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Antonio, age 21

MORRO BAY: VISIT TO AN OLD-FASHIONED FISHING VILLAGE

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Photography by JOHN MONTGOMERY

As we paddle our kayak across Morro Bay toward the famous rock, often called the “Gibraltar of the Pacific,” I have a sense that I am being watched.

Looking down beside our boat, I meet the liquid brown eyes of a California sea lion, which is apparently curious about what we are up to. Aside from the occasional sounds of pelicans’ wings flapping, along with squawks of gulls as they swoop across the blue sky and barking of sea lions around the fishing boats, all is tranquil.

California dreamin’ still exists in the friendly fishing village of Morro Bay which is located an easy three hour drive from San Jose. A national and state estuary, the area is famous for Morro Rock, which was first sighted by Portuguese explorer Juan Cabrillo in 1542. Cabrillo named it *el Moro*, thinking it resembled the turbaned head of a Moor, someone from North Africa. A California State Historical Landmark, the rock was formed 26 million years ago by a volcanic eruption. The bay itself washed into existence as a result of melting icecaps and rising seas about 6,000 years ago.

Morro Bay’s propitious location, mild year-round climate, along with bountiful fresh seafood and local produce, coupled with reasonably priced, well managed hotels, motels and restaurants, combine to tempt visitors to relax and enjoy the many diversions of the area.

Morro Bay is a paradise for bird watchers; more than 250 species of birds visit or nest in the estuary area, including peregrine falcons. Most weekends an Audubon Society guide makes a telescope available to visitors at the Rock for better viewing, especially fun when the chicks are newly born.

On the sea, Morro Bay offers kayaking, glass bottom boats, fishing, scuba diving and visits to a unique oyster farm. One day, Neal Maloney took us on an estuary tour of his oyster farm, which is one of only three such farms south of San Francisco. Neal, a marine biologist, popped open some of his Pacific Gold oysters for us to savor. We slurped a few directly from their beautiful shells. Their velvet chill was both briny and sweet, with an aftertaste of watermelon and cucumber. As a French poet once said, eating an oyster is like “kissing the



Morro Bay is famous for its oysters.

sea on the lips.” Neal explained that like terroir for wine, an oyster’s taste varies according to the environment in which they grow. The Morro Bay oysters eat the plentiful plankton in the bay, enjoy being shaken—not stirred—by the currents and tides, and provide an ecological benefit by clarifying the waters with their energetic filtering.

If your desire is to view undersea activity without getting wet, Kevin Winfield entertains on his fun and instructive Subsea Tours, pointing out underwater life around the bay. Kevin’s daily scheduled trips also include whale and dolphin watching.

Back on land, hike or bike around the Morro Bay and Montana de Oro State parks. Enjoy the unusual pygmy oaks at El Moro Elfin Forest Wilderness Preserve, along with the Chumash middens (abalone shells and other clues to the diet of the Chumash), as this area was the springtime home of the region’s original inhabitants around 10,000 BCE. The Chumash built homes from the local willows, calling their dwellings *sa’aqtiko’y*, or “sheltered from the wind.”

On a hilltop location with a panoramic view of the bay and rock is the Museum of Natural History. The only natural history museum in the California park system, its interactive displays explain the ecology of the Morro Bay estuary. The displays were beautifully designed by

