

LEISURE / TRAVEL / BUDGET TRAVEL

California's captivating Central Coast

May 18, 2015

1:36 PM MST

Midway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, along the coastline on Highway 1, are more than 100 miles of rolling hillsides and aquamarine oceanscape embracing enormous rock formations. Here lies a scenic beauty and sense of serenity that travelers search continents to experience. Within the lavish landscape are hidden gems to discover. Hamlet-sized towns laden with local wineries, first-class restaurants, oceanfront hiking trails, and colorful [artists'](#) enclaves are all tucked away from the clamor and stress of the big city.

Ten-plus destinations comprise the coastline of [California Highway 1 Discovery Route](#) bordered by San Simeon & Ragged Point farthest north and Oceano and Nipomo to the south, each with its own diversity and personality. For an extended weekend getaway to clear the mind and calm the soul, visit these four small towns for starters, which are all in close proximity: **Avila Beach**, **Cayucos**, **Harmony**, and **Cambria**.

Avila Beach

Escape to 125 acres of meadows, forests and hills at Sycamore Springs Resort & Spa in the tiny town of Avila Beach, a perfect spot to start your days of [relaxation](#) and rejuvenation. Many rooms have outdoor hot tubs and a full program of yoga and Pilates exercise classes taught in the Yoga Dome facing the hillside, and the Wellness Center provides a soak in mineral waters before finishing with a relaxing massage.

Stroll along the nearby Bob Jones Trail in view of estates and farms, which eventually leads to



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California Highway 1 Discovery Route

a downtown beachfront peppered with gift and surf shops and casual eateries.

Then, take a short drive to the historic 1878 Harford Pier at Port San Luis. The port served as a gateway for shipping goods and passengers in 1880s from Pacific Rim to Europe and was the largest crude oil shipping port in the world by WWII. Cars are still welcomed to travel onto the pier.

Enjoy fresh seafood at The Gardens of Avila Restaurant located within the Sycamore Springs Resort. Chef Mike Avila has created several savory seafood dishes as Dungeness Crab Ravioli and Pan Seared Scallops with apple butter. All the vegetables and fruits come from the restaurant's acre-plus organic garden.

Don't bypass the 140-acre Avila Valley Barn which is pesticide and herbicide free. The luscious olallieberries, peaches, and apples are also added to mouthwatering baked pies, which can be topped off with the homemade ice cream. Kids and local students enjoy visiting the petting zoo and pony rides.

Cayucos

Continue to the neighboring town of **Cayucos** for lunch at the venerable Schooner's Wharf for some succulent calamari strips in view of the picturesque ocean and quiet town devoid of commercialism and even traffic lights, a throwback of yesteryear.

One mile north on Highway 1 arrive at Estero Bluffs State Park for a hike along the craggy cliffs watching the sea otters cajole while surrounded by a fertile kelp forest and 355 acres of windswept grasslands.

Harmony

Further north, in a blink of an eye, you can almost miss the miniscule town of **Harmony** and its 18 residents. New owners Alan Vander Horst, a third-generation dairy farmer, and his wife Rebecca are responsible for the extensive renovation now in progress.

The original 1869 creamery is being restored along with the current artists' studios. Harmony Glassworks continues in full operation with an exquisite array of vases, jewelry and gift items. The creamery courtyard is expanding into a dairy shop offering cheeses by local artisan cheese makers, along with yogurts and ice cream. Also on the agenda targeted for fall are a dairy museum and a first-class restaurant to feature Central Coast cuisine.

Harmony is a unique place to be married with its tiny chapel which can host up to 60 guests and 100 guests with the use of the adjoining garden. Vander Horst adds, "You can even rent

the entire town for an event that could accommodate around 200 people.”

Cambria

Just moments from this charming hamlet, sits Cambria, an artist's haven reaping with creative energy and endless eateries. Stay at the Cambria Pines Lodge, seated on 25 wooded acres of forests and coveted gardens, and stroll through the historic East Village and Old English-style West Village of Cambria. Walking tours have recently been offered through the East Village with buildings dating back to early 1800s.

Venture out to the dramatic bluff of the 435-acre Fiscalini Ranch Preserve for a meditative hike among purple compact cobweb thistles, wildflowers, and the surrounding rare Monterey pine forest (only three in the world), serving as a habitat for wildlife. You may even encounter some blue herons or a whale breaching.

The Stewardship Travel Program is the Central Coast's *feel-good* program, an inventory of 70 activities where visitors can have a closer connection to the area and nature—from weed removal and tree planting to maintaining the trails. According to Stewardship Travel Director Diane Strachan, “The program is a passport for visitors to connect to locals to make a difference.”

For Relaxation, Spas and Wellness: <http://www.winecoastcountry.com/relaxation-spas-wellness/>

Links to the other seven coastal towns:

Ragged Point, San Simeon, Los Osos, Oceano, Nipomo, Arroyo Grande Valley, and Edna Valley

SUGGESTED LINKS

- A soulful stroll through San Pedro Valley County Park
- Traveling back centuries through Laos II
- Discovering what's new in Paso Robles

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Beverly Mann

San Francisco Travel Examiner

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