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My first view of Monterey Bay on California's Central Coast was thrilling — a raft of 40-something sea otters — and free. The next time I would get close to them, at the [Monterey Bay Aquarium](#), it cost nearly \$60. That split between free access to outdoor wonders and investment-grade attractions epitomized my experience in the area.

Like so much of coastal California, the Monterey Peninsula, home to famous Pebble Beach golf courses and exclusive towns like Carmel-by-the-Sea (known simply as Carmel), connotes wealth. It is encompassed by Monterey County, a roughly 3,300-square-mile area, which includes Big Sur, where accommodations at luxury resorts like the [Post Ranch Inn](#) start at around \$1,500 a night.

With a budget of less than half of that for three days, I put Monterey — the town and the county — to the frugal test. In January, a quiet and thrifty time of year, I trusted parks and preserves, unsung hotels and small businesses to keep things economical, even if sampling the variety of Monterey — ranging from historic cities to redwood forests, tide pools and vineyards — required renting a car (\$175).



Statues of John Steinbeck characters from his 1945 novel "Cannery Row," in the Cannery Row plaza in Monterey. Jason Henry for The New York Times

## Seeking Steinbeck

My introduction to Monterey, John Steinbeck's 1945 classic novel "Cannery Row," describes its waterfront lined in sardine canneries as "a poem, a stink, a grating noise, a quality of light, a tone, a habit, a nostalgia, a dream." It's hard to find that gritty romance along today's [Cannery Row](#), which boomed in the 1930s and '40s, before overfishing killed supply.



Cannery Row, once lined with sardine canneries, had its heyday in the 1930s and '40s. Today it is filled with shops and restaurants. Jason Henry for The New York Times



Now chains such as Bubba Gump Shrimp Co. and Sunglass Hut replace “weedy lots and junk heaps,” though a central plaza with bronze sculptures of Steinbeck and some of his characters pays tribute to the past.

Still, the spirit of the book’s protagonist, Doc — a marine biologist based on the real-life scientist [Ed Ricketts](#) — lives on at the Monterey Bay Aquarium, which is housed in the former Hovden Cannery. At \$59.95 for admission, the aquarium is a worthy splurge, offering opportunities to encounter creatures large, small, wondrous and rare.



The Monterey Bay Aquarium is housed in the former Hovden Cannery. Jason Henry for The New York Times

“We bring the ocean to people to inspire them with things they might not get to see otherwise,” said Madi Frazier, an aquarium naturalist, as she guided me to a kelp forest modeled on the one found just beyond the bayfront building’s glass walls.

A wing devoted to deepwater ecology held bright red bloody-belly comb jellyfish, stringy bioluminescent siphonophores and four-foot-high Japanese [spider crabs](#) that inched along in the gloom. A dune-style aviary offered opportunities to observe a normally skittish red knot at close range. Bat rays glided beneath tentative fingers in shallow touch tanks.



A coral reef display at the aquarium. Jason Henry for The New York Times

A few blocks away, Katie Blandin named her five-year-old cocktail bar [Pearl Hour](#) after “the hour of the pearl,” described in “Cannery Row” as “the interval between day and night when time stops and examines itself.”



People gathered around a fire pit in the backyard of Pearl Hour, a cocktail bar, in Monterey, Calif. Jason Henry for The New York Times

We met during happy hour — 6 to 8 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday — when classic cocktails such as the Corpse Reviver No. 2 go for \$10 (normally \$13). Ms. Blandin plants the bar’s back patio in succulents, flowers and herbs, many of which make their way into her cocktails.

“I think even a cocktail should have a sense of terroir,” she said.



## Old Monterey



The Cooper Molera Adobe, in Monterey, includes an orchard, barn, eateries and a house museum. Jason Henry for The New York Times

The oldest part of [Monterey](#) — an outpost of Spain and then Mexico dating back to the 17th century — lies just over a mile south of Cannery Row in a pedestrian-friendly downtown where signs flag historic adobe buildings.

Among several modestly priced hotels there, I booked the [Hotel Abrego](#), where my \$130-a-night room included a Keurig coffee machine and spacious glassed-in shower. Its \$20 nightly resort fee, included in the room total, covered parking, a hot breakfast buffet and a glass of wine.

