
Getaway: A weekend escape to Morro Bay in San Luis Obispo

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Midway between Los Angeles and San Francisco and west of California's scenic Highway 1 sits the popular seaside fishing village of Morro Bay, a great weekend getaway with endless activities for adventurers and nature lovers. Choices include kayaking, sailing, surfing, paddle boarding, biking, bird watching and hiking along endless coastal and state park trails.

For the wine enthusiast, the town is just 30 minutes from lush vineyards in the Paso Robles and Edna Valley wine regions.

But at the entrance to the town's harbor stands the major tourist draw, the majestic 576-foot-tall Morro Rock, a volcanic plug formed 23 million years ago. The California Historical Landmark, part of the Seven Sisters volcanic mountain chain, is also known as the "Gibraltar of the Pacific" and is a reserve for the locally endangered peregrine falcon. It's connected to the shoreline with a scenic causeway perfect for a leisurely seaside stroll.

Morro Bay celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2014, but the area's rich history dates back to Chumash and Salinan Indian tribes. Portuguese explorers came next, include Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, who in 1542 named the rock El Morro, or "crown-shaped hill."

The town has served many purposes. In the 1870s it was a port for exporting dairy and ranch products, and in the 1940s a thriving abalone producer. Today, it boasts the only all-weather small craft commercial and recreational harbor between Santa

Barbara and Monterey.

If you are a seafood lover, this also is the place to savor fresh salmon and local oysters from the Morro Bay Oyster Co.

The mild Mediterranean climate also is a draw, with the warmest months September through November and the coolest months December and January.

Accommodations are plentiful, with more than 30 hotels and motels to choose from.

A good introduction to Morro Bay starts with a stroll along the Embarcadero, which has a wealth of restaurants, art galleries and novelty shops. The Shell Shop is one of the oldest, established in 1955 with bragging rights for the largest selection of marine shells on the Central Coast. Owner David Thomas remembers selling abalone shells for 10 cents each in the 1950s, earning as much as \$100 for his efforts. Now 60, he said, "I've always been fascinated with objects at the bottom of the ocean."

Nearby Sub Sea Tours offers rides on a 21-passenger semisubmersible vessel, with a viewing room for passengers who want a closer look at the mysterious sea life below.

For a more solid land experience, take the self-guided Morro Bay Mural Walk past 23 murals, an outing that takes several hours and includes an arduous climb up hills. Or stay on the waterfront to visit art galleries that include Gray's Inn & Art Gallery, the Garden Gallery and the John Ramos Art Gallery.

The Embarcadero also houses restaurants of all types, including the hearty salads at Blue Sky Bistro and fine dining at Windows on the Water, a romantic spot to view spectacular sunsets.

Travel a few blocks uphill to Main Street to spend time in the Coalesce Bookstore, which hosts weddings at the Garden Wedding Chapel in back. Need some rest and relaxation? Take a meditative break at Morro Bay Yoga Center.

Don't forget to leave time to experience Morro Bay's natural gifts. The No. 1 reason people visit is to see nature, according to a survey by Visit San Luis Obispo County.

Much of Morro Bay is a state wildlife refuge, declared by the California Fish and Game Commission as a California Marine Reserve.

The town's Estuary Natural Preserve, with 800 acres of wetlands, is home to more than 250 species of land, sea and shore birds, both migratory and resident. This extensive marshland has been designated as a state and national bird sanctuary and estuary. Every January, international bird watchers and photographers arrive for the Winter Bird Festival, when thousands of herons, egrets, geese, brown pelicans and other birds are out and about.

Hiking is yet another way to enjoy the natural surroundings. At Morro Bay State Park, trek to the top of Black Hill for a 360-degree view of the bay. Housed in the park is the Museum of Natural History, featuring exhibits that focus on the ecology of the Morro Bay Estuary.

Located just 6 miles southwest of Morro Bay is Montaña de Oro State Park, considered a hiker's paradise with miles of trails that also serve bikers and equestrians.

For a final farewell, nothing tops the teal, crimson and lemon-yellow sunset that halos the iconic Morro Rock.

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