Discover Half Moon Bay
With a name like Half Moon Bay, how can this coastal hamlet be anything but charming and captivating?
By Juliet Pennington

I had heard about this little section of the California coast called Half Moon Bay many years ago and wanted to visit, but the opportunity never seemed to present itself. However, an invitation to a wedding in San Francisco gave me the perfect chance to sneak away for a few days and explore the area.

JUST SOUTH OF SAN FRANCISCO
Located just 30 miles south of San Francisco, this quaint town is a great alternative to the hustle and bustle of the nearby metropolis. Instead of gridlock traffic, honking horns and throngs of people jockeying for position on the sidewalk, cars moseyed along, people strolled through the town at a leisurely pace, and never a honked horn was heard. My directional and other inquiries were met with warm, friendly responses that on more than one occasion turned into somewhat lengthy social visits.

Getting to Half Moon Bay was an experience in itself. As I traveled along Highway 92, it was difficult to focus on driving, since there were so many beautiful wildflowers lining the curvy roadside, which was dotted with greenhouses and nurseries. The aroma was so enticing that I wished I could bottle it into a perfume.

WHERE TO STAY
There are many lodging options in Half Moon Bay. I decided to split my time between a charming downtown inn and an upscale seaside resort.
As I drove along Main Street toward the Old Thyme Inn, the bed and breakfast where I would stay the first night, I couldn't help but pull over to stop in an adorable little book store that caught my eye. Coastline Books had a great assortment of local history books about many of the coastal towns in San Mateo County. The store also had fun, funky greeting cards -- several of which I purchased -- magnets, bookmarks, etc.

An avid shopper, I had to use every ounce of willpower I could muster to go directly to the car from the bookshop without making any other stops. I was able to do so in large part because I knew I'd have some time for some retail therapy the following day.

OLD THYME INN
When I pulled up to the Old Thyme Inn, I thought it looked cute, but I wasn't overly impressed. That changed immediately when I walked in the front door and saw the inviting, attractive decor that included eye-catching antiques and fresh flowers everywhere. Owners Rick and Kathy Ellis, who gave me a brief tour before showing me to my room, greeted me warmly. When I commented on the beautifully crafted wood furniture throughout, they explained that much of it was made by their son, David, a furniture designer.

The nearly 110-year-old inn's seven guest rooms, each of which comes with a private bath, get their names from the Queen Anne Victorian home's fragrant English herb garden, which is clearly tended to with care. The names of the rooms are Garden, Thyme, Mint, Lavender, Rosemary, Chamomile and Oregano, and each is uniquely decorated to reflect a specific theme.

THE GARDEN ROOM
I lucked out with the Garden room, located on the second floor. The walk outside and through the fragrant garden, which boasts soothing water fountains and a small, tranquil pond, evoked thoughts of The Secret Garden. I had barely gotten over the wow factor when I was hit with another eye-opening sight: my room, which was simply perfect. With a cathedral ceiling, perhaps the most comfortable-looking queen-size four-poster canopy bed (complete with a plush featherbed, down pillows and comforter, and crisp, all-cotton French linens) I had ever seen, a fireplace, and a whirlpool spa for two under a skylight, I was all set.

CETRELLA
I didn't want to leave the room, but I had dinner plans at Cetrella, a relatively new restaurant located just down the street from the inn.
Featuring exceptional Mediterranean cuisine and a modern, yet intimate atmosphere, it's a great place to gather with friends. Live jazz performances are offered on the weekends.

I tried several different menu items and would highly recommend the wood oven baked focaccia and the fritto misto of baby artichokes, served with string beans, squash, and royal trumpet mushrooms. The steamed Moroccan couscous with curry, toasted almonds and raisins was also appetizing, as was the cheese plate with Granny Smith apples, d'Anjou pears and smoked almonds. For dessert, don't miss out on the warm chocolate cake with hot chocolate-flavored ice cream and bittersweet toffee. Cetrella, 845 Main Street, Half Moon Bay, California 94019, Tel: 650-726-4090.

