

A Local Secret: Monterey and Santa Cruz

Convention CentersDestinations

BY KATHARINE FONG ON JUNE 01, 2015

Refreshing alternatives to Bay Area meetings scene



Lone Cypress, Pebble Beach

Most planners look to the obvious spots when pulling together a meeting in the San Francisco Bay Area—San Francisco or Silicon Valley, with a detour to Napa Valley. While these are great places to meet, they also come with the flip side of major tourist attractions: traffic and crowds.

Monterey and Santa Cruz counties are a refreshing alternative. A relatively short distance south of San Francisco and San Jose, they are convenient, extraordinarily scenic and well set up for groups.

Krista Rupp, sales and marketing manager of the [Santa Cruz County Conference and Visitors Council](#) (CVC), likes to tell prospective visitors that her county is a microcosm of all the great things California has to offer.

“In Santa Cruz, you get the best elements of California,” Rupp says. “You have the beaches and coast, redwoods and mountains, rolling vineyards and wineries. You get a taste of a lot of California—really close to the Bay Area.”

The same is true for Monterey County. “It’s beautiful,” says John David Van Kirk, media relations specialist for the [Monterey County Convention & Visitors Bureau](#) (MCCVB). “There’s the ocean, our coastal climate—we have no snow. We have golf, the aquarium. And we have a diversity of meeting spaces.”

So planners, take note of these excellent alternatives to the usual Bay Area hubs. They’re sure to [stimulate the senses—and the meeting.](#)



Rendering of renovated Monterey Conference Center

Monterey County

Monterey County is filled with iconic California experiences and imagery, from breathtaking Big Sur on Highway 1 and Cannery Row to frolicking otters, the fabled links at Pebble Beach and superb wineries. There are a dozen cities and towns and a population of 415,000 across its 3,371 sq. mi., including Monterey, Carmel-by-the-Sea and Carmel Valley.

The county's popularity among visitors is trending up. According to the most recent figures released by MCCVB, overnight visitation jumped from 3.5 million in 2013 to 4.3 million in 2014—an increase of 22 percent. Occupancy rates increased to 67.8 percent in 2014—4 percent higher than in 2013. And 2014 travel spending in the county was \$2.6 billion, a 4.4 percent increase from 2013.

“Since 2009, we’ve seen a steady increase in our leads,” Van Kirk says. “People are willing to spend again.”

The bulk of visitors come from the drive market, including San Francisco, Sacramento, San Jose and Los Angeles. But travel by plane is easy: Monterey Regional Airport (MRY) offers direct flights to and from Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Phoenix, San Francisco and San Diego.

Van Kirk points out that the CVB has six regional sales offices throughout the United States; he has noticed quite a few visitors from Texas, among other places.

He also says that the international travel trade market is growing, especially from China. “They’re ready for other destinations on the West Coast,” he says. “We know that Monterey is targeted [by Chinese tour operators]. We’re already a stop; we’re starting to become a destination.” He notes that direct flights from China to San Jose International Airport (SJC) have helped, and says that the CVB has been aggressively courting Chinese business with “a website in their language” and “travel trade informational sheets translated to Mandarin.”



Event at National Steinbeck Center, Salinas

Meeting Facilities Spruce Up

The big meeting news in Monterey, however, is the upcoming renovation of the 38-year-old, 41,000-square-foot [Monterey Conference Center](#). The \$45 million renovation will create more flexible meeting space and more usable prefunction space, and add advanced technology. [The new center](#), aiming for LEED Silver designation, will have the ability to host multiple meetings simultaneously.

The center will be closed during construction from November to summer 2016, when the first floor reopens. The grand opening will be in early 2017. Hotels around it, including the adjacent 379-room [Portola Hotel & Spa](#) and 341-room [Monterey Marriott](#), will be open for business throughout. Portola offers 50,000 sq. ft. of indoor space; Marriott has 16,500 sq. ft. of event space. In addition to the convention center renovation, Monterey County's premier properties are sprucing up. The 550-guest-room [Hyatt Regency Monterey Hotel & Spa](#), for example, completed a \$6 million upgrade of its 40,000-square-foot conference center and ballroom last year. The theme of the redesign is “land, edge, sea” and is based on poet Robinson Jeffers’ line about Monterey being “the greatest meeting of land and sea.”



