
Getaways: Visit scenic Point Arena-Stornetta

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Sonoma's dramatic coastline provides its own share of waves crashing against cavernous cliffs and islands of sculptured rock formations. But it's not until you arrive just north of Point Arena, at the new Point Arena-Stornetta Public Lands, that you connect with Mother Earth and the marvel of California's endless oceanscape.

On March 11, 2014, the parcel became the first land-based portion of the California Coastal National Monument, which covers 1,100 miles of stunning scenery and includes some 20,000 rocks and small islands, and it quickly became a hiker's haven and photographer's dream.

Your shutter snapping opportunities begin about three quarters of the way down Point Arena Lighthouse Road, where the massive ecological conservatory begins. A 12-mile stretch of ocean and 1,660-plus acres of undeveloped federal- and state-managed coastal bluffs, dunes and sandy beaches are yours to explore between Point Arena and Manchester State Beach, along with the Garcia River estuary, prime Coho and Chinook salmon habitat.

Critters abound

Visitors can enjoy wildlife viewing, hiking, bird watching, fishing, picnicking, nature photography and public access to the Mendocino coast. The complex and fragile ecosystem also is a haven for great blue herons, Laysan albatross, peregrine falcons and black oystercatchers.

This also is one of only five areas in the world that has deep upwellings, an

oceanographic phenomenon that involves wind-driven motion of dense, cooler and nutrient-rich water towards the ocean surface.

Once the Stornetta family dairy ranch, this massive piece of land was donated by Larry Stornetta. The family continues to graze cattle and grow beans and peas here, so don't be surprised if you see a cow or two cross the path.

Margaret Lindgren, owner of Unbeaten Path Hiking Tours, offers personal and group nature tours, providing a private walk past birded bluffs, sea lions, elephant seals, pelicans and Spanish moss (Old Man's Beard), which covers the branches of cypresses. All are easily accessible from the historic Point Arena Lighthouse and Highway 1.

The two-hour walk begins at the north entrance off Lighthouse Road, the three-hour tour at City Hall. Both lead participants along cliff edges with sweeping views of tide pools, waterfalls and diverse marine life.

A number of threatened and endangered species live within this expansive environment, including the Point Arena mountain beaver and California red-legged frog, the western snowy plover and Behren's silverspot butterfly.

"Many species feed, breed and nest along the coast, and some come from long distances to do so," Lindgren said. "It's important not to disturb them. Respect wildlife and protect yourself by not climbing down onto rocks, into sinkholes or into other areas off trail, especially to capture that memorable photo."

Timing is everything

Fall and spring are the best times to visit, when days are fog free, temperatures are warm and the seas are quite calm. The stormy season arrives in January and February, and wildflowers are at their peak by the end of May, while gray whales are still migrating north along the coast.

Make time to visit the nearby Point Arena Lighthouse and Museum, the tallest

lighthouse on the Pacific Coast with its 115-foot tower. Daily tours are available.

After hiking and exploring, leave time for a meal and a taste of Point Arena.

Directly across the street from the town's art deco movie and film house sits Franny's Cup & Saucer, owned by Franny and Barbara Burkey, who had a tearoom in Paris and worked as pastry chef for Chez Panisse in Berkeley. The enticing aromas come from creative baked delicacies such as fresh Gravenstein apple pie.

In this jewel of a town, population 450, it appears that there is only six degrees of separation. The congenial town mayor Doug Burkey, former owner of Franny's, also tutors special education students and can be seen around town walking his shaggy dog, Webber. He candidly expresses mixed feelings about the new national designation.

"Even though there has been an influx of tourists from outside California and the country since the announcement, I'm concerned that Point Arena may become a tourist town from a working town," Burkey said.

"I don't want this place to lose its authenticity."

Beverly Mann has been a feature, arts and travel writer in the San Francisco Bay Area for the past 32 years.