

Finding the center of California requires time to explore it

By Susan Wood

CAMBRIA – It's easy to fall in love with the Central Coast of California in autumn – or during any other time of year for that matter.

With so much to do and see, what will soon become apparent on a trip through a region that stretches from Santa Cruz to Santa Barbara is the time allotted to fully take in the varied sights and activities will require that of a vacation hopping countries in Europe.

California has maintained the reputation for being the land of the active. But for the more docile wanting to appreciate the finer tastes and bountiful harvests in life, the Central Coast has emerged with formidable wine regions.



Fall is evident throughout the vineyards of the Central Coast. Photos/Kathryn Reed

Paso Robles (which the locals nickname "Paso") and Santa Ynez

Valley may make the case of being the next Napa and Sonoma valleys.

This is the land of Pinot Noir. But as the more than 200 Paso Robles area wineries such as J. Lohr, Peachy Canyon and Robert Hall have proven, bold tastes may come from bottles of Grenache, Cabernet Sauvignon or even Sauvignon Blanc on a 90-degree day 25 miles east of Cambria.

Cambria, this crown jewel of the Central Coast, represents the proverbial California lifestyle – a quaint town broken up between two villages and a beach where a one-mile boardwalk allows a walker the experience of being on the bluff or in the sands and moonstones.

When the fog doesn't roll in, the sunset brings out all types to Moonstone Beach in the hopes of catching the last-second green flash at the horizon line. It's worth driving hours to see.

Then, there are the stones the beach is named after. Even on an average weekday morning, people were spotted looking down or even digging for the small, bluish rocks.

"The good news is people decided to travel this summer," said MaryAnn Carson, executive director of the Cambria Chamber of Commerce. Carson added that after two bad, recession-spawned years in 2009 and 2010, the town has used 12 major events – to bring people to the region.

San Luis Obispo County assists the promotional efforts. Towns as far away as Pismo Beach take part.

Plus, the multitude of area hotels has supported the ventures by taxing the tourists 1 percent to subsidize these events.

Visitors have a place

The El Colibri Boutique Hotel and Spa is situated above the popular Moonstone Beach, requiring just a three-minute walk on

the boardwalk from the hotel to see the ocean.

Nestled within a nature preserve, it's the only hotel lining the boardwalk on the west side of Moonstone Drive.

The place is a perfect launching pad for a 10-minute drive north to the monumental Hearst Castle, cycling one of the best, most scenic stretches of the California Coast where elephant seals are bountiful on the beach and flocks of pelicans soar over the water.

Named after a hummingbird, El Colibri is as intimate, charming and relaxed as its picturesque surroundings. Inside, there's a romantic feel to the 34-room hotel. Every room comes with a gas fireplace to take the nip of the fog away. Saturday nights feature jazz performers and a local winery. On one September night, the Midnight winery uncorked a Zinfandel that rivals those in El Dorado and Amador counties.

The spa stands out as an exceptional amenity. Dunking in the hot tub in a semi-private, open space may be the ultimate remedy for capping off an evening in a restful state – if not for the more-than-memorable massages from therapists Terri and Diane.

The latter provided Kae, who declared she was a “new woman” after receiving “one of the best massages (she's) ever had.” Among the many treatments offered, Kae got an aromatherapy massage.

(Just one shortfall: the offerings of the complimentary continental breakfast and evening tapas in the comfortable wine bar don't live up to the service level of the hotel, so you'll need to look elsewhere for nutrition – especially if out wine tasting.)

Robin's restaurant in the “east village” fits the bill for lunch or dinner.

Going south to 'Sideways' land

Filling the tummy for a day of wine tasting or evening out is not an issue in Buellton, located four miles west of the cute Danish town of Solvang in the Santa Ynez Valley.

A chef cooking eggs to order can get any day off on the right foot at the Marriott Santa Ynez. This Marriott is large and comes with many amenities, including tennis and squash courts and even a game room near the swimming pool patio.

It's yet another perfect jumping off spot for cycling the Santa Ynez Valley, home of one of the most acclaimed organized bike rides in the state – the Solvang Century, which is always in March. (Bring your rain gear as this reporter has been caught in hail twice during that event.)

On the way to the Danish town, it's advised to take the time to check out Ostrich Land, if only from the road on a bike. The rescue farm is listed as one of the area attractions between Buellton and Solvang.

Solvang is the quintessential walkable town – with wayfinding signs, an inviting village green and sidewalks lining the shop-filled streets. (Note: the Danish eateries may introduce the aebleskiver for those seeking a delightful puffball pastry in the middle of the day.)

The Santa Ynez Valley is a wine region that's made it to the big screen. More than 80 wineries offer vintages ranging from Syrah to Chardonnay. But it was the love of Pinot Noir that put the region on the map when the movie "Sideways" was released in 2004. The story of two very different men out wine tasting before one gets married became a cult hit that brought scores of people discovering the region.

According to Buellton Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Bureau Executive Director Kathy Vreeland, the fascination has endured yet another year despite a 20 percent recessionary dip in

visitation in 2009 and 2010.

“I don’t think any of us expected (the popularity),” Vreeland said.

And now, there’s a sequel called “Vertical” in the works.

Still, the original saga of Miles and Jack lives on at the Hitching Post restaurant in its real name in the movie. The steakhouse still boasts throngs of people who stop to just have their pictures taken in front of the sign or eat at the movie characters’ table.

“People want to follow what Miles and Jack did,” Vreeland said.

There’s even a Sideways wine tour.

That aside, followers who swear off Merlot (as Miles declared in the movie because his ex wife drank it) and onto the more hearty Pinot Noir will still appreciate the vast varietals found in the valley such as Lincourt’s tangy Chardonnay and Beckman’s four-way, Syrah-based blend of Cuvee Le Bec.

(Note: a preceding stop at Wandering Dog Bar for a few flights of local wines and advice from fourth-generation wine taster and staffer Ian may be just the ticket if time is a factor.)

If you go:

Cambria: Off Highway 1 between Monterey and Morro Bay

El Colibri Boutique Hotel and Spa

Rooms start at \$169 (midweek specials for \$139).

Buellton: Off Highway 101 between Santa Maria and Santa Barbara

Marriott Santa Ynez

Rooms start at \$149.

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