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Photographs by Jason Henry

Daniel Scheffler, a long-time writer for The New York Times, moved to Carmel in 2020.

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When locals say Carmel, they mean Carmel-by-the-Sea, the quaint seaside village on California's Central Coast without street lights and addresses, where Clint Eastwood was mayor once upon a time. But many also mean nearby coastal Carmel Highlands and Carmel Valley. The three enclaves have long drawn artists, writers and bohemian types, like Jack Kerouac and Salvador Dalí, who came to the region for its fresh Pacific Ocean air, starry night skies, the Santa Lucia Mountains and sandy beaches off dramatic coastal cliffs. Those natural features now attract a new cohort of creatives, resulting in a profusion of locavore restaurants, snazzy shops, art galleries and boutique hotels. Next year, the completed renovation of the Monterey airport, designed by the architecture design firm HOK, may make access to the area even easier for visitors and residents alike.

Recommendations

Key stops

- Stroll along the sugary white **Carmel Beach**, where dogs are allowed to roam off leash.
- Hike the trails at **Point Lobos State Natural Reserve** to catch a glimpse of migrating whales, and visit the **Whalers Cabin** (now a museum), which was built in the 1850s to house local fishermen.
- More forever ocean views, plus redwood groves, can be enjoyed by meandering through **Garrapata State Park**.



- Walk around the fable-like town of **Carmel-by-the-Sea**, with its storybook homes and businesses. Just remember the enclave's odd rules, including a required **permit** to wear heels over two inches (lest you trip over the famously uneven pavement).
- Sit and sip a glass of locally grown estate pinot noir at **Pelio Estate**'s new tasting room in Carmel Valley Village.
- Dine at a favorite local spot, **Stationaery**, which serves sourdough avocado toast with seaweed from Monterey Bay.
- Rent a **Mad Dogs & Englishmen** bike and side car to cruise about the whole area.

Museums and galleries

+

Restaurants and bars

+

Shopping

+

Where to stay

+

Getting around

+

Itinerary

Friday

3 p.m. Eat and stroll the sunny valley

Carmel Valley Village, which was established (first as Airway Village) in 1946 as a spot for cowboys and ranchers to purchase supplies and provisions, is always beyond the coastal fog. Today it has an array of wine tasting rooms, places to eat, art galleries and an arts institute, Hidden Valley, specializing in opera, dance, theater and musical performances (check their website for up-to-date events). First stop is Carmel Valley Creamery, which has a hitching post in case you come on horseback.



Originally from Normandy, France, the cheesemaker Sophie Hauville has a selection that includes a coriander-infused cheese washed with beer (\$12 for a half wheel). She also sells Alta coffee (lattes are \$5), fresh pastries (\$6) and bread from Ad Astra Bread Co (\$10 to \$12). Next you can quench your thirst with a classic tasting (\$35 per person) at Pelio Estate, a boutique winery owned by two sisters. They offer fun wines from sustainably and organically farmed grapes, plus curated picnic baskets (\$50).



5:30 p.m. **Slide into the evening with a drink in Carmel-by-the-Sea**

As the sun starts to set, pop in for local wine at Annex Wine Bar, owned by the same proprietors as the Seventh & Dolores restaurant next door. For their Reserve Flight (\$60 per person) the Annex serves five limited-production offerings, including Folktale We are a Flower (a sauvignon-blanc Sémillon), and Folktale the Hound (a classic Bordeaux blend from grapes grown in Carmel Valley). The owners, Greg and Madigan Ahn, are originally from Los Angeles, and on a Friday evening you're likely to find them laughing, eating oysters and chatting with customers. Also try Bud's "Dime Time" Happy Hour at the La Playa Hotel (which was once a luxurious mansion built as a gift to Angela Ghirardelli, an heiress to the famed chocolate fortune). The newly restored bar is named in honor of the local legend (also former owner), Howard "Bud" Allen. And once a day — at the bartender's discretion — a 10-cent happy hour commences for just 10 minutes.