Bernardus Lodge & Spa

The new owners of Forbes Four Star, 28-acre **Bernardus Lodge & Spa** just finished a four-month, multimillion dollar renovation of its lobby and 57 guest rooms. The design reflects a rustic chic ambience in keeping with the rugged Santa Lucia Mountains nearby, including Italian stonework, mosaic tiles and French oak flooring. New Lucia Restaurant & Bar serves 120 and now features an additional 2,300 sq. ft. of alfresco dining space and a craft cocktail program. Bernardus' 4,300 sq. ft. of meeting space also received technological upgrades.



Quail Lodge & Golf Club, Carmel-by-the-Sea

Carmel Valley Ranch, with 10,000 sq. ft. of indoor meeting space, will add 30 guest rooms to its current 139 and a brand new pool this summer. **Quail Lodge & Golf Club** features 93 guest rooms and meeting space for up to 220. It just reopened its golf course, with new tee boxes and bunkers, and a completely redesigned layout. Edgar's restaurant is located at the golf clubhouse.



Monterey Jazz Festival

New Venues

The county has seen some exciting venue developments of late. **Seventh & Dolores** in Carmel-by-the-Sea is a new, dedicated event space with its own commercial kitchen; one 2,300-square-foot room can host up to 190, and the 600-square-foot room can hold up to 40. The entrance is large enough to accommodate an automobile; floor-to-ceiling windows, white walls, an outdoor fire pit, and advanced technology and A/V make for very dramatic events.

Wave Street Studios off Cannery Row in Monterey is a multistory media production and private events venue with 3,300 sq. ft. of indoor and outdoor space. In addition to professional sound and lighting, the studio offers bar and food service, table and linen rentals and wait staff. Most distinctive are the tearoom, eco-garden, heated benches and interior stone walls (the building is chiseled into a gigantic granite boulder).

In downtown Salinas, **201 Main** can host up to 1,400 in 26,000 sq. ft. of event space, opened last fall. It offers two function rooms and several dining and entertainment venues, including an outdoor “Tuscan piazza” with TV/projector capabilities, fire pits, patio heaters and a waterfall. The basement, also available for events, was once a bank vault.

Celebrated Restaurant **1833** in downtown Monterey has a new chef, Jason Franey, and a revitalized menu. The interior, including its private dining rooms available for special events, has been completely remodeled.

Big Fish Grill, formerly Rappa’s, just opened at Monterey’s Fisherman’s Wharf. Owned by the same group that handles Whaling Station Steakhouse in Monterey and Beach House Restaurant at Lovers Point in Pacific Grove, the new restaurant offers private space and is available for buyouts.



Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk

Santa Cruz County

Santa Cruz County, with a population of about 260,000, is situated on California’s Central Coast, 65 miles south of San Francisco and 35 miles north of Monterey. In addition to the city of Santa Cruz, famed for its Boardwalk, surfing and University of California, Santa Cruz, the county has many smaller towns and villages, and expansive parks, beaches and open space.

Among the towns to visit or possibly consider as home base for meetings are Aptos, Capitola/Soquel, Scotts Valley and Watsonville.

With mild weather, incredible ocean and mountain landscapes and small-town ease, the area is appealing to groups who want to experience the quintessential—and a tad unconventional—Golden State.

Six Reasons to Meet

The **Santa Cruz CVC** emphasizes six reasons the county is a winner for groups:

-Sense of place. Its unique setting and casual vibe lend themselves to productive and creative meetings; the city of Santa Cruz has been tagged among the top five most artistic cities in the country by The Atlantic, which also dubbed the metropolitan area the second healthiest in the nation.

-Coastal location. The county has 29 miles of south-facing coastline and resulting favorable weather near year-round; it’s only 30 miles from San Jose International Airport (SJC) and 60 miles from San Francisco International Airport (SFO).

-Variety of venues. Choose mountain, town or beach; the county has 3,500 guest rooms and 160,000 sq. ft. of meeting space—from intimate venues for private retreats to large hotels.



