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More clouds, fewer crowds in Half Moon Bay

Matt Villano, Special to The Chronicle

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A little moisture never hurt anybody.

Though this line of reasoning usually necessitates a sturdy slicker and some serious hiking boots, the philosophy is precisely what makes spring the perfect time to hit the trails in and around Half Moon Bay.

The onslaught of winter storms along the San Mateo County coast brings everything from eerie cloud patterns to rainbows galore. The weather systems also are notable for what they drive away: hordes of people who descend on the coast to cool off during hot summer days.

With places in the region more deserted than usual, local parks such as Pillar Point Bluffs and the Purisima Creek Redwoods Open Space Preserve combine gorgeous vistas with challenging tromps. I lived in Half Moon Bay between 2002 and 2007 and got to know these spots well. On a recent weekend homecoming, I remembered why this always was my favorite time of year to explore.

Getting there

Bay Area residents generally dread the drive to the San Mateo County coast because the two main thoroughfares - Highways 92 and 1 - are perceived to be treacherous. The truth is that the roads really aren't that bad. Another option is San Mateo County Transit bus service from either Pacifica or Hillsdale Mall in San Mateo. Fares start at \$1.75.

Overnighters who seek efficient accommodations without breaking the bank will love the local Comfort Inn, which offers clean and spacious rooms starting at \$109 on weeknights.

A perfect day

7:30 a.m.: Start your day with eggs and a side of attitude at the Three-Zero Cafe, an unassuming greasy spoon at the Half Moon Bay Airport along Highway 1. Locals love co-owner and head server Mark Smith for his spunky style, and line up for burrito-size omelets and specialties such as the Pilot's Plate: scrambled eggs with locally grown artichoke hearts, zucchini, sausage, mushrooms and garlic.

9 a.m.: From the airport, take Capistrano Road toward Pillar Point Harbor, and head west toward the U.S. Coast Guard station. Mavericks Beach - the sandy strip at the end of a flat trail from the parking lot - is where surfing legends put in for the annual contest of the same name. For a longer (roughly 3-mile) hike, follow the signs for the Pillar Point Bluffs, a 123-acre swath of land purchased by the Peninsula Open Space Trust in 2004.

11:30 a.m.: It's time for some retail therapy in downtown Half Moon Bay. To get there, follow Highway 1 south and turn left at Main Street. Start at Moon News, the largest independent bookstore in town. Also worth exploring: Abode, a home furnishing store; the Harbor Seal Co., which sells marine mammal-themed trinkets; and Toque Blanche, a kitchen supply haven. Fuel up with a hulking \$6 sandwich from the delicatessen at the San Benito House.

1 p.m.: Brave the switchbacks and venture to the end of Higgins Purisima Road, where a small parking lot marks the main trailhead of the 3,360-acre Purisima Creek Redwoods Open Space Preserve. More than 24 miles of trails wind amid Coast Redwoods in the Santa Cruz Mountains east of town. My favorite loop takes the Purisima Creek Trail to the Soda Gulch Trail, then connects with the Harkins Ridge Trail and ambles back along the North Ridge and Whittemore Gulch trails. It's about a 7-mile jaunt.

5:30 p.m.: Clean yourself off before heading over to the Ritz-Carlton, Half Moon Bay, where the recently renovated Conservatory is the perfect indoor spot to sip fancy cocktails and watch the sun sink into the Pacific. Eno, a new lobby wine bar, offers flights of wine and wine by the glass.

7 p.m.: Chase your sundowners with dinner at Sam's Chowder House back toward the marina. "The Today Show" selected its lobster roll as one of the five best sandwiches in America and yes, the simple dish really is that good. Also worth trying are the roasted garlic-chili prawns. For dessert, the soft-serve ice cream is the winner.

Heading home

If you haven't had your fill of hiking by the time you're ready to leave, head home via the northern route (Highway 1 toward San Francisco) and leave time for a jaunt up Montara Mountain in McNee Ranch State Park. The main trail switchbacks 4 hamstring-straining miles up to the 1,898-foot summit. On a clear day, you can see to the Farallones. When it's cloudy, you're looking down on an infinite cotton ball - making it feel as if the entire world is yours alone.

If you go

Stay

Comfort Inn, 2930 N. Cabrillo Highway, (650) 712-1999, www.comfortinn.com. Clean, efficient rooms starting at \$109 weeknights. Most rooms come with mini refrigerators.

Another option is the Ritz-Carlton, Half Moon Bay, which through April 30 offers the "Resort Reconnect" package: overnight accommodations, \$100 resort credit per day and full breakfast for two for \$349. (650) 712-7000, links.sfgate.com/ZGNR

Eat

Three-Zero Cafe, 9850 Cabrillo Highway N., (650) 728-1411, www.3-zero.com. Breakfast and lunch. Moderately priced.

San Benito House Deli, 356 Main St., (650) 726-3425, www.sanbenitohouse.com. Lunch only. Inexpensive.

Sam's Chowder House, 4210 Cabrillo Highway N., (650) 712-0245, www.samschowderhouse.com. Lunch and dinner. Moderately priced.

Mezzaluna, 240 Capistrano Rd., (650) 560-0137, www.mezzalunabythesea.com/caffe. Breakfast, lunch and dinner. Moderately priced.

Splurge

Follow in the footsteps of Lorena Ochoa, Paula Creamer and the rest of the LPGA golfers who competed in the Samsung World Championship on the Half Moon Bay Golf Links last fall. Golf Digest magazine has ranked the two courses one of the top golf resorts in the country. Spring tee times start at \$184 per player.

Save

From most places around the Bay Area, Half Moon Bay is an easy day trip, so don't spend the night.

Good to know

The Shops at Harbor Village, an indoor shopping mall north of Pillar Point Harbor, opened to much fanfare last year, but most of the storefronts are empty, and the Vegas-style faux streetscape (complete with "cobblestones" and light posts) is downright eerie.

Resources

The Half Moon Bay/Coastside Chamber of Commerce has links to restaurants, lodging and other fun activities on its easy-to-navigate Web site, www.halfmoonbaychamber.org. (650) 726-8380. For maps and additional information about Purisima Creek Redwoods Open Space Preserve, go to www.openspace.org

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