

# The Mercury News

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## Beyond Cannery Row: Exploring Monterey, without the crowds

By Lisa Wrenn  
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*Thanks to the beautiful Coastal Recreation Trail, you can easily explore Monterey on foot, from Cannery Row to Fisherman's Wharf and the historic adobes and hot restaurants downtown. (Patrick Tehan/Bay Area News Group)*

"So imagine this filled with tables and people, there's mariachi music from the stage, the wine is flowing," explained Michael D. Green, a park ranger and enthusiastic tour guide, waving his arm across the flower-filled Memory Garden in the courtyard behind California's first Custom House.

Green is describing "La Merienda," the annual Monterey History and Art Association event that re-creates a fiesta from the romantic pre-Gold Rush era, when California belonged to Mexico and colorful vaqueros sped across its hills and valleys on fast horses and entertained lavishly at their opulent rancheros.

"People are talking, the wine is flowing," he continued. "And over there (gesturing toward a corner), Leon Panetta is working the grill. Leon always comes." He's referring, of course, to the former U.S. secretary of defense and CIA chief, who retired to his family's Carmel Valley ranch some years ago.

The courtyard was the final stop in what had turned out to be a private walking tour of the venerable buildings and gardens near Monterey's historic waterfront, a stone's throw from touristy Fisherman's Wharf.



As we wandered in and out of centuries-old buildings and fragrant gardens, Green delivered a crash course in Central California history, from Spanish explorer Sebastian Vizcaino's 1602 discovery of Monterey Bay through the area's various periods ruled by Spain, then Mexico and ultimately the United States. Within just a few blocks, we learned the stories behind everything from the signing of California's first constitution to how in 1848, at the end of the U.S.-Mexican War, a lodging house and bar were converted into the state's first theater, where musicals were performed to sold-out crowds, who paid an

exorbitant \$5 a head.

We toured the old Customs House and heard about the ships sailing from Boston and China, with goods to trade for the hides and tallow rendered from the huge herds of cattle that ranged freely across California's rolling hills, and about the house where the young Robert Louis Stevenson stayed during his sojourn in Central California.

We'd happened on the \$5 hour-long tour -- offered several times a day, depending on time of year -- while poking around historic buildings behind the Portola Hotel & Spa, which turned out to be an excellent home base for spending an entire weekend exploring the city by foot.

It was a break from how my husband and I usually spend a weekend on the scenic Monterey Peninsula. Between Carmel Valley wine tasting, Carmel gallery hopping, Point Lobos hiking or, perhaps, Monterey Aquarium browsing, we usually spend more time than we'd like in the car, hopscotching from whim to whim.

This trip would be different. The goal was to abandon our car in downtown Monterey for the weekend and see where our feet would take us. As it turns out, Monterey is a great walking town, especially in spring when everything is in bloom. It's the only place I've ever been where you can follow plates embedded in the sidewalk to mark a historic route and find yourself crossing another set of plates marking a whole different historic walk.

In fact, within the roughly 1.5-mile rectangular downtown area you'll find the largest concentration of historic buildings in the West, comparable to Boston and its Freedom Trail, though on a smaller scale. Some are museums, some are in modern-day use as offices or restaurants, others are just to be noted as part of the area's storyline.

And of course, history is just part of it. The downtown area itself -- with its bustling shops, restaurants and bars round Alvarado Street, is worth exploring just on its own -- with numerous choices for meals, coffee or a glass of wine. Head west and you can easily walk, run or bike along the paved, two-lane Coastal Recreation trail that begins north of the city and follows the coastline past Fisherman's Wharf to Cannery Row, past the always alluring and mobbed Monterey Bay Aquarium, all the way down to where the waves crash into the cliffs at Lover's Point.

#### WHERE TO STAY:

The Portola Hotel & Spa, at the base of Alvarado Street, is ideally located for exploring the historic downtown's shops, bars and restaurants, Fisherman's Wharf and Cannery Row, which is a scenic 15-minute walk -- or free trolley ride -- away. Like the conference center next to it, the hotel is currently in the middle of a major renovation, which includes a makeover of its enormous atrium like lobby (slated for completion in September) and room and bathroom upgrades. Among its 379 rooms, a number have balconies with various city, wharf and bay views. Facilities also include a full fitness complex, the Spa on the Plaza, an outdoor pool with cabanas, Jack's Restaurant & Lounge, and the popular-with-locals Peter B's brewpub, which are all open during the renovation. For more details, rates and reservations: [www.portolahotel.com](http://www.portolahotel.com).