Annex Wine Bar

8 p.m. **Feast as the fog rolls in**

There are two distinct approaches to dinner on a Friday evening in Carmel-by-the-Sea. Either feast at the newly Michelin-starred restaurant, Chez Noir, or try a much more low-key approach at Stationaery. At Chez Noir, the owners (the husband-and-wife team Jonny Black and Monique Black) live upstairs and have a local, micro-seasonal and seafood-centric menu. Start with artichokes with Monterey squid and lemon, then a nettle and potato gnocchi and finish with Brandt Beef as your third. If you have the space, try the île flottante before calling it a night (\$150 prix fixe per person). Stationaery offers a different feel but is still delicious — a laid-back neighborhood restaurant where the chef Amalia Scatena sources and serves seasonal produce from Monterey and Santa Cruz County farms and ranches. Try the Ad Astra sourdough (served with Stepladder cultured butter and Big Sur sea salt, \$14), plus the grilled swordfish (served on romesco with broccoli di ciccio, \$49). Crown all that with a Basque cheesecake (\$13).



Chez Noir





A very good dog peers out from the sidecar of a vintage-looking e-bike at Mad Dogs & Englishmen, a bike shop in Carmel-by-the-Sea.

Saturday

7 a.m. **Walk — or ride — off those carbs**

Most of your breakfast needs can be solved at Rise + Roam Bakery in Carmel-by-the-Sea, where chef Jessica Haney makes seasonal quiche, cinnamon rolls and classic biscuits (prices start at \$4). Afterward, pick up your favorite style of caffeine at the Mad Dogs & Englishmen bike shop — they partner with one of the oldest family-run coffee producers in the world, Dieseldorff Kaffee. But really visit to rent a vintage style Scrambler e-bike with a sidecar (\$150 for the day, plus \$10 for dog accessories, if you take your pup along). Ride to one of the region's many dog-friendly beaches (like nearby Carmel River State Beach with its bird sanctuary and a lagoon, free), or go to Mission San Carlos Borromeo de Carmelo (museum, store and grounds, \$15 per person), a National Historic Landmark considered the most authentically restored Franciscan mission in California.



Mission San Carlos Borromeo de Carmelo

10 a.m. **Get out on the bay**

To view local sea creatures, you have many options. Walking the trails at Point Lobos State Natural Reserve (\$10 parking) is the most accessible, and gray whales, which migrate past this area from December to April, can be easily spotted from the coast. Or book a whale-watching boat tour on Monterey Bay with Princess Monterey Whale Watching (starts at \$70, up to three hours). Or, if you're feeling active, book a kayak tour (\$65 per person, three hours) in the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary to see sea otters, seals, sea lions and dolphins up close. If quaffing local wine is more your speed, reserve a seat with Carmel Valley Wine Tours (\$179 per person, five hours), which halts their trolley at spots like Rombi wines, Scratch Wines and Seabold Cellars.



Point Lobos State Natural Reserve

1 p.m. Grab a picnic and head to the beach

En route to Carmel Beach, stop at Dutch Door Donuts for a fried-to-order doughnut (the flavors are distinctive — think seasonal guava-lime, or classic chocolate brown butter, \$4.50). For something a little more substantial, select a picnic of cheeses, deli snacks, sandwiches and drinks from Nielsen Brothers market. Friendly to off-leash dogs and right at the foot of Ocean Avenue, Carmel Beach has silvery sand and an annual sandcastle contest (there is time-limited, free street parking along Camino Real/Scenic Road). As you amble to the shoreline, you'll see views of the famed 17-Mile Drive (admission is \$12.25 per vehicle), a scenic jaunt that hugs the Pacific Coast and the 10th green of the Pebble Beach Golf Links.



You can also glimpse rugged nature views with Monterey cypress trees and dramatic coastal cliffs. If you're a surfer, this is also where to get your board wet, or book a lesson with Carmel-by-the-Sea Surf Lessons (\$300 for a couple).