BACK AT THE INN
Even though I was so full I could hardly move, I decided to take a delicious bubble bath (complete with bath salts and scented candles, and during which I could gaze up at the stars) when I got back to the inn. It was heavenly and was the perfect prelude to a wonderful night's sleep. When I woke up, I actually thought about how I could pull off taking my comfy bed back to the East Coast with me. Unfortunately, a solution never came to mind -- at least neither a practical nor affordable one.

Most guests enjoy breakfast in the inn's large dining area, gathered around a large, round, beautifully-crafted wood table made by the Ellis' son. However, the Garden room has a small dining table in it and guests staying in that room have the option of having breakfast delivered. I opted for an in-room dining experience and wasn't disappointed. Knowing I was vegetarian, Kathy Ellis made a wonderful meat-free breakfast for me -- delivered by her husband with fresh flowers and a smile -- that included lemon-ricotta cheese pancakes, homemade muffins, fresh fruit and piping hot herbal tea. I was quite content as I savored my breakfast, leafed through a tourist guide and took in the sights and smells of the garden below.

When it was time to leave, I assured the Ellises that they would be seeing me again on another visit. Rates at the Old Thyme Inn range from $155 to $275 midweek and $175 to $325 on the weekends. Breakfast is included. Old Thyme Inn, 779 Main Street, Half Moon Bay, California 94019-1924, Tel: 650-726-1616.

I was disappointed to be leaving the inn, but excited to head out to the nearby Seahorse Ranch, where I was going to go on a two-hour late-morning horseback ride along the Pacific coastline. As it turned out, I was the only rider, so my guide -- a friendly ranch hand named Nicholas -- was more than willing to go at my pace. As we meandered through the

Cushioned window seat in room at the Ritz
Bathroom at the Ritz
Romantic bath, complete with fresh rose petals, at the Ritz
Bathtub at the Ritz
creeks and along the bluffs of Sunset Beach, the scenery was simply breathtaking and the ocean air invigorating. Once we got down to the beach, we put things in gear, galloping and running along the ocean's edge for more than an hour. It was exhilarating and worth the inevitable soreness that ensued. Trail and beach rides range from $55 for one hour to $75 for two hours, with an 8am "early bird" two-hour trail and beach ride for $45. Click here for more information or call 650-726-9903.

THE RITZ-CARLTON, HALF MOON BAY

After horseback riding, I squeezed in a quick shopping jaunt in town before heading to the Ritz-Carlton, Half Moon Bay, where I would be spending the next two nights.

As I drove up the long driveway toward this majestic looking structure, perched atop a scenic bluff with sweeping ocean vistas, I knew I was in for a treat. I'd stayed at Ritz-Carlton hotels before, but never one as perfectly located as this. Even though I'm not a golf enthusiast, I could see why the courses at this Northern California luxury resort are routinely ranked among the best in the area. Looking like the links situated on the rugged coasts of Ireland or Scotland, the newer of the resort's two courses -- which hosts the annual LPGA Samsung World Championship -- allows golfers to bask in the sun while enjoying the sights and sound of the waves crashing below.

Upon my arrival, I was greeted with a pleasant welcome and a quick check-in. When I got to my room on the sixth floor, my eyes were immediately drawn to a long, cushioned window chair and a magnificent view of the Pacific Ocean. I could not wait to get out the latest Nora Roberts novel I'd bought earlier that day in town and curl up for a late-afternoon reading session. The Ritz-Carlton, Half Moon Bay, One Miramontes Point Road, Half Moon Bay, California 94019, Tel: 650-712-7000.

