, too — this large restaurant was nearing capacity even on a weekday night.

Another fun place to dine in Half Moon Bay is Sam's Chowder House, our choice for lunch on the second day. Located within walking distance of the Beach House, this casual, relatively new restaurant has great views of the bay as well as a fresh seafood market. Our favorite item: the clam chowder.

Once you've shopped and dined to your heart's content, the next step is exploration and that starts with the beaches right in Half Moon Bay. There are some 55 miles of beaches along this part of the Coastside area — the area just on the west side of the mountains from San Francisco Bay cities -- and it seemed like a good number of those were right in Half Moon Bay. We took a trail along the bluffs and then went down another trail to the beach level where on this windy day we had miles and miles of beaches to ourselves. No doubt on less windy days there are more visitors enjoying these wide, seemingly endless beaches.

Numerous state parks and coastal trails of all varieties are found in nearly all of the communities along Highway 1. McNee Ranch State Park is a 700-acre preserve near Montara Mountain that offers picture-perfect ocean and hillside views. San Pedro Valley County park is an 1,150-acre park in Pacifica that offers several short, scenic trails.



Eco-tourism is big in this area only minutes from downtown San Francisco and among the activities to put you in touch with your planet are visits to area wildlife preserves and farms. Pillar Point Harbor, near the Beach House, is a working fishing harbor where you can interact with fishermen and women and learn how they make their living from the sea. In fact you can go fishing yourself on one of the local charter boats, or take a boat out to watch the whales that travel the Pacific Coast, December through April.

And how's this for an interesting option: Spend part of your visit staying on a local family-owned farm where you'll get an up-close view of how farmers make their living from the soil or from animal products. You can also tour a farm if you don't have time to stay. Phipp's Ranch in Pescadero features over 100 varieties of organic veggies, plants and herbs, while Harley Farms Goat Dairy features an edible flower garden and tours of their cheese-making room.

In addition to the seashore activities such as beachcombing and tide pooling, there are a couple of bird refuges in the area. The Pescadero Marsh is where about 200 species of birds rest and feed each year and the trail that leads along an old marshlands dike offers some great views. At Pillar Point, bird-watchers have sighted about 20 percent of all North American bird species including herons, snowy egrets, loons and grebes.



Finally, be sure to visit the two historical lighthouses located in along this coast. The Point Montara Lighthouse is in Montara and just off Highway 1 — although keep a watchful eye or you'll miss the turn-off. It was built for mariners approaching the sometimes fog-shrouded San Francisco Coast and dates back as far as 1875. The current 30-foot tower and lens have been in operation since 1928. The grounds are currently leased to American Youth Hostel, Inc. and are open from 7:30 to 9:30 a.m. and 5 to 9:30 p.m.

The Pigeon Point Lighthouse State Historic Park is located south of Pescadero on the way to Santa Cruz. The lighthouse lens was lit for the first time in 1872 and this particular lighthouse is one of the two tallest on the West Coast. The grounds are open daily from dawn to dusk with guided tours and docents available from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on weekends. There is a hostel at this lighthouse as well.

AT A GLANCE

WHERE: Half Moon Bay is about 25 miles from San Francisco and accessible using the two-lane coast road from Pacifica or by driving Interstate 280 south from San Francisco and then motoring the last few miles west on Highway 92, a two-lane road. Since it's across the mountains from the city and its suburbs, Half Moon Bay has a distinctly rural feel.

WHAT: Half Moon Bay is an ideal choice for a short getaway that offers a variety of accommodations, good local restaurants, quaint shops, beaches and plenty of seaside activities such as tide pooling and sea kayaking.

WHEN: Any time of year. Bundle up for those winter walks, and sometimes even summer months are quite cool down on the beach.

WHY: Lots of natural beauty that can be combined with visits to the city.

HOW: For more information on the Beach House, phone 800-315-9366 or visit www.beach-house.com. For more information on Cetrella, call 650-726-4090 or visit www.cetrella.com. For more information on Half Moon Bay and area eco-tours, visit www.visithalfmoonbay.org or phone 650-726-8280.

Photos, from top: Beach near Half Moon Bay; one of many trails in Coastside area; Beach House hotel; Cypress Island salmon at Cetrella

Photos by Cary and Sandi Ordway; Beach House photo courtesy of the Beach House

OTHER DESTINATIONS: If a Southern California beach city is your idea of a great California vacation, be sure to check out other California Weekend articles on [Laguna Beach](#), [La Jolla](#) and [Coronado](#).