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Half Moon Dreams

California's rugged Central Coast offers travelers a bit of everything, from fine dining and 5-star digs to 40-foot waves and eco-resorts.

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Fire pits at the Ritz, a couple glasses of wine, a good book, and a view that's worth every penny.

chilly breeze churns off the Pacific, but I don't mind. It reminds me of Ventura. Besides, there's a crackling fire warming my bones and I'm on the terrace of the Ritz-Carlton, Half Moon Bay. Things could be worse. Thanks to an overcast sky and cool temperatures, my mother and I are here admiring the majestic view all by ourselves. We sip our wine and feel the breeze, turning now and then to warm our bodies with the fire's glow.



We search the horizon vainly for a glimmer of light, still hoping to view a sunset over the Pacific tonight. But the fog and the clouds conspire to shroud the sun, and as the sky grows progressively darker we take comfort in the fire's warmth before dinner calls us inside.

Perched on a bluff overlooking the Pacific, less than six hours north of Ventura County, the Ritz-Carlton is a haven from the everyday world, a chance to escape the mundane and live like royalty for a while. Here you'll find an otherworldly experience where bagpipes play in dreamy wonder, where warm hands massage pumpkin-infused shea butter into your skin, where dinner at Navio unfurls like a map revealing a gastronomic adventure, from which you will emerge hours later, slightly dazed and savoring the rich mix of flavors and textures that linger on your palate.



Pillar Point, home to Mavericks, one of the largest surfable waves on the planet.

Mom and I are here enjoying a mother-daughter getaway. I've visited twice before—once on a solo sojourn and another time with a gal pal—and wanted to show my mother this special place that stirred something within the first time I saw it.

Maybe it's the magical name that rolls off your tongue like a song from the '40s. Or the way people smile and make you feel welcome, even if you're just passing through. Maybe it's the old-fashioned Main Street with its weekly farmers market and tidy shops and offices. Or the smell of the forest that seeps down from the mountains and awakens your senses. There's just something here I can't explain, a feeling I get, an addiction almost, that makes me want to drop everything and head to the Northern California coast for some HMB time. And whether you stay at the Ritz-Carlton, a B & B, or the youth hostel at Pigeon Point, you'll find plenty to love about this region. But be warned: Once Half Moon Bay grabs hold, you'll find yourself daydreaming about its charms and wondering when you can go back.



Ritz-Carlton guest room.

An adventurer's paradise, Half Moon Bay promises action from surf to turf. And when I say surf, I'm not talking about longboarding C-St. Every winter, 24 of the world's best big-wave surfers vie for top honors at the Mavericks Surf Contest, which has a waiting period that guarantees huge waves breaking off Pillar Point. Of course, surfing Mavericks isn't for everyone, but the contest attracts thousands of spectators every year.

If you prefer a four-legged jaunt, get up at sunrise for the early bird special at Seahorse Ranch. Along the tops of the bluffs, you and your horse will amble along a trail that reveals an unsurpassed view of the ocean. Then be prepared to descend a steep path to the beach, where if you're lucky, you can coax your mount into a gentle canter through the billowing surf.



Overview of Half Moon Bay.

Hikers will find trails to the mountaintops and beyond snaking through the Santa Cruz Mountains. One of my favorites is a coastal trail near Costanoa, an eco-resort just south of Half Moon Bay with upscale lodge accommodations, tent cabins, and campsites with a view for folks who want to sleep under the stars. After you cross Highway 1, the trail takes you through waist-high grasses and brambles full of rich woody smells. Soon the ocean's roar will grow louder, and suddenly you'll peer down at the Pacific from a rocky bluff surrounded by craggy cliffs that loom like giants. It's as if you've wandered into a different realm, where nature reigns supreme and everything else falls flat.



With its rugged land and seascape providing a dramatic counterpoint to 5-star accommodations, Half Moon Bay satisfies all types of travelers, whether your taste runs to champagne or the local amber ale.

After your hike, stop for a bowl of steaming soup and wonderful sourdough bread at Duarte's Tavern, a landmark in Pescadero since 1894. I make a pilgrimage here every time I'm in Half Moon Bay. It's that good: an authentic atmosphere, friendly staff, and the most amazing cream of green chile and cream of artichoke soup (ask for half-and-half—both in one bowl).

Another great place to cool your heels is Half Moon Bay Brewing Company, where an eclectic crowd gathers to soak up the sun while sipping tasty micro-brews. Try their Mavericks Amber Ale, a chewy robust brew with a slightly sweet aftertaste. For an upscale dining experience—and great jazz on Fridays and Saturdays, Cetrella on Main Street offers cuisine with Mediterranean roots in a rustic-chic venue. Half Moon Bay is perhaps best known as the home of the Pumpkin Festival, held every October. This colorful event, now in its 38th year, celebrates the 3000 tons of pumpkins grown in Half Moon Bay each year. Families from all over throng to the little town in search of perfect pumpkins. And it's no small event: This fall, planners expect upwards of 250,000 visitors.



As for me, I like Half Moon Bay in its quieter moments, when the only sound I hear is the windswept waves unfolding on the beach. Even after I've gone home, I can conjure up images of this magical town with its golden hills and foggy coastline. I just close my eyes and imagine the fresh, piney scent and daydream about my next visit.



