

California's San Mateo Coast, South of San Francisco



Author's Note: This article "California's San Mateo Coast, South of San Francisco" is one of 30 chapters in my travel guidebook/ebook *Northern California Travel: The Best Options*. That book is available also as an ebook in Chinese. My other Northern California travel guidebook/ebook with parallel content is my newest book *Northern California History Travel Adventures: 35 Suggested Trips*. Several of my books on California can be seen on my Amazon Author Page.

By Lee Foster

The San Mateo County Coast is a special getaway for a San Francisco/Bay Area traveler looking for a bucolic, cool, green, seaside encounter. Multiple attractions lie north and south of the city of Half Moon Bay, the main coast side city.

Occasionally, winter rains have washed out the Highway 1 coastal road from San

Francisco to the San Mateo County Coast in the Devil's Slide area. Efforts are underway to modernize the road and prevent these challenges. Highway 92 is always the dependable road over the mountains, though there can be traffic delays, such as during the October Pumpkin Festival, the major annual celebration.

When you get to the San Mateo County Coast, north to south, here are some choice discoveries for a discerning visitor.

Start at Montara Beach, one of the more expansive vistas along the entire Northern California coast. From a small parking lot above the beach, you can peruse this sandy domain. The view is particularly lovely at sunset. Walk down the steep path or the convenient steps at an adjacent defunct restaurant and walk the beach at your leisure. This is the place to fine-tune your appreciation for the crashing surf.

Moving south, make your next encounter the Montara Lighthouse, a historic building. The Lighthouse support structures, which have quaint names, such as the Fog Signal Annex, now serve as meeting spaces and a Youth Hostel. Lighthouses saved many ships, but not all, from going aground along this coast in the 19th century. Farther south, Pigeon Point recalls an ill-fated ship, the *Carrier Pigeon*, which was lost on the rocks.

The next stop, Fitzgerald Marine Life Refuge, is not well marked. Look for a sign displaying binoculars, indicating wildlife viewing. Turn right on California Street and then right again at the end of the road on North Lake. If you happen to arrive at high tide, there is less to see. However, at low tide the many resilient life forms that survive in the intertidal zone can be observed, from purple sea urchins to mussels. Twenty-five species of invertebrates and plants, new to science at the time, were discovered here.

Continuing the drive south, watch for the Moss Beach Distillery sign, indicating a restaurant of good reputation bearing that name. This is a favored lunch and dinner place, with a cozy outdoor area over the water.

From the Distillery you can walk farther south on the bluffs and in winter view the famous Maverick surfing competition. At auspicious times, November to March, there is a confluence of lunar pull and the natural upwelling of waves on a coastal

shelf, creating some of the highest waves in the world. Extreme surfers who love to ride these 50-foot-high waves are alerted by email and told to come within 24 hours to the competition. They arrive from Australia and elsewhere. It helps to have a powerful spotting scope to see them because the action occurs a half-mile offshore.

Not only during the blustery Mavericks period, but all year, weather on the San Mateo Coast can be chancy. Come prepared to enjoy all kinds of weather. Wind is a constant in every month. Protective wind jackets and wind pants can make a visit here a lot more fun, even in summer. Dress warmly, in layers, even if you don't think you'll need it. A fog cover and wind can have a devastating effect on the unprepared. From October to May there could be rain, so wind/rain gear will be needed. Some days can be gloriously sunny, with a slight, cool wind. Those are the most pleasing days for most travelers.

Beyond the Distillery, driving south, you'll encounter the Half Moon Bay airport. The airport seems like a throwback to an earlier era. You can imagine Howard Hughes descending in a small biplane, wearing a leather helmet and goggles.

Across the road from the airport lies your first encounter with the fertile coastal benchlands that grow an abundance of leaf crops and cole family vegetables, from spinach to broccoli. The broad marine terraces around Half Moon Bay are not exceedingly rich, but the climate provides a long, cool, fog-moistened growing season ideal for artichokes, Brussels sprouts, and cut flowers.