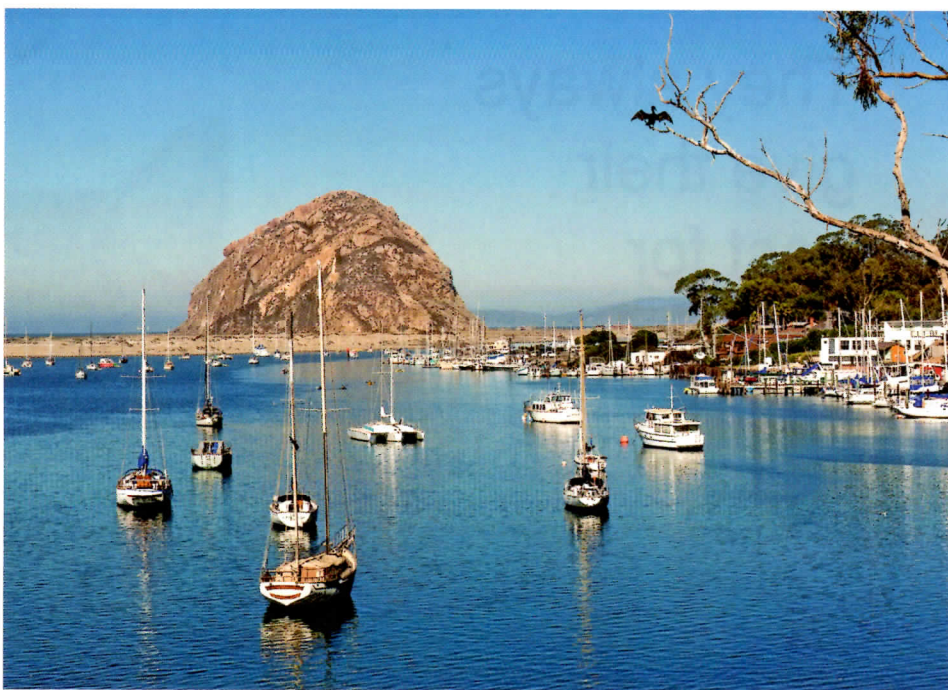
Exhibit Group Giltspur, which created exhibits for both the Smithsonian and J. Paul Getty Museums.

The town of Morro Bay has a real sense of community with numbers of regularly scheduled activities. During our visit we were able to stroll through one of the farmers markets which occur every Thursday and Saturday and include local produce as well as fresh flowers from neighboring flower farms. It was a fun opportunity to mix and mingle with the friendly local folks. On most weekends, Captain Jimmy supplies music in Anchor Park. We also enjoyed the Embarcadero Art Walk which takes place on the second Friday of each month, when the local galleries display their wares.

This area is justifiably proud of its fine wine production. For the only waterside wine tasting on the Central Coast, drop by for carefully selected wines from around the world.

Morro Bay hosts on-going festivals from music to kites to Tall Ships to world class photo and writers’ conferences to, well, I’m specially looking forward to this one: Avocado and Margarita Festival. Check them all out at <http://www.morrobay.org/events/>

Day trips from Morro Bay can include exploration of elephant seal birthing in the early spring at Piedras Blancas Light Station, just a 25 mile drive up the coast. Along the way, you can stop by Hearst Castle.



Morro Bay harbor offers views of Morro Rock and the friendly fishing village.



Visitors to Morro Bay enjoy miles of colorful flower farms.



Kayakers enjoy the company of a sea lion in Morro Harbor.

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR FOOD AND ACCOMMODATIONS

RESTAURANTS:

Breakfast and Lunch:

The Coffee Pot Restaurant. Owner Lu Chi Fa's book is on sale about his amazing story of escape from China during the Cultural Revolution.

Frankie and Lola's offers a homemade, local, natural, innovative menu. Check out their special event wine pairings.

Top Dog Coffee Bar features top quality beans from around the world. Fresh roasted regularly.

Dinners:

Tognazzini's Dockside, 1245 Embarcadero, 805.772.8100. Serves fresh fish right off the owner's boat.

BeachHouse Bistro, 2770 Main St., 805-771-9705. Chef/owners trained at California Institute of America. Creative menu.

Windows on the Water, 699 Embarcadero 805.772.0677. Elegant with spectacular view.

The Orchid at the Inn at Morro Bay, 805.772.5651. Delicious meals at beautiful location.

ACCOMMODATIONS:

Ascot Suites, 260 Morro Bay Blvd. 1.800.887.6454. Newly renovated. Charming. Centrally located.

El Morro Masterpiece Motel. Boutique hotel at 1206 Main St.. 800.527.6782. Spanish-Moorish architecture, reproductions of masterpieces on the walls.

Inn at Morro Bay. 60 State Park Road. 800.321.9566. Recently renovated complex features a peaceful location on the Bay and within Morro Bay State Park's 4,000 acres. Pool and fine dining.

For more information or assistance contact:
Morro Bay Visitors' Center, 695 Harbor St., 800.231.0592, 805.225.1633
<http://www.morrobay.org/>

HOW TO GET THERE:

Traveling South from San Jose: Take U.S. Highway 101 south to Atascadero. Exit on State Highway 41 west, then head south on Highway 1. Exit at Main Street in Morro Bay. Total drive time: about 3 hours.