

Wild Sonoma Coast soothes the soul



It's all about the ocean when staying at the Timber Cove Inn. Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Susan Wood

JENNER – You know you've encountered something unique and untamed upon walking through the lobby with its high-vaulted ceilings and turning right to gaze beyond the expansive setting to the back patio overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

Or, maybe it hits you before you even arrive at the Timber Cove Inn. Driving the wild and scenic Sonoma Coast is transformative in itself. Cows wander freely on Highway 1 north of Jenner, mingling with deer in a perfect harmony between ocean and land.

Harmony is just what a soul gets at this iconic, 49-room rustic resort. The half century-old inn melds being active and

doing nothing.

After settling in on one recent fall Wednesday evening to a cocktail, French fries and the National League pennant champs San Francisco Giants on the television in the airy, redwood Sequoia Lounge in front of the large, stone fireplace, Kae and I chose the latter for our first-day itinerary. Doing very little hit the spot.



The lounge area at the inn is relaxing.

In a daze while waiting for the coffee to brew in the room, I stood almost motionless on the patio of the ocean view room as AJ jumped down a few feet to conduct her morning ritual. So many hotels come equipped with borders and railings. The openness was a nice change. No obstacles to inhibit the 180-degree view of the ocean. It was like no other I've had before.

And it's one thing to see this massive body of water. Waking up to the sounds of the pounding surf are quite another thing. The rhythm of the waves sets the stage for the entire stay.

We walked with AJ over the 26 acres of the grounds on the bluffs overlooking the Pacific. There was no bad view on the clearly marked trails divided between the North Coast and the South Coast trails – with Lover's Point and Timber Cove Point jutting out at the midpoint. Waves crashed in over the rocky

coastline.

Visible from most of the property is the Bufano Obelisk. The 93-foot sculpture made of tile, concrete and redwood was created by Italian artist Benjamin Bufano as a symbol of world peace.

Peacefulness is the general theme here. Upon each bend in the trail, we often stopped at the benches staged just for spending time to take it all in. Only the sunbathing seals appeared to be lazier than us. The resort gets major points for having several areas to sit and just be. What's striking at the resort is the notion that it's incredibly quiet.

To partake in one of our favorite places to sit, I grabbed a bottle of wine because this is after all Sonoma County – the ultimate Wine Country. We soon learned the Timber Cove Inn's outside fire pit set up just outside the restaurant patio is a big hit. Wednesday night we had checked it out with the provided lantern in the room. Nice touch. On Thursday, wine and reading – and Bananagrams – topped the agenda.

For those who didn't bring their own games, the inn built a bocce ball court off to the side.

Eat, drink and be merry



Alexander's restaurant serves breakfast, lunch and

dinner.

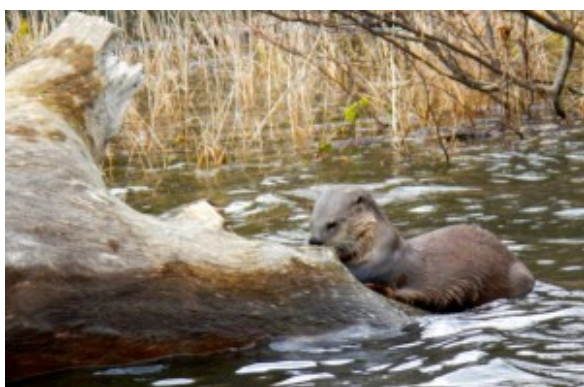
Suggested is dinner at the inn's Alexander's restaurant. For starters, the roasted red and yellow beets in the salad melted in my mouth, and the Ricotta cheese provided a perfect accent. And, we loved the sourdough bread.

The Alexander Valley merlot paired well with Kae's polenta lasagna, which looked as good as it tasted. The circle of marinara sauce on the plate was ample enough for every bite of the concoction. The sauce had a definite homemade flavor.

My seafood pasta was more about the catfish, prawns, salmon and halibut than the noodles – which can be a rarity. The dish was tasty and filling. The view at sunset next to the floor-to-ceiling window was stunning.

After dinner, we hit the bar again for the Giants game and formed a kinship with a small community that turned up there in the evening – with couples from Reno to Rohnert Park enjoying the cushy sofas and fireplace. Bands play there on the weekends.

A sense of adventure beckons



An otter along the Russian River.

With the Timber Cove Inn situated 13 miles north of Jenner, the Russian River represents a good outlet for recreation. We

rented a canoe for \$60 that we could have had for four hours from Watertreks' kiosk in downtown Jenner on Friday. I appreciate the worker's tips such as the nature of the currents. With AJ in the middle compartment, we paddled the calm and serene estuary that marks the mouth of the river. It's currently closed off at the ocean by sand. On the ocean side that we walked to is where seals bob their heads in the surf when they're not lounging on the beach. We also spotted a river otter near the island dividing the north and south riverfronts.