Dutch Door Donuts



3 p.m. Stroll around an art colony village

Some of the region's fairy-tale vibes come from 21 tiny, zany cottages scattered around Carmel-by-the-Sea that the self-taught architect Hugh Comstock built in the 1920s for his wife, Mayotta Brown. But this petite town has been a haven for artists for over a century. Salvador Dalí was an early member of the Carmel Art Association, and even though the photographer Ansel Adams lived here at one point, it was the photographer Edward Weston who captured its beauty (find work from both photographers, plus more, at Weston Gallery, by appointment only). Check out other galleries — a highlight is Monica Graham Fine Art — or just explore the village for yourself. The Carmel Heritage Society suggests a self-guided walking tour (download it from their website). The Carmel Public Library Foundation also offers community events like talks about Henry Miller's influence on the area (the author lived in nearby Big Sur).



5 p.m. Do some amusing shopping

Start at the chic Japanese menswear brand Visvim, known for combining modern technical ways to enhance garments with age-old production techniques. Then nip next door to one of the best collections of vintage unisex clothing stores in California, Wally's. If you are lucky the owners, Andrew and Jordan Chugg, are there for an interesting chat. If you want to find something remarkably quirky, the Mole Hole is just where to dig that up. It is a truly one-of-a-kind gift store that has everything imaginable, from tiny woodsy ceramic animals to fun martini glasses and collectors-edition brass Monopoly pieces. Speaking of witty names, you shouldn't miss the Nut Hut next door for all your gourmet gift basket needs.



Visvim

7 p.m. **Eat with the locals**

At The Pocket, you will find some of the best dishes on the Central Coast, including salads like roasted beets with chicory (\$17), or Monterey black cod with blood orange (\$47). If you fancy a French twist, try La Bicyclette's plats du jour (Cannellini d'Emilia with pork, \$42, finished with a Tarte Aux Pommes, \$16). For Italian comfort food, try Il Tegamino (the ravioli di campagna with eggplant, \$38, is delicious). And if you can get a reservation, Akaoni (no website, 831-620-1516) will not disappoint. The restaurant is known for its master chef's sushi selection (\$60 and up) but locals know to check the specials board that often includes local halibut (\$15) and Monterey squid (\$16). Akaoni has just a few seats, with limited hours.



La Bicyclette

9 p.m. **Continue the evening at local bars**

The actual bar at Barmel was built in 1900 and was once owned by one of San Francisco's most famous madams, Sally Stanford (who later became the mayor of Sausalito). This saloon-style cocktail bar in Carmel-by-the-Sea is inspired by gangsters, Prohibition and the California gold rush era. It's one of the very few late night dance spots in an otherwise sweetly sleepy little town — plus they have weekly live music, D.J.s and plenty of nightlife credibility. It does all shut down by 2 a.m. If you would rather meet some cowboys, head down the valley to the Running Iron Restaurant



and Saloon. They have a juke box and cowboy boots hanging from the ceiling plus a reputation for rowdiness.

Barmel





The sunset over Monterey Bay at Marina Dunes Preserve, in Marina.

Sunday

9 a.m. **Caffeine and a tour of an organic garden**

In Carmel Valley, at Earthbound Farm's organic farm stand, grab a cappuccino (they serve Sightglass coffee, a roaster out of San Francisco) and their Sunrise Breakfast Bowl (gluten-free, with roasted sweet potatoes, sauteed kale, just the right amount of chili yogurt dressing and more, \$16). If you have extra time take a tour of the grounds with their gardener, or pick your own fresh herbs and berries (costs vary). They have plenty of seasonal activities, too — flower bouquet making in the spring, lavender harvesting in summer, pumpkin picking in the fall, and wreath-making in winter time.



Earthbound Farm Stand

11 a.m. **Grab some fresh air and forever ocean views**

Just a 10-minute drive down the Pacific Coast Highway on a mostly foggy, windy road is Garrapata State Park; it's ideal for hiking and walking (all levels). On the coastal side of the road is Soberanes Point with Whale Peak (a 280-foot climb), which offers sterling views of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, a federal marine protected area. On the other side of the road is the Soberanes Canyon Trail (2.8 miles out-and-back, 1.5 hours) — this is where you will find redwoods and wild flowers. Parking for Garrapata State Park is along the side of the road.



Garrapata State Park

