

Central Coast Sojourn

Sights, scenes, restaurants and attractions along the Pacific

BY LESLIE A. WESTBROOK

→ **“The girlies like bright, shiny objects,”**

our tour guide, Whitney, warns us at Stepladder Ranch & Creamery, the makers of fine goat and cow cheeses in the hills of Cambria, near the middle of California’s Central Coast.

After my friend Annie and I take a short uphill hike to the goat pasture, we are greeted by a very gentle stampede of female milking goats. I think it’s the one named Flower, described by Whitney as “bossy,” that manages to open my purse by nibbling on the metal zipper. Even so, the gently nudging mothers, and their just-months-old curious kids, easily win our hearts.

In addition to getting up close and personal with these affable animals, we tour the creamery. We sample awesome cheeses named for equally awesome locations on the nearby California coastline, such as Big Sur and Ragged Point (where the world-famous Pacific Coast Highway recently reopened after a 14-

month closure and a \$14 million restoration).

Our time at the ranch is just one of many delightful experiences that my best “girlie” friend and I have cruising the coast of my home state along idyllic California byways—and I’ve enjoyed the Central Coast (which stretches south to the Santa Barbara area and north to Monterey) on other trips, as well. During our girls’ trip, the vistas shift from velvety rolling hills dotted green by California live oaks, to views of the Pacific Ocean and verdant vineyards.

In SLO (San Luis Obispo) County, we follow the California Highway 1 Discovery Route, a lovely ribbon of highway. We spend a night at Allegretto



Vineyard Resort in Paso Robles, and I half expect to see the ghost of a modern-day Medici emerge into the central courtyard of the Italianate art-filled hotel with 171 rooms and suites that has its own stone chapel, vineyard, spa and pool. Our comfortable stay includes a convenient in-house wine-tasting and a lovely dinner at the resort’s Cello Ristorante & Bar.

I begin the next morning with a meditative walk in the resort’s “sonic labyrinth” (open to the public), tracing the winding pathway to the center as an array of speakers plays tones high and low. This time of contemplation and slowing down makes a perfect launch to our SLO County day.

Next up is a bucolic drive to the coast, passing

Clockwise from top: The California Highway 1 Discovery Route is a picturesque drive on the Central Coast; wineries abound in the San Luis Obispo County area; and marine mammals rule the beaches at several coastal locations.



More to Do INSIDE

- At the **Dunes Center**, a small museum in Guadalupe, examine huge film-set remains from nearby sand dunes, where part of the epic 1923 version of *The Ten Commandments* was filmed.
- **Mendenhall Museum of Gasoline Pumps & Petroliana**, in Buellton, features vintage race cars and hot rods, antique gas pumps, neon signs and more cool stuff filling 18 garages.



- The world-famous **Monterey Bay Aquarium** has jaw-dropping exhibits such as the “Open Sea,” with its 90-foot-wide window allowing views of sea turtles, rays and much more.

OUTSIDE

- Visit **Central Coast Kayaks** for an excursion from Avila Bay’s sandy beach to the late-19th century Point San Luis Lighthouse and back.
- The 5-acre **Leaning Pine Arboretum** is tucked into the campus of California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo. Explore a California native garden and other displays.
- At **Covell’s California Clydesdale’s Ranch**, in Cambria, visitors can ride the iconic resident horses, crossing meadows with ocean views. —L.A.W.

several notable Paso Robles wineries on our way. Two examples: The Riboli Family of San Antonio Winery, with its tasting room, bistro and winemaking facility, and Broken Earth Winery (whose wines are being served this fall in Alaska’s First Class).

We drive into the Santa Lucia Range and then enjoy the views as we descend toward the coast.

On past Central Coast adventures, I’ve headed both north and south of here. Just north, in the San

Simeon area, is Hearst Castle, with tours of the hilltop estate that once belonged to news magnate William Randolph Hearst (reserve tickets ahead). Nearby is Piedras Blancas Elephant Seal Rookery, where elephant seals galumph on a protected beach. Still farther north is the scenic, winding Big Sur Highway leading to Monterey, with its famous aquarium and Cannery Row.

To the south, in bustling Pismo Beach, I’ve stopped at Blonde restaurant for chowder with whole clams. I’ve also visited the 18-mile

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Insider Knowledge

Oh, the Central Coast mineral springs! There are several places in SLO County to soak in these nature-fed water features, from Avila Hot Springs and Sycamore Mineral Springs (shown above), both in Avila Beach, to River Oaks Hot Springs Spa, Franklin Hot Springs and the springs at the Paso Robles Inn (hotel guests only).

stretch of sand between Pismo Beach in the north and Rancho Guadalupe Dunes Preserve in the south. Between these two towns, I've followed the two-lane Highway 1 route, with agricultural farmland to the east and the grand Pacific Ocean to the west.

I've also headed inland on Highway 101 to a great refreshment stop with views of the Santa Ynez Valley: the restaurant-bar Norman, at the Skyview Los Alamos motel, offers farm-fresh fare and thirst-quenching herbal elixirs. And, near the Central

Coast region's southern end, in Buellton, I have enjoyed excellent casual dining at Industrial Eats.

Back in the city of San Luis Obispo, we lunch at Giuseppe's Cucina Rustica. Our delightful alfresco meal includes mozzarella cheese in batter-fried zucchini flowers from the owner's farm. Nearby, the new, upscale Hotel Serra is rising downtown (slated to open in spring 2019).

On our adventure, Annie and I also crave barbecue and beer. So, for dinner, we enjoy Blood

Orange Cali-Squeeze beer and pulled pork that's been cooked over local applewood and red oak at the SLO Brew Rock. The year-old outpost of one of the first breweries in the region is adjacent to the San Luis Obispo County Regional Airport. Which makes it an ideal first or last stop on a Central Coast sojourn. ✕

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