The canoe trip was a blend of both the natural world and an architectural tour marking a small civilization of gutsy river inhabitants who are known to rebuild when the river floods because they love the environment so much.

I can see why.



AJ isn't sure what to make of the ocean waves.

The Sonoma Coast doles out a rugged yet relaxed type of lifestyle.

Eating up the experience

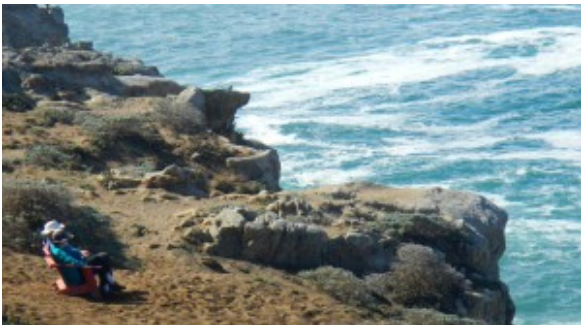
For an overcast day, the excursion required a quick hot meal – so we opted for soup at the Jenner Inn Café. My salmon chowder was as close to local ingredients as one could have it. I heard the very helpful clerk tell another customer the salmon

is pulled from the ocean in the front yard and grilled in the restaurant's back yard. Kae's squash soup was true warmth with flavor. Fresh French fries topped off the meal, with an interesting ginger lemonade concoction mixed in the café.

The sign out front said it all: "Eat, rest, love."

Loving Sonoma County is a state of mind I may never lose.

We quickly turned off on the way back to the inn with wine in mind, yet again. The Fort Ross Vineyard named after the Russian military fort called out to us, so we climbed the very steep grade that led us high on the bluff overlooking the ocean. Think Chardonnay and the ever-so temperamental Pinot Noir that thrives in the fog.



This view never gets old.

With the chill of the weather again, we soon headed to the warmth of our room and cranked up the gas stove awaiting the highlight of the day – massages by Karma Tales' Hannah. (Note of recommendation: set up the head of the table near the slider with the door cracked open to hear a hint of wave action with the new age music.)

It's beyond relaxing.

(Another note: the menu for room service will not fully match that of the Website, so keep that in mind when ordering in.)

On the prowl for fungi and fun

The Sonoma Coast can be a lush playground where the mushrooms dance – especially when it rains. So after a few light storms giving the coast a hint of winter, off we went with the Sonoma County Mycological Association on the next morning. The experience was like no other.



More than 70 kinds of mushrooms were discovered on the foray.

We traversed up and down hills through the dense wilderness of the 6,000-acre Salt Point State Park at Woodside Campground searching for mushrooms like pioneers searching for game. SOMA, the association, hosts these forays throughout the fall and winter. Plus, the group throws a potluck lunch with many offerings afterward.

From food to wine

The Fort Ross Harvest Festival capped off the afternoon with tasting from a dozen local wineries, including the samplings from an artisan cheese maker from Freestone. It was a picture perfect day – filled with activities commemorating the park and the vineyards that surround it.

The event celebrates the bounty of the Sonoma coast as well as the culture of the historic park set over the bluffs one mile south of Timber Cove.

With unparalleled views all its own, the Timber Cove Inn hosted its year-long celebration called "50 and fab." The resort is old and has a slight weathered look to it to match its age, but it also has undergone a renovation of about a quarter of its rooms – mostly the forest view variety.

We were in an ocean view room, equipped for a disabled person with the open shower and plenty of space. In the corner of the room is a huge boulder that spills out onto the sidewalk.

The hot tubs have been taken out in the interest of California's drought.

According to General Manager Sharon Lynn, Sonoma County wants to see a master plan for the hotel before further upgrades are made.



Timber Cove Inn – the view from the room.

Don't count on high-end upscale. But with free WiFi and other standard amenities like a small gym, the rooms serve their purpose. It's really all about the view that makes this place special.

Oh, and don't expect cell service. It's non-existent on a huge swath of this coastline. Lynn said there's talk of a tower going in nearby.

"I tell people to come here to unplug," she said. "It is what it is, with all its quiriness."

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Notes:

- Timber Cove Inn is located at 21780 North Coast Highway 1, Jenner.
- Contact: 707.847.3231 or online.
- Rooms start at \$229 a night. Low season runs from January to March.
- Watertreks Jenner: 707.865.2249.
- Fort Ross Vineyard and Tasting Room: 15725 Meyers Grade Road, Jenner.
- Sonoma County Mycological Association.