Drumming circles for corporate groups

-Unique team building. Includes ropes courses, scavenger hunts, ziplining, drumming, eco-tours, standup paddle-boarding and surfing. CSR activities can involve a beach clean-up, planting trees and more. The county has more than 60 parks and public spaces.

-Great value. During the winter season and when the bigger cities are crowded with mega-events, Santa Cruz offers competitive pricing.



Meeting room at Seascaple Beach Resort Monterey Bay, Aptos

-Expert service. The CVC provides resources and assistance to planners, including a comprehensive venues listing and RFPs from its website.

Santa Cruz does not have a convention center, and therefore, Rupp says, it is ideal for small groups. Groups come from all over, but Rupp says the drive market accounts for most of the meetings business in Santa Cruz, including Sacramento, San Francisco and Silicon Valley.

“We focus on corporate and small to medium size groups,” Rupp says. “We’re targeting strategic board meetings, team-building events, training sessions and small conferences offsites. Our sweet spot is a couple hundred people.”

Seascaple Beach Resort, for example, in the charming seaside village of Aptos, has 17,000 sq. ft. of meeting space with 15 conference rooms—most with ocean views. It can host a group of up to 200, and also offers a range of team-building activities including sailing, culinary challenges, ropes courses and more.

Silicon Beach

Because of its proximity to Silicon Valley, Santa Cruz (aka Silicon Beach) is proving to be an increasingly popular draw for those who want a change from the tech epicenter—but remain connected. “It’s a really cool contrast with its beach vibe and surf culture,” Rupp says, “but [the services and amenities mean tech] still permeates. It’s a mashup of work life and personal life. We’re a great location, close to the hustle and bustle and innovation of the city but separate enough and with its own little vibe.”

The city of Santa Cruz, with a population of 60,000, has attracted several tech company headquarters and satellite offices, including Amazon, which will soon open a local coworking space.

One local business based in the city has already created a buzz: Santa Cruz Surf Office was designed with entrepreneurs, techies and digital nomads in mind. It's a communal live/work space available for up to 11 working visitors, and includes a fully equipped kitchen, high-speed Internet and Wi-Fi, an office with all the accoutrements, call space, a yoga room, surfboard and wetsuit storage, and a free weekly car ride to San Francisco. Of course, it's a stone's throw from legendary surf spot Steamer Lane.

And don't forget the [Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk](#), considered the best seaside park in the world and in operation since 1907. Admission is free, as is summer entertainment; the wooden roller coaster still thrills, as does the mix of vintage and modern games. The boardwalk offers group food and fun packages on Aloha Terrace and Beach Deck as well as discounted ride tickets. It doesn't get better than that.

Make Plans Now

Monterey and Santa Cruz counties are [local secrets for their beauty and recreational](#) offerings. They're also top-notch spots for groups and meetings—and a secret no more.

Resources

-Monterey County Convention & Visitors Bureau

seemonterey.com

-Santa Cruz County Conference and Visitors Council

santacruzca.org



Monterey Bay Aquarium

Monterey County by the Numbers

-12,000 guest rooms

-250 hotels and resorts

-700-plus restaurants

-99 miles of coastline

-28 world-renown golf courses

-More than 100 art galleries

-40,000 acres of vineyards producing 42 grape varieties

-20 state parks and beaches

-65 degrees average daily temperature year-round

-No. 1 tourist attraction on the Central Coast: [Monterey Bay Aquarium](#)



Point Lobos State Natural Reserve

Monterey's Main Attractions

- AT&T Pebble Beach National Pro-Am is traditionally held in February.
- Elkhorn Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve has a visitor center and five miles of trails; seasonal wildlife; great for CSR; prime kayaking spot.
- Monterey Bay Aquarium is well worth a visit; it can host up to 2,500.
- Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary is one of the most spectacular marine protected areas.
- Monterey Jazz Festival attracts top musicians; traditionally held in September.
- National Steinbeck Center showcases John Steinbeck's writings and the history of the Monterey area; the Steinbeck Festival is held in May.
- Point Lobos State Natural Reserve is a gem of a park offering rocky outcroppings, roaring ocean, wildlife in abundance.