#### HERE ARE SOME DISCOVERIES TO EXPLORE ON FOOT:

**Monterey Art Museum:** The downtown venue -- one of two locations -- is just a couple of blocks from the shops and restaurants on Alvarado. The interior, with its clean craftsman lines, is so beautifully renovated you'd never imagine it was once a funeral parlor, though that explains the chapel-like setting in the room now used for lectures. Its well-curated permanent collection features plein-air landscape paintings depicting the area, but there are also the requisite photos by Edward Weston, Ansel Adams and others drawn to the natural beauty of the Central Coast. 559 Pacific St. Open Thursday-Monday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.; [www.montereyart.org](http://www.montereyart.org)

**Colton Hall Museum:** Admission is free to this mini-museum, where we had the place to ourselves to poke about the large room that served not just as California's first school house, but also as the site where the state's founding constitution was debated and ratified in 1849. The walls of California's version of Philadelphia's Independence Hall are covered with photos, declarations and other memorabilia documenting the extraordinary story of this building. Outside on the spacious lawn, a mama grizzly and her cubs frolic in the form of life-size bronze sculptures by Kris Swanson, commissioned to celebrate the city's bicentennial in 2000. 570 Pacific St. Open daily from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.; [www.monterey.org/museums](http://www.monterey.org/museums)

Secret gardens: As you amble through town, and especially around the historic buildings near the Custom House, you can't help but be lured into the hidden patios and gardens behind the adobe walls. The gardens bloom with climbing roses, wisteria and the occasional exotic tree brought in by an early settler, along with a huge variety of native flora. Volunteers from Monterey's Historic Garden League have partnered with the California State Parks workers to restore and maintain these botanical gems. You can find out more about official tours at their website, but you can also just wander into most and enjoy them on your own. [www.historicgardenleague.org](http://www.historicgardenleague.org)

Alvarado Street: This five-block stretch, which extends east from the city's historic plaza, is lined with restaurants, bars, cafes and shops. Its here you'll also find the newly renovated 1,300-seat Golden State Theatre, which hosts lectures, plays and concerts. Judy Collins and Art Garfunkel, among others, are on the calendar this year, as is comedian Lewis Black. [www.goldenstatetheatre.com](http://www.goldenstatetheatre.com)

San Carlos Beach: On any weekend morning, this grassy park is home to human sea creatures, creating a surreal scene as they wriggle into black wetsuits and gingerly pick their way into the water to join dozens of others bobbing in the bay. The day we were there, we saw a large crowd getting suited up for the annual "underwater Easter egg hunt." Where Cannery Row intersects with Reeside Avenue.

Homegrown art galleries: At the north end of Cannery Row, two green carriage houses have been converted into galleries, offering a huge selection of art, most of it local. One is the Monterey Peninsula Art Foundation co-op with rooms of paintings, photos, sculpture and jewelry. Next door, Cheryl Watts Pottery & Gallery houses works of internationally recognized area artists, including painters Dick Crispo and Anthony LoSchiavo. The gregarious Watts, whose pottery wheel and studio are on the premises, is celebrating 25 years in the space, knows the artists well and will happily walk you through their works, regaling you with stories.

417 Cannery Row

#### La Merienda

What: Monterey's annual celebration features a barbecue buffet capped off by a 75-foot birthday cake, and live entertainment with mariachis and folklorico dancers. Guests are invited to dress in 18th-century costume for the event, which is sponsored by the Monterey History and Art Association (MHAA).

When: June 4 from 11:15 a.m.-3:00 p.m.

Where: Memory Garden, 20 Custom House Plaza, Monterey

Tickets: \$65 per person; \$55 for MHAA members; [www.montereyhistoryandart.org](http://www.montereyhistoryandart.org)

Walking tours: Ranger-led walking tours of the historic area around Custom House leave from the Pacific House Museum Fridays-Sundays (also Thursdays from May into fall). Tours cost \$5 per person (children under 12 are free) and last 45-60 minutes. Find more information at [www.parks.ca.gov/mshp](http://www.parks.ca.gov/mshp).