SHEER RELAXATION AT THE SPA

But first, I had an appointment at the hotel's highly recommended spa, which did not disappoint. I was scheduled for an 80-minute signature lavender wrap topped off with a light scalp massage. It was heavenly. After relaxing in one of the spa's lounges then taking a quick dip in the Roman mineral bath, I was led into a treatment room that permeated an intoxicating aroma of lavender. The treatment began with a dry brush exfoliation followed by a lavender shea butter massage, which was pure indulgence. I was then wrapped in warm blankets so my skin could absorb the butter and I could, as my massage therapist explained, “bask in a cocoon of comfort” as she massaged my head and helped deliver me to a state of sheer relaxation.
TRES AMIGOS MEXICAN RESTAURANT
While I was tempted to stay in my room and spend the evening reading, I decided to take my horseback riding guide up on his offer to take me to what he claimed was the best Mexican restaurant in the area. Even though I hadn't tried any other nearby Mexican eateries, after eating at Tres Amigos, located on Cabrillo Highway South in Half Moon Bay, I was sure he wasn't far off base. The restaurant isn't fancy, but it has authentic, tasty Mexican cuisine at affordable prices. A hearty dinner for two cost $14.

EXPLORING THE AREA
I had a comfortable night's sleep and the following day I explored the community that was once known as Spanish Town, home to a thriving fishing industry, before being renamed Half Moon Bay in 1874.

A hearty morning walk along the docks at Pillar Point Harbor, at the northern edge of Half Moon Bay, was the perfect way to start the day. Fishing and recreational boats line the harbor's docks, and nearby restaurants, bars and shops provide a great spot for tourists and locals alike. The popular Half Moon Bay Brewing Company, known for its homemade beer -- including the seasonal pumpkin pale ale, since pumpkins are in abundance in the area -- nightlife and alluring ocean views, is located here.

HALF MOON BAY KAYAK CO.
Also at Pillar Point Harbor are chartered fishing boats and whale watches, as well as the Half Moon Bay Kayak Co., where kayaks can be rented daily. The harbor is considered one of the safest places for beginners to learn kayaking skills, but for those more adventurous souls, an ocean surf kayaking class is offered. Rentals are $15 an hour, $50 a day for singles and $30 an hour, $90 a day for doubles. Click here for more information or call 650-773-6101.

FITZGERALD MARINE RESERVE
Bird watchers from all over come to Pillar Point to see a variety of species, including herons, loons and snowy egrets. And six miles north of Half Moon Bay, the Fitzgerald Marine Reserve at Moss Beach is a great place to explore the rich biodiversity of marine life. There are numerous areas along the rocky shore where, at low tide, visitors can see blue-green anemones, coralline algae and many other plants and animals that have adapted to live at the edge of the ocean.

THE MAVERICKS
I didn't make it there, but I understand that the nearby popular surfing enclave known as the Mavericks is a great place to watch skilled surfers, who can catch waves topping 50 -- yes 50 - feet at times. It was here that
professional surfer Mark Foo died in 1994.

OTHER THINGS TO DO
Not far from Half Moon Bay are wineries, state parks, hiking and biking expeditions in the redwood forests (don't miss the Purisima Creek Redwoods Open Space Preserve) and working farms and nurseries.

Phipp's Ranch in nearby Pescadero features many varieties of organic vegetables and more than 75 heirloom and exotic dry beans. Handmade jams are sold in the farm's Country Store, and, in season, visitors can pick strawberries (late April or mid-May through the end of September), boysenberries (late June through the end of July) and olallieberries (mid June through the end of July). All pick-your-own berries cost $3 a pound.

Further south of Pescadero is the Ano Nuevo State Natural Reserve, where elephant seals, sea lions, and other marine mammals come ashore to rest, mate, and give birth in the sand dunes or on the beaches and on the offshore islands. The reserve is the site of the largest mainland breeding colony in the world for the northern elephant seal. During the breeding season, December through March, daily access to the reserve is only allowed via guided walks. Reservations fill quickly, so making them early is recommended. Click here for more information or call 800-444-4445.

PIGEON POINT LIGHT STATION
Less than five miles from the Ano Nuevo State National Reserve is Pigeon Point Light Station, another state historic park. Perched on a cliff on the Pacific coast, the 115-foot Pigeon Point Lighthouse is one of the tallest lighthouses in America and has been guiding mariners since 1872. Also nearby is Butano State Park, which is located in a secluded redwood-filled canyon on the San Mateo coast off Highway One.

