



Helen Anders/AMERICAN STATESMAN

Monterey's Cannery Row glistens in the sun on a typical morning. The area is home to great seafood restaurants and to the Monterey Bay Aquarium, a vast complex showcasing various types of marine life.

## TRAVEL

# South of San Francisco: Sun, sand, seafood and shopping

**By Helen Anders**

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MONTEREY, Calif. — On a sunny Saturday, Cannery Row's tourists are packed as tightly as the sardines that were once canned here.

We are all here to enjoy sun, seafood and shopping next to Monterey Bay, which is gleaming brightly as its waves menace the toes of a few squealing children on the beach.

My husband and I are on the first day of a two-day foray south from San Francisco to Monterey and back up through Half Moon Bay. There's a lot to see in this part of California, but our time is limited. We can just scratch the surface, but we're scratching it hard.

We set out early one morning, cruising down U.S. 101 past jets landing at San Francisco and San Jose airports, then trying and failing to smell the garlic as we drove through Gilroy, home of the annual garlic festival (2009's wrapped up three weeks ago).

We took off on California 156 to Castroville, marveling at the huge fields of artichokes, the theme of this town's annual May festival, and headed up to Moss Landing for lunch at Phil's Fish Market.

I can't say Phil's is easy to find, but at least 100 people seemed to have located it on this day. It has a mile-long menu of seafood plates, pastas (Phil's last name is DiGirolamo) and, of course, artichokes.

Fish and chips — fresh, tender cod in a crispy, nongreasy batter with hand-cut fries — were crunchy and good, and my husband liked his seafood-packed chowder and flaky halibut. The restaurant is on a marina, and sea lions were basking in the sun. We saw other patrons walking out back, so we did the same, finding a lovely private beach.

Tempted as we were to hang there, we needed to press inland to Salinas, a sweet town in a flat valley that has the look of Kansas. Salinas is where author John Steinbeck grew up. His boyhood home at 132 Central Ave. is still there, operated as a restaurant. Nearby is the National Steinbeck Center, which pays homage to the works that the locals burned years ago. (They didn't much like his portrayal of them.)

Steinbeck Center is as architecturally interesting as a high school gym, but inside is a well-curated assortment of exhibits, videos and artifacts — such as the little camper in which he and his poodle, Charley, traveled the nation. The author's themes of hard times and the ephemeral nature of wealth really resonate right now.

From Salinas, Monterey is just half an hour's drive. We've checked in at the Monterey Bay Inn, at the edge of Cannery Row. Our room's huge windows overlook the bay, and we can hear the waves crashing against the rocks, along with the screeching of gulls and the occasional barking of a sea lion.

What we need, I decide, is a bottle of wine to share on our little balcony overlooking the water. As I search for one amid Cannery Row's T shirt shops and seafooderies, I am distracted by the aroma of chocolate wafting out of the Toll House Caf?. I run in and score a couple of Toll House Cookies, figuring they'll make a great dessert later.

Then, I locate my wine. One great thing about California is that wherever you are, you can find wine-tasting rooms. As the sun sets, I head back to the hotel with a bottle of Scheid chardonnay. I find that my husband has turned on the fireplace and is watching TV. I take my glass of wine to the Jacuzzi bathtub, which has its own open window overlooking the water.

We've chosen a restaurant off Cannery Row for dinner: Thai Bistro II. The mile-and-a-half walk works up our appetite for green curry chicken and a mountain of minty chicken larb.

The next morning, free breakfast is delivered to the room: homemade pastries, along with coffee and orange juice. We eat it overlooking the bay, then head off to the Monterey Bay Aquarium, a vast complex showcasing various types of marine life: otters, seahorses, jellyfish, black-footed penguins (the warm-weather kind from Africa) and a rather shy octopus.

A new seahorse exhibit opened in March . Especially amazing are leafy seahorses, which look like fancy seaweed. A docent tells us they're hard to keep healthy and cost \$15,000 apiece.

Huge tanks feature fish-filled habitats such as deep reefs and kelp forests. In one room, a school of anchovies circumnavigates a rotunda. One of this museum's missions is to educate people on how to be nice to sea life, and guests are constantly encouraged to, for example, refrain from eating diminishing species such as Chilean sea bass.

There are a lot of interactive exhibits for kids, along with petting zoos and play areas. But the kids we see here seem most happy looking at the sea creatures.

Time to move on. We head up California 1, a gorgeous drive under eucalyptus canopies, past big evergreens and palms, alongside beaches, dunes and huge fields of artichokes and strawberries, through Santa Cruz to Pescadero, where we had lunch at Duarte's Tavern.

Duarte's, established in 1894, is popular. Even at 2 p.m., we have to wait for seats. Perched comfortably at the lunch counter, we enjoyed petrale sole and halibut. We're stuffed, but we order some olallieberry (a tart local berry that's mostly blackberry with a little raspberry) pie to go.

Our second night is spent at Half Moon Bay, a bucolic village with shops of all kinds — even two book stores. It's surrounded by green, gently rolling hills, and there's a beach across U.S. 101, just a short walk from downtown. It's a good place to sample the relaxing life of rural California just a stone's throw from San Francisco.

We check into Half Moon Bay Inn, a homey inn built in the 1930s that offers rooms of all sizes. The huge suite we're in, which includes a bedroom, small living room, big kitchen, laundry room and balcony, costs only \$225 in low season. (Since my visit, the inn has added brick ovens to its back patio and opened a pizza restaurant that we'll have to try on a future visit.)

We dine at nearby Pasta Moon on homemade pastas such as my decadent butternut squash-marscapone ravioli before retiring to the hotel to tackle the olallieberry pie. I make a mental note not to eat anything else fattening for at least a week. Then I draw a mental line through the mental note: We're headed back to San Francisco in the morning.

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