It was easy walking distance to lively Alvarado Street, lined in restaurants and shops. A 19th-century complex, the [Cooper Molera Adobe](#), includes an orchard, barn and house museum (free) behind its walls, and the [Alta Bakery and Cafe](#), where I sipped coffee (\$3) on the tranquil patio.



Ron Mendoza at his bakery, Ad Astra Bread Co., in Monterey. Jason Henry for The New York Times

Down the block, [Ad Astra Bread Co.](#) sells aromatic loaves of sourdough (\$10 each) from Ron Mendoza, the former pastry chef at the Michelin-starred [Aubergine](#) in nearby Carmel.

“For the last five years, some of our leading chefs have abandoned fine dining and opened artisanal food businesses,” said Deborah Luhrman, the editor and publisher of the food magazine [Edible Monterey Bay](#), who recommended both bakeries.



The Alvarado Street Brewery, in Monterey, Calif. Jason Henry for The New York Times

The brewpub [Alvarado Street Brewery](#) was buzzing when I stopped in for a quinoa bowl (\$16) and a Mai Tai tropical I.P.A. for \$8. Nearby, my favorite cheap find, [El Charrito Express](#), served substantial barbacoa wraps stuffed with marinated beef, beans and rice for \$6.99.

## Chancing it in Carmel



A waterside path near the coastal scenic route known as 17-Mile Drive. Jason Henry for The New York Times



From the outset, it felt like a losing bet to take my penny-pinching budget to chic Carmel-by-the-Sea, the one-square-mile seaside town where the actor Clint Eastwood was once mayor.

Even getting there comes at a price: [17-Mile Drive](#), the coastal scenic route, costs \$12 to drive. Fortunately, it's free to cyclists, which helped take the edge off the cost of the bike I rented to explore some of Monterey's celebrated [cycling routes](#).



The Mad Dogs & Englishmen bike shop in Monterey, where the author rented an electric bike. Jason Henry for The New York Times

From the bike shop [Mad Dogs & Englishmen](#) in Monterey, I rented an electric bike (\$40 for four hours) to assist in the long ride — about 28 miles round-trip — and its hills. The deal included free valet parking for my car at the adjacent Monterey Plaza Hotel & Spa.

On a cool January morning, frothy aquamarine waves broke on the granite rocks that barricaded the coast, tempting me to stop every half mile or so to admire their churn. A thick fog blew in as I reached the area's renowned shorefront links, dramatizing their sand bunkers and wind-shorn cypress trees. I passed a landscape painter and jaw-dropping Pebble Beach mansions before coasting into Carmel.



The salmon bowl at Jeju Kitchen, in Carmel-by-the-Sea, Calif. Jason Henry for The New York Times

Amid luxury retailers like Tiffany and Bottega Veneta I found the new Korean restaurant [Jeju Kitchen](#) in the outdoor [Carmel Plaza](#). My salmon rice bowl was not cheap at \$26, but it was delicious, substantial and only a few dollars more than food truck options at the [Carmel Farmers Market](#) across the street.

## Monarchs, redwoods and waterfalls



The Monterey coastline, with McWay Falls in the distance. Jason Henry for The New York Times

It was far easier to stretch my budget seeking nature in Monterey, home to 99 miles of coastline.



I started at the 2.4-acre [Pacific Grove Monarch Sanctuary](#), where mature Monterey pine trees attract overwintering butterflies that are known to cluster in groups of up to 1,000 from November through February (free).

Using binoculars, I spied bright orange monarchs catching early-morning rays from the tips of pine boughs like mini-solar panels. A pair of deer grazed in the shade below while a set of acorn woodpeckers chattered in the treetops. The abundant bird life drew the attention of two red-shouldered hawks, which glided in silently.

Continuing south along the coast, I spent a sunny afternoon at [Point Lobos State Natural Reserve](#) (admission \$10). The craggy headland has been the setting for classic Hollywood films, including Alfred Hitchcock's "[Rebecca](#)," and attracted the photographers [Edward Weston](#) and [Ansel Adams](#).