Major Meeting Venues

Carmel-by-the-Sea/Carmel Valley

Bernardus Lodge & Spa

Luxury hotel with winery; recent multimillion-dollar lobby renovation features Italian stonework and French oak flooring; 57 guest rooms; 4,300 sq. ft. of meeting space.

Carmel Mission Inn

Pet-friendly hotel in Carmel-by-the-Sea; largest full-service hotel and conference center in Carmel; accommodates up to 300 guests; 165 guest rooms; 4,500 sq. ft. of meeting space.

Carmel Valley Ranch

Idyllic property in Santa Lucia Mountains; miles of hiking trails, mountaintop yoga; apiary and organic garden; 18-hole Pete Dye golf course; 10,000 sq. ft. of meeting space; 139 guest rooms.

Hyatt Carmel Highlands

Newly renovated property overlooking Big Sur coast; outdoor heated pool; Pacific's Edge restaurant features American/continental cuisine; 48 guest rooms; 4,945 sq. ft. of meeting space.

Quail Lodge & Golf Club

Located in Carmel Valley, with quiet, country club atmosphere; refurbished 18-hole golf course; 93 guest rooms; more than 8,500 sq. ft. of meeting and banquet space.

Monterey

Asilomar Conference Grounds

Historic Arts and Crafts-style property on 107 protected acres in Pacific Grove; 312 guest rooms; 30,000 sq. ft. of meeting space; ideal for team building.

Hilton Garden Inn Monterey

Business-friendly property close to the beach, Cannery Row and Monterey Bay Aquarium; 204 guest rooms; 6,500 sq. ft. of meeting space.

Hyatt Regency Monterey Hotel & Spa

Modern property on Del Monte Golf Course; \$6 million ballroom renovation; full-service spa; 550 guest rooms; 43,000 sq. ft. of indoor and outdoor meeting space; two heated outdoor pools; preferred tee times for guests; bicycle rental.

InterContinental The Clement Monterey

On historic Cannery Row; fitness center; spa; 208 guest rooms; 15,000 sq. ft. of meeting space; outdoor courtyard with fire pits.

Monterey Bay Aquarium

Accommodates up to 2,500 for evening tour of its 35,000 sea creatures; smaller groups of up to 300 can opt for the Ocean Edge Wing or Open Sea Wing experience; one boardroom holds up to 50.

Monterey Marriott

Downtown's only high-rise hotel connects by footbridge to Monterey Convention Center; area attractions a short drive away; 341 guest rooms; 56,000 sq. ft. of meeting space; views of Monterey Bay.

Monterey Plaza Hotel & Spa

Perched directly over Monterey Bay; ballroom and Schooners Coastal Kitchen restaurant have dramatic ocean views; 11,000-square-foot spa; 290 guest rooms; 47,000 sq. ft. of event space.

Pebble Beach Resorts

Collection of three resorts, The Lodge at Pebble Beach, The Inn at Spanish Bay and Casa Palmero; multiple fine-dining restaurants; spa; four golf courses including the world-famous Pebble Beach Golf Links; total of 454 guest rooms and 28,260 sq. ft. of meeting space.

Portola Hotel & Spa at Monterey Bay

Steps from harbor and coastal trails; two eateries; 379 guest rooms; 50,000 sq. ft. of meeting space; new gigabit Ethernet network rivals speeds usually found only in the largest convention halls.

Unscripted Monterey

Trendy East Coast import with bay views; rooms offer "color therapy," memory-foam mattresses, light-based alarms that simulate dawn; 196 guest rooms; 9,056 sq. ft. of meeting space.

Ventana Big Sur

Adults-only luxury retreat on famous rugged coastline south of Monterey; check-in includes wine and cheese reception and Pilates session; 60 guest rooms; 8,000 sq. ft. of meeting space; two pools.

Wild Things/Vision Quest

Salinas animal sanctuary offers 10,000-square-foot enclosed pavilion, meeting rooms and large lawns for events; eight luxury safari-style bungalows; animals can appear at events.