The commercially serious agriculture along this coast is the under-glass growth of flowers and other ornamental plants, which can be quickly shipped worldwide from San Francisco Airport, just over the hill.

Next on this southbound itinerary is Princeton Harbor, where you can buy fish directly from a fishing boat in the morning hours or perhaps have a grilled salmon or halibut with the fisherfolk on the Formica or oilcloth tabletops at Princeton Seafood or next door at Ketch Joanne. Walk around the harbor to admire the working fishing boats and the abundant pleasure craft. Three fancier restaurants catering to travelers flourish on the north edge of the Harbor. Barbara's Fishtrap is good for down-home fresh fish. Mezza Luna is Northern Italian fine dining. The Half Moon Bay Brewing Company crafts its own beer, serves brewpub food, and hosts almost

every night some musical performance, making it the happening nightspot in the area.

A huge shopping center at the Princeton Harbor, complete with hotel and restaurant, forces a traveler to think about growth and progress on this relatively undeveloped coast. The same issues will be raised if one looks at the many modern homes tucked here and there along this route. Growth vs No Growth is the incendiary point of discussion here, especially considering the tension between limited water resources of the coastal region and the strong desire of many Peninsula residents to move west across the mountain for a more scenic, green environment.

A half mile south from Princeton Harbor is the Beach House, one of the choice lodgings in the region, putting you close to the water, with a patio or balcony. You have views of the sunset and harbor, plus peace and quiet. The Beach House is within a short walk of the restaurants at Princeton Harbor. The walking and biking path immediately in front of the Beach House could take you out exploring for many miles.

Proceeding south, after passing more farm fields and floriculture greenhouses, you enter the region of the small city of Half Moon Bay. Three beach access roads on your right present the Half Moon Bay State Beaches. The Young Avenue and Venice Boulevard Beaches are more secluded, but the beach at the end of Kelly Avenue is the main attraction, with an inviting campground for tent and RV folk, hot showers, a day picnic area, and plenty of sand play areas. The view is lovely to the north as the coast winds in a wide arc.

Drive back down Kelly Avenue, cross Highway 1 and head into town, stopping at Main Street. This is a fun street to browse because of its many small shops run by people who care about books, art, nature, yarn, and music, among other things. At the Half Moon Bay Feed and Fuel you can buy animal hides. Historic houses along Main Street include the San Benito House and the Zaballa House.

The iconic store on this street is Cunha's Country Store, which has served generations of Portuguese and Italian families. Tragically, this store burned in May 2003, but there was such an outpouring of community grief that it was quickly

rebuilt and reopened in May 2004. Ground level is an upscale small supermarket. Upstairs is the dry goods of the general store era, which tend now more toward gift items, but in the back you can still get boots, cowboy hat, and blue jeans. Ask to see the scrapbook about the fire and citizen support.

Main Street continues to evolve. The traditional fine dining leader, San Benito House restaurant, is now open again after the earlier proprietors retired, following decades of service. A block away is the Half Moon Bay Inn restaurant, with its large, friendly bar and dining area. Try the shrimp pasta. Restaurants Pasta Moon and Cetrella get high marks, as does the breakfast spot known as the Half Moon Bay Bakery.

As you leave Half Moon Bay, looking to your left, there is an important stop to make at a lonesome white house on the hill. Drive up to see this gem, the Johnston House, a New England "saltbox" style structure, bought as a prefab and shipped around the Horn to this area in 1853. The house boards were dropped from a ship, rafted ashore, dragged up the hill, and assembled. The region was then a roadless area with only a few Spanish Mexican families living in the current downtown near what is now the San Benito House and adjacent Zaballa House.

Continuing south, you can meditate on the landscape and let the miles whizz by. There are alluring and ample beaches to the right, such as San Gregorio and Pescadero, and on the left there are grassy hills and more benchlands with agriculture.

Two essential stops await you in this southern area.

The Pigeon Point Light Station could be defended as the most glorious example of lighthouse architecture along the California coast. Like the Montara Lighthouse to the north, it now serves as a Youth Hostel.

For the appreciator of nature, a