A trail in [Point Lobos State Natural Reserve](#) near Carmel-by-the-Sea. Jason Henry for The New York Times

The reserve, which has a special conservation status within the state park system, was created by a land donation to protect its cypress grove, according to Kathleen Lee, the executive director of the nonprofit [Point Lobos Foundation](#), which supports the park with fund-raising and docent training. In a phone interview, she directed me to the forest, noting that it is “one of only two native Monterey cypress groves remaining in California.”

Atop vertiginous cliffs, a trail wound bravely through the wind-sculpted trees. Below them, harbor seals appeared in the backwash of coves. A short drive south, I scrambled over wet rocks at Weston Beach — named for the photographer — to find [tide pools](#) filled with sea stars, anemones and hermit crabs.

Waning light chased me from the park as I set out south, eager to make the drive down famously curvy Highway 1 in Big Sur before dark. The rugged coast of towering redwoods and mountains that plunge into the ocean was named [El Sur Grande](#), or the Big South, by Mexican colonizers as an unmapped wilderness.

Twenty-two miles south of Point Lobos, [Ripplewood Resort](#) got its start when the highway was being built in the 1920s. I booked a rustic but comfortable cabin there for \$135 a night and woke to find it ideally located just a few miles north of [Big Sur Bakery](#), a beacon of artisanal baking that seemed impossible in such a remote location (a Cheddar-and-chive scone cost \$5.50).

Ripplewood also lies close to a series of coastal parks, including [Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park](#), where the four-mile Buzzard's Roost Trail ascended amid redwoods to ridge-top ocean views (admission, \$10, good at all state parks for the day). Nine more wiggly miles south, McWay Falls cascades onto a pristine beach at [Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park](#). Between them, I stopped at frequent turnouts to scan for migrating gray whales exhaling telltale spouts.

### **A safari and a tasting**



A sea otter and pup in [Elkhorn Slough](#), a coastal wetland preserve in Moss Landing, about 27 miles north of Monterey. Jason Henry for The New York Times

The survival of southern sea otters in California is a comeback story. Hunted nearly to extinction for their thick pelts, sea otters managed to hang on in the most remote coves and crags of Big Sur, where a few individuals were discovered in 1938. Now numbering about 3,000, the endangered marine mammals are some of the most charismatic residents in the Central Coast's kelp beds.

They also thrive in [Elkhorn Slough](#), a coastal wetland preserve in Moss Landing, about 27 miles north of Monterey. There, I boarded an electric catamaran from [Monterey Bay Eco Tours](#) to troll the calm waters on a 90-minute cruise (\$45).

Within minutes, we spotted harbor seals hauled out on muddy banks shared by marbled godwits, black-necked stilts and whimbrel, some of the park's more than 300 species of birds. Mother otters fed their babies sea cucumbers, gave them swimming lessons and carried sleeping pups as they floated on their backs.



“Elkhorn Slough is a low-stress environment for them,” said Cindy Rice, a naturalist guide leading the tour.

The drive to my last stop — Monterey’s vineyards — took me through the agricultural flats surrounding Salinas, which grows 70 percent of the nation’s salad greens, some 20 miles to the [Salinas Valley](#), which nurtures pinot noir and chardonnay grapes in the foothills of the Santa Lucia range.

Attracted by vintage tractors, I turned into the family-owned [Rustiqué Wines](#) and found its convivial tasting room lodged in a former dairy barn filled not with hushed aficionados swirling and evaluating wine, but with a sociable crowd enjoying glasses of estate pinot noir and oaked chardonnay in the spirit of happy hours everywhere.

The winemaker Chad Silacci and two other family members worked the bar and the crowd. The winery, established in 2006, has built a following through concerts, events and warm hospitality (tastings cost \$20, waived with a two-bottle purchase).

“We want it to be comfortable,” Mr. Silacci said, indicating the tasting room’s sofas and chairs arrayed around a wood-burning stove. “It’s kind of like walking into our family’s living room.”

I finished an earthy pinot, thinking the investment, like so many in Monterey, paid unanticipated returns.

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***A correction was made on March 25, 2024: An earlier version of this article misstated the name of a hotel in Monterey, Calif. It is Monterey Plaza Hotel & Spa, not Monterey Place Hotel & Spa.***