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The Most Magical Road Trip: Monterey

2015/12/10 | [Amber Guetebier](#)

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There's no reason for this to be the winter of your discontent, just pack 'em in like sardines and drive south. A little over two hours from San Francisco, Monterey makes the perfect family getaway for a day (or two) of play. Read on to find out where to take your smallest Steinbecks in and around this laid back seaside town.



photo: [Dave](#) via flickr



Stay

[Portola Hotel & Spa](#)

There's a wide variety of overnight accommodations in the Monterey area but for a hotel that will take your road trip to mini-vacation, stay at the [Portola Hotel & Spa](#). Located right in downtown Monterey, it's an easy walk to restaurants, Fisherman's Wharf, beaches and other historic sites and museums. You'll get a luxe vacation experience without stressing that the kids are too noisy, there's a sweet outdoor pool (we went in even in November and the water was fine!) and jacuzzi, and mom can book a spa treatment without having to trek too far. Every guest gets a warm cookie upon check in, and kids can join the [Portola Pirate Club](#) which includes a scavenger hunt, cool pirate bag and a membership that allows them to collect prizes with every stay. The first hunt includes lobby exploration and a trek through the adjacent Candyland (you've been warned). Both on-site restaurants, Jack's and Peter B.'s Brewpub welcome little diners with the Portola Pirates Menu. Room service (which delivers until 11 p.m.) also has a great selection of kid's food. As an added bonus, the hotel offers a VIP Pet Program, with amenities like outdoor pet dining areas at Jacks & Peter B's, pet beds, water and food bowls, so the whole family really can join. Winter specials from \$199.

2 Portola Plaza
Monterey, Ca
888-222-5851

Online: portolahotel.com



photo: Amber Guetebier

Eat

Monterey Bay Aquarium's cafe and the Portola Hotel both sport great in-house options for kids meals. Within a short walk of Portola Plaza along Alvarado St., you'll find pubs, sandwiches, Starbucks, bagels and even a Pinkberry. Go beyond and get your brew from boho-favorite Caffe Trieste (409 Alvarado St.) and grab a donut from [Red's Donuts](#), pumping out deliciousness since 1950 (433 Alvarado St.). They're open Tues.–Sat., 6:30 a.m.–1:30 p.m. and Sun.–Mon., 6:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m.

About halfway between downtown and the Aquarium along Lighthouse Ave. you'll find a variety of food in just a couple of blocks (between McClellan and Hoffman Avenues). Sushi, pizza and tacos are all great options for kids. We love [Taqueria del Mar](#) (530 Lighthouse Ave.) for its friendly, fast service, generous portions and relaxed vibe.

Play

The Monterey Bay Aquarium

No trip to the area is complete without exploring the world-renowned Monterey Bay Aquarium. Don't miss Tentacles: the whimsical, Jules-Verne influenced excursion through the world of cephalopods, packed with hands-on exhibits and kiddo-eye level tanks. Because the Aquarium is so awesome, you should allot at least 4 hours to explore. There are otter and shark feedings and [other daily programs](#), an entire play area geared toward the younger crowd (upstairs) that includes water play and other handsy fun and even a baby tumble zone for the littlest sharks. For a truly unforgettable experience, kids ages 8-13 can enroll in the [Underwater Explorers](#) program. Read all about it [here](#). Not far from the main entrance of the Aquarium you'll find Cannery Row, made famous by John Steinbeck in his novel by the same name. Now a shopping area, you can take a little stretch and grab a bite or snag a sea-themed trinket to remember your trip by.

Tip: look on nearby side streets for metered parking. There are some streets that offer 12 hour parking. While you'll need to feed the meter, it still is cheaper than the parking lot at the Aquarium.

Hours: 10 a.m.–5 p.m.

866 Cannery Row

Monterey, Ca

831-648-4800

Online: montereybayaquarium.org



photo: [Greg Clemenson](#) via flickr

The Monarch Grove Sanctuary

If you want to wow the kids take them on a short journey to one of the most magnificent and truly unique sites in California: the nesting Monarch butterflies. From October to February the butterflies overwinter here. Clusters of butterflies hang from the branches of eucalyptus and pine trees in the grove. It's a short walk from the free parking area, and truly a sight to behold. Arrive between noon-3 p.m. when most days, from Nov. to Feb., docents from the [Pacific Grove Museum of Natural History](#) are there to answer questions and enhance your viewing experience. The park is open from sunrise to sunset.

250 Ridge Rd. (between Lighthouse Ave. & Short St.)

Pacific Grove, Ca

831-648-5716

Online: cityofpacificgrove.org



photo: [MYMuseum Yelp biz page](#)

Monterey County Youth Museum

If the weather is looking gloomy or you just want to savor that coffee drink from Caffe Trieste while the tots have a blast, don't miss the oft-overlooked MY Museum. This hands-on museum teaches kids about the area's culture and history through exploration and activities. Climb a tree-house, put on a play, get crafty, ride a tractor and more. This little museum packs a big punch with all the kids and is well worth the stop. Bonus! It's right downtown.

Hours: Tues.–Sat., 10 a.m.–5 p.m., Sun., noon-5 p.m.
425 Washington St.
Monterey, Ca
831-649-6444
Online: mymuseum.org

Fisherman's Wharf

It's hard to miss this iconic wharf which, in spite of its somewhat "tourist trap" vibe is still well worth a sunset stroll with the kiddos. If chowder is your game, there's more than one spot to hit along the wharf, but we loved taking an after-dinner walk where the the littles can gaze at the array of salt water taffy from not one but two different sweet shops. You can see the machines at work from the windows, which will enchant your little engineers almost as much as the ocean-sunset-salt air combo will enchant you.



photo: [Kei Noguchi](#) via flickr

Go Wild

Beaches

Naturally, there's no shortage of beaches in this coastal town. You've probably heard of the fine white sands of [near-by Carmel](#) but Monterey's own sandy stretches are just as sweet for all-ages fun. [Monterey State Beach](#) is great for tidepooling (and sand castle building). Nearby Del Monte Beach is essentially an extension of Monterey State Beach, has dunes and a boardwalk, and the advantage of being across the street from the popular playground at [Dennis the Menace Park](#). If you're staying in downtown and want a spot to catch the serene views, take an easy walk to San Carlos Beach Park, a popular spot for divers.

Kayaking & Seafaring Adventure

[Princess Monterey Whale Watching](#) departs near Fisherman's Wharf and you can book tickets right there. Keep in mind that most whale watching excursions are 2 ½ to 3 hrs. long and most (including Princess) do not allow children under the age of 5 or expecting mothers. For families with littles, take to the sea in a kayak with Monterey Bay Kayaks offers guided kayaking tours in the bay as well as nearby Elkhorn Slough for families including kids as young as 3-years-old!

Monterey Bay Kayaks
Winter Hours: 8:30 a.m.–5 p.m.
693 Del Monte Ave.
Monterey, Ca

Moss Landing (Elkhorn Slough location)
2390 Highway One
Moss Landing, Ca

800-649-5357 or 831-373-5357
Online: montereybaykayaks.com

Looking for More? Check out [our guide to nearby Carmel](#) to extend your family vacay by the sea.

Have you visited Monterey with the kids? What's your favorite family fun in the area?

—Amber Guetebier