

## Travel Bug

### Central coast, Channel Islands make for fun road trip

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**S**cratch your travel itch by exploring California. What could be easier than hopping into your car for a road trip south along Highway 1?

A 100-mile stretch of the most iconic roadway in California, known as the Highway 1 Discovery Route, weaves through San Luis Obispo County along the uncrowded white sand beaches and connects artist communities and award-winning wineries. It also includes Hearst Castle, 13 state parks and an elephant seal rookery. The portion of Highway 1 that travels through Big Sur reopened in late April after being closed for repairs, and the small coastal towns are open for business.

Recently, my husband, Gary, and I loaded the car, left the dog with great neighbors and headed south. From spotting elephant seals covering the beach to dolphins, whales and rare foxes to eating fresh seafood to jellyfishing and biking to visiting mineral hot springs, small coastal villages and the Channel Islands National Park, we discovered a trip that's great for couples, families, solo travelers and anyone looking to combine great food with California adventure.

#### Cambria

Hearst Castle is still closed to the public due to pandemic-related restrictions, so we headed straight for Cambria, a small town located about four hours from T-burton and 40 minutes from San Luis Obispo.



During our trip south through San Luis Obispo County, we stopped at the elephant seal rookery.

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The town is brimming with coastal inns, charming bed-and-breakfasts, stupendous shopping and fine dining.

Cambria's Moonstone Beach has a boardwalk with amazing views, tide pools, driftwood and unusual stones, including a variety of chalcedony that are reputed to glow in the dark.

Pedras Blancas Elephant Seal Rookery is the place to see hundreds of elephant seals, some as big as 1,700 pounds and 12 feet long, up close and personal. The rookery, which is free to visit and open year-round, is located right along the highway 10 minutes north of Cambria.

Elephant seals began coming ashore there in 1990, and now about 25,000 use the seven miles of beaches. There were hundreds of seals visible on the beach the day we visited.

In May, the start of the nesting season and a time when the adult females are with their pups on the beach. In May the adult males have returned to sea, but the wildlife show on the beach is mesmerizing. They wiggle, vocalize, grunt, spit, scratch and flip sand on themselves. Two young males snarled badly and tried to bite each other's necks as they sparred in shallow water.

Fresh sea air always makes us hungry, so on our way to the Cambria Pines Lodge we stopped at Linn's Restaurant for a warm slice of the town's famous oliveberry pie. Oliveberry is a cross between a blackberry and a raspberry. Late in the afternoon, we joined other guests at the rustic style lodge for Happy Hour to sing along with a guitar player.

The culinary highlight of our visit to

#### more info

For more information about California's Central Coast, visit [highway1discoveryroute.com](http://highway1discoveryroute.com).

Cambria was dinner at Robin's Restaurant. The restored adobe home offers cozy indoor dining and an extensive garden with tables. The real showstopper is the cuisine. It was voted "Best Central Coast Restaurant" several times by the New Times San Luis Obispo, the county's alternative weekly newspaper. The restaurant has a "vegetable congregate" who travels to local farmers' markets to buy the freshest greens, fruits and fish.

#### Avila Beach and Sycamore Mineral Springs

Our next stop was Avila Beach, a small beach town with art galleries, boutiques and plenty of opportunities to surf, kayak, paddleboard or fish off the pier. We rented bikes and rode along the tree-lined Bob Jones Trail to get ready for a soak in restorative mineral water at the Sycamore Mineral Springs Resort and Spa. Tucked under a canopy of sycamore trees, our secluded bungalow room had a hot tub on the private deck where we soaked under a full moon after a scrumptious dinner in town.

Restaurant tip: Enjoy exceptional margaritas and fresh seafood with awesome views of the ocean at Mercia's Restaurant, located at the end of the long pier. We joined locals and watched fishermen bring in crab

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pots and prepare nets on the working pier. Mersea's truly is the "real thing," serving the freshest fish available. The prawn salad, clam chowder, crab cakes and fish and chips were all well done.

### **North American Galapagos Islands**

While other national parks will be mobbed this summer — think of the crowded valley floor of Yosemite — Channel Islands National Park offers the opportunity to disappear on a remote island. The park encompasses five ecologically rich wild islands with no services or accommodations. They offer a very different experience from crowded Santa Catalina, with its resort towns and casino.

The park and the national marine sanctuary are often compared to the Galapagos, not only for the landscape, created by tectonic forces and never connected to the mainland, but also for the more than 150 endemic or unique species found there.

We chose Santa Cruz Island, the largest, most biologically diverse and closest to the mainland. We discovered a remote island of jaw-dropping beauty with secluded beaches tucked within craggy coves, fields of yellow *coreopsis* flowers and crystal-clear waters with swaying kelp and purple sea anemones

below. Santa Cruz Island is home to the signature island fox and sea caves.

The islands are only accessible by ferry service, Island Packers, and planes, Channel Islands Aviation, or by private boat, which explains why they are one of the least-visited national parks. Ferries leave out of Ventura or Oxnard, about an hour north of Los Angeles. We left the Ventura Marina on the 9 a.m. ferry and returned to the mainland on the 4 p.m. ferry. Because there are no services on the island, we packed a picnic and brought our own water.

The calm 90-minute ferry ride from Ventura was a wildlife show in itself. We saw huge sea lions as we left the harbor. The captain's voice boomed over the speaker alerting us to four whale sightings and a thrilling 10-minute cruise through a pod of bottlenose dolphins surfing along both sides of the boat.

Hiking the coastal trail of Santa Cruz Island offered stunning views of bays and pristine coastline, but no wildlife sightings. We were disappointed because we heard that most visitors spot the docile, endangered island fox on Santa Cruz. We hiked back down the steep hill and while eating our lunch in the shade, we heard a little boy shout, "Fox, fox!" We pivoted on the picnic bench just in time to watch the sly, small fox amble across the dirt path and disappear into the brush.

After our hike, we joined a Discovery Cave

Sea Kayak Tour for a 1.5-hour paddling tour of the coastline, navigating into deep caves and over kelp forests. As we paddled around a huge rock, we were rewarded with a birders' dream: a steep cliff covered with dozens of nests filled with Brandt's cormorants sitting on their eggs flashing their breeding plumage and cobalt blue throats. They are the largest cormorant on the Pacific Coast, and expert divers that can swim deeper than 200 feet searching for fish.

### **Ventura**

We spent two nights in Ventura so we would be close to the harbor for the early-morning departure to the Channel Islands. A coastal surfer town, Ventura also offers visitors a historic mission, botanical gardens and local art on colorful tile murals. We stayed at the Crowne Plaza, right on the beach and two blocks from town. The pedestrian-only Main Street is packed with restaurants serving outdoors as well as indoors. Ventura boasts a beer culture, with creative craft brewing that is second-to-none. One evening we grabbed a pint and relaxed in the garden of Topa Topa Brewing Co. on Colt Street. This where all their brewing magic and creativity takes place.

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