

Travel Feature Story

Magical Moments in Monterey

The Monterey Bay area offers much to do or nothing to do, it's your choice

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Moonlight over the Monterey Bay

Whenever I feel the weight of the world pressing down on me it's to the water I go. So I was off to Monterey Bay for a breath of sea air, a sight of great beauty, the sound of the waves caressing the rocks and a taste of the ocean.

Monterey Bay is an easy five-hour drive up the 101 or an even easier flight. I chose to drive so I could enjoy the scenery (driving is always my first choice; flying is such a hassle these days).

Our first stop was to check into the Monterey Plaza Hotel. Located on Cannery Row, the hotel sits perched over the bay. Views from our room were spectacular with the expanse of the bay laid out before us.

The property offers a spa on the top floor and guests are invited to enjoy the roof-top whirlpool tubs with views of the water, the sundeck with fireplace, fitness center, and steam rooms. Hotel guests are also given a locker, robe and slippers just like spa customers.

Dinner that night was in close-by Pacific Grove at the Jeninni Kitchen + Wine Bar. Jeninni offers a contemporary take on the cuisines of the Mediterranean Coast. Chef Jeffrey Weiss takes his love of Spanish cuisine and marries it to other Mediterranean fare. Whereas proprietor Thamin Saleh uses his knowledge of wines to create the restaurant's eclectic wine menu.

The menu for the restaurant changes daily making use of available seasonal fresh ingredients. It features small plates and entrees to share along with house-made sausages and Chef's charcuterie plates. Speaking of

charcuterie, Chef Weiss has written a book “Charcuteria: The Soul of Spain.” He’ll be traveling to New York to receive an award for his book.

We began our meal with a glass of fruity, bright, Toscolo, Chianti and a plate of warmed flat bread with olives and choice of two dips: chickpea hummus, smoked trout dip, bab ghanoush, spicy broccoli pesto, cervelle de canut (a creamy cheese dip) or Goat cheese fromage blanc -za’atar (a Middle-Eastern spice blend that Thamin obtains in his home country of Palestine). We had the smoky trout dip and the sweet cervelle de canut. What a treat from the usual pita and hummus.



Eggplant fries

We also tried the baby gem fattoush salad which was served on a bed of Goat cheese and dressed with a bright lemon dressing. The baby gem lettuce was so tender and the combination of Goat cheese and lemon was inspired.

A dish that is always on the menu due to popular demand is the crispy octopus. The octopus is very tender almost fillet mignon-like with a lightly charred exterior. The addition of the spicy Calabrian chile and sweet-tart lemon mermelada is icing on the cake.

Two fluffy buns encased pork belly that was topped with pomegranate molasses and pickled chilies. Called Shawarma pork buns, the little “tacos” were rich, sweet and spicy with refreshing slices of cucumber to cool the palate.



Black cod with tahini

Side dishes of Brussels sprouts, eggplant fries and mushrooms were encouraged by the waiter. I’m sure you all know my feeling about Brussels sprouts: yuck, but these were so freaking good. Fried crispy, tossed with raisins, freekah (roasted green wheat) and served on a bed of chorizo sauce these sprouts made me a convert. Killer-yummy!

For those of you who stay away from eggplant, Jeninni's eggplant fries will make you change your mind. The slightly acidic taste that some people object to is removed and the eggplant spears are lightly breaded and fried until crispy on the outside and tender on the inside. I don't know how Chief Weiss does it but the fries are not greasy and when dipped in the honey aioli that is served on the side they are perfection.

Chef Weiss likes to call his sauteed mushroom caps "escargot with out the snail", they are everything that is good about escargot: buttery, garlicky, and herby.

For our final dish we enjoyed a piece of fresh-off-the-boat black cod grilled with tahini sauce and served with grilled shishito peppers. The cod was a tender-juicy plate of the best the ocean has to offer.

It was a short waddle to our car and a quick drive to the hotel. The over-stuffed beds were calling our names. As I was closing the blinds, I noticed the full-moon shinning over the bay. What a beautiful sight, the moon so bright the light danced it's way across the tranquil waters.

The next morning we were going to visit the Aquarium and I was so happy that we could walk. The Monterey Plaza Hotel is very centrally located with easy walks to the Aquarium, Cannery Row and Fisherman's Wharf.

What a wondrous place the Aquarium is. One side of it is dedicated to the wildlife near the shore and the other side to the animals farther out in the ocean. We started with the shore animals first. All the exhibits are truly wonderful but I spent a lot of my time in the aviary. Shore birds of all types frolicked on the sandy shore of the enclosure. A very knowledgeable docent was able to tell us how old each bird was. Every one of the birds was a rescue.



Aviary at Monterey Aquarium

I also loved the otter enclosure. I missed the feeding but got to watch the playful otters skim across the water. They are so darn cute.

For lunch we walked in the opposite direction toward the Wharf to Jacks Restaurant in the Portola Hotel. Jacks serves breakfast, brunch, lunch and dinner and has dishes suited to the Monterey area. We began with a bowl of Jacks Signature Chowder; a creamy affair filled with clams, Dungeness crab, roasted corn and bacon. Rich and full of seafood the chowder could be a meal in itself.



Crabcake salad and onion rings

I ordered the crispy Dungeness crab cake salad with artisan lettuce tossed in a white Balsamic vinaigrette and accented with smoked tomato relish and lemon aioli. It was crispy, refreshing and enjoying. I also had an order of onion rings because you can't live on salad alone. They were thick-cut and crispy, just right.

My companion had an order of fish and chips made with an ale batter and fresh cod. The batter was light not over-bearing with a nice crunch and full of flaky cod.

One of the nice things about Jacks is that it is a short walk away from Fisherman's Wharf which I just had to visit. We headed straight to the end and to the roof of Rappa's for views of Seaside, Moss Landing, and Santa Cruz. Also on view from Rappa's roof are sea lions, all sorts of them, lolling in row boats and sunning themselves.

The walk from the hotel to the wharf and back is really enjoyable. A long cement walkway runs along the Bay, it's flat and easy to maneuver. If you're a bike rider the hotel has bikes you can borrow at no extra charge. They are first-come, first-served however so plan accordingly.



Hot tub at the hotel spa, Photo: Monterey Plaza Hotel

Another thing the hotel offers are kayaks. They have a little beach to launch them from. The bay was so calm when we were there, if I had had the time I would have loved to paddle around for an hour or two.

Dinner that night was in Carmel-by-the-Sea, an easy drive from the hotel. Just a note, the hotel also offers its guests a shuttle service so if you don't want to, you don't have to drive your whole stay which is a great perk.

Cantinetta Luca is a cozy Italian restaurant located in the heart of Carmel-by-the-Sea. It's menu has offerings from many of Italy's regions and boasts a real live Italian-American Chef Jason Balestrieri. Chef Balestrieri specializes in handmade pastas, wood-oven baked pizza, unique varieties of house-cured salumi, roasted whole fish and meats served family-style.

We started our meal with a bowl of warm Sicilian olives served with chunks of Pecorino and hints of lemon. If you love olives as I do this is a great start to a meal.

Cantinetta Luca's menu offers an array of hormone and antibiotic free steaks, chops, veal, lamb, pork, and chicken. It would make any New York Italian steak house proud. My companion who is a meat lover ordered the Lonza D'Angello, a roasted 14 ounce Colorado lamb loin chop with a rosemary crumb topping. The menu is a la carte so sauces and sides are extra. With the lamb he ordered a red wine sauce, polenta and sauteed seasonal mushrooms. The lamb was beautifully prepared with a crispy rosemary and bread crumb crust and the wine sauce was a great accompaniment to the savory lamb. The polenta was soft and creamy and the mushrooms were savory. A meal fit for a carnivore.

I on the other hand ordered the house-made tagliatelle with a robust bolognese sauce. The pasta was cooked a perfect al dente and the sauce had that slow-cooked richness that only a good bolognese can impart. Mama mia!

Clouds were on the horizon when we returned to the hotel, a storm was coming in and we were leaving the next day.....bummer.

Before we left we were treated to a breakfast at the Monterey Plaza Hotel's restaurant, Schooners. It's a lovely restaurant right on the water with huge windows and a large porch for al fresco dining. While I tried out the restaurant's huevos rancheros, my companion opted for the two egg breakfast with sausage and hash browns.

I loved my huevos rancheros with the eggs over medium on top of thick, fresh, corn tortillas. The chili ancho salsa was plentiful with a little heat and a lot of flavor. My companion proclaimed the sausage to be juicy and flavorful and the hash browns were some of the best he's ever had.

A fitting end to a wonderful respite.

The 411:

Monterey Plaza Hotel & Spa, 400 Cannery Row, Monterey
(831) 421-0264, www.montereyplazahotel.com

Jeninni Kitchen + Wine Bar, 542 Lighthouse Avenue, Pacific Grove
(831) 920-2662, www.jeninni.com

Monterey Bay Aquarium, 886 Cannery Row, Monterey
(831) 648-4800, www.montereybayaquarium.org

Jacks Restaurant and Lounge, 2 Portola Plaza, Monterey
(831) 649-2698, www.portolahotel.com/dining/jacks

Cantinetta Luca, Dolores Street between Ocean and 7th, Carmel-by-the-Sea
(831) 625-6500, www.cantinettaluca.com