

# CALIFORNIA DREAMIN'

**Big Sur and More in Monterey County**

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# CALIFORNIA COOL

by Jill Fergus

BIG SUR AND  
MORE IN SCENIC  
MONTEREY COUNTY

**EVER SINCE** I saw a photo of the iconic cliff-hugging coastal road in Big Sur, California, I knew I had to make that drive. It's taken me a while to get out there but last fall I finally made it happen—and believe me, cruising along Highway 1, with the Pacific Ocean on one side and towering redwood forests on the other, more than lived up to expectations. But what I didn't realize is that Big Sur is just one gorgeous spot in a county full of them. In fact, all of Monterey County, about two hours south of San Francisco, is blessed with dramatic scenery—not to mention pristine beaches, boutique wineries, charming tasting rooms and organic farms, making it one of the Golden State's most captivating regions.

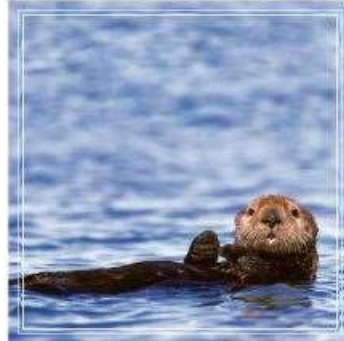
After dropping my bags at the elegant AAA Four Diamond rated Portola Hotel in the town of Monterey, I met up with some friends in Carmel-by-the-Sea. This exclusive enclave, with its gallery-lined streets and storybook “cottages,” attracts many well-known names (Clint Eastwood was once the mayor), as does neighboring Pebble Beach with its famous golf course.

**"Monterey County is blessed with pristine beaches, boutique wineries and organic farms."**

We headed to Carmel Beach, a litter-free, crescent-shaped beauty. Sitting on the sand beside a blazing bonfire sipping a glass of Joyce Vineyards pinot noir, I was transfixed by the sun setting directly over the ocean—still a cause for wonderment for this East Coaster.

In this fertile Central California region, winemaking is a growing industry and tasting rooms have been springing up all over Carmel. There are more than a dozen within a four-block radius—and the best way to experience them is through Wine Walk Passport, where for \$65 you can sample flights in nine tasting rooms. At Caraccioli Cellars, I started with a brut rose sparkling wine and worked up to a chardonnay while the pinot noir and syrah were standouts at Wrath Wines. If you want to visit an actual vineyard, head inland to the family-owned Hahn Estate in the Santa Lucia Highlands wine country.

PHOTOS: SEEMONTREY.COM, MARSH (TOP); AP/WIDE



**Top to bottom:** A Monterey Bay seascape, a friendly sea otter in Monterey Bay and Hahn Estate Winery in the Santa Lucia Highlands. **Opposite Page:** The iconic Bixby Bridge on the Pacific Coast Highway.



Aside from viniculture, this area is a major agricultural center with endless fields of artichokes, lettuce and other greens, earning Salinas Valley the nickname “Salad Bowl of the World.” Salinas is also known as the birthplace of Pulitzer- and Nobel-prize winning author John Steinbeck. Main Street’s National Steinbeck Center has artifacts, old black-and-white photos and displays on his life and most famous works including *Of Mice and Men*, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *East of Eden*. We lunched at Patria, a stylish newcomer with pastas, tapas and flatbread pizzas (the butternut squash topped with gruyere cheese and local Castroville artichokes got raves from the table).

In Steinbeck’s novel *Cannery Row*, he memorably writes about the sardine canneries on the Monterey peninsula and the hardscrabble people who worked in them. Today, that stretch of bayfront has been transformed into a lively

entertainment district dubbed Cannery Row (in honor of the book). The old Hovden Cannery, the largest on the “row,” now houses the world-famous Monterey Bay Aquarium, while other warehouses have been turned into hotels, restaurants and shops. At nearby Old Fisherman’s Wharf, a historic pier built in 1845, take a whale watching tour, sample seafood like sand dabs (a Pacific flatfish) in open-air clam bars and seafood restaurants and be sure to keep an eye out for sea otters and harbor seals frolicking in Monterey Bay.

Steps from the bay is the Monterey Old Town Historic District with the oldest government building in California, the Custom House, a 1820s adobe built during Mexican rule and Casa del Oro, a former general store. From there, it’s a five-minute walk back to the Portola, a 379-room upscale hotel with a spa and Peter B’s, Monterey’s only craft brewery. In terms of culinary offerings, you’ll find that the Monterey

PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK



PHOTO: ZERIKORRENTZON, JAMES HALL, DAVID PERROTTI

*Clockwise from top: A produce field in the Salinas Valley, Big Sur Roadhouse and the Monterey Bay Customs House.*