After spending the morning at Pillar Point Harbor, I drove back to Half Moon Bay's Highway 92 to again see the brightly-colored, wonderful smelling flowers and stop by some of the greenhouses and nurseries -- including Repetto's and Pastorino's. I also checked out Lemos Farm, which has pony and train rides for youngsters, and Arata Pumpkin Farm, which is the oldest working pumpkin farm in San Mateo County. It, too, has pony and hayrides, as well as a way cool -- and pretty complicated -- straw maze and petting zoo on 6 1/2 acres.

Even though the town is named after a half moon, it is known for its plethora of pumpkins harvested every fall. An annual pumpkin festival held the first weekend in October draws more than 300,000 people to Half Moon Bay, which has a normal year-round population of 13,000.
The festival was started in 1970 and continues to grow every year. Pumpkin fudge, bread, ice cream ... you name it, it's made and sold during the festival, which is held on Main Street.

MAIN STREET
Speaking of Main Street, I was able to get back downtown to do some shopping. I found a great garden store -- Half to Have It, which sells glass rock by the pound -- and a nice little gift boutique called Quail Run, which has a great collection of Santa statues. Fengari sells beautiful yarns from around the world and has an eclectic button collection, with some of the most fun and funky buttons I've ever seen. There are several interesting art galleries on Main Street, some of which (including Sujaro, an African art gallery) are only open by appointment.

After exploring all day, I was eager to get back to The Ritz-Carlton and relax a bit. My husband was coming into town and we were going to have dinner at the hotel's signature restaurant, Navio, and celebrate our 20th anniversary. When I got back to the hotel, I stopped in the hotel's private lounge, where personal concierges are available for anything guests might want, and where complimentary food and beverages are offered throughout the day. I had a piece of the delicious tomato, mozzarella and watercress focaccia with olive spread and a few bites of the numerous desserts. I didn't want to eat too much because I knew I'd be eating plenty at dinner.

NAVIO
I'd heard wonderful things about Navio and was not disappointed. The service was impeccable (when a nearby diner was having trouble reading the menu, the waiter whipped out a pair of reading glasses for him) and the sweeping views of the manicured lawns and ocean beyond were stunning. As we watched the sun set far out to sea, a bagpiper strolled along the walkways behind the hotel playing traditional Scottish tunes. Several hotel guests went outside to take in the awe-inspiring scene, and some gathered around the large fire pits to ward off the cool night air.

After nibbling on a sampling of multi-grain and sourdough breads, and a mixed green salad that came with a vinaigrette dressing (a bit too salty for my taste), I had my main dish: an asparagus risotto that was out of this world. It was rich and flavorful -- so much so that I kept eating it after my stomach was clearly filled to capacity. My husband and I shared the chocolate cake with lemon thyme ice cream and, surprisingly, I found room for that, too. We didn't sample any of the wines, but several of the hotel guests with whom I spoke said the wine pairings at Navio are awesome and the selection of vintages is impressive. Navio, One Miramontes Point Road, Half Moon Bay, California 94019, Tel: 650-712-7000.
After dinner, we took a walk out on the bluff overlooking the ocean, where earlier in the day a wedding had been held. I can't think of a more scenic or romantic setting for such an occasion. Since it was getting cold, we took one of the outdoor blankets provided for guests and snuggled in the oversized wooden deck chairs next to the fire, where we chatted with other guests and enjoyed the sound and smell of the ocean. It was a great way to top off the evening, even if we were too full to partake in the roasting of marshmallows to make s'mores.

Rooms at the Ritz-Carlton Half Moon Bay start at $259 on weekdays and $329 on weekends. Suites start at $359 on weekdays and $429 on weekends. Click here for more information about the Ritz-Carlton Half Moon Bay or call 650-712-7000. Click here for tourist information on Half Moon Bay or call 650-726-8380.

*Please tell us what you think of this story!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:
Juliet Pennington is a freelance journalist who lives in North Attleboro, Massachusetts. She can be reached at Juliet at JohnnyJet.com (replace the "at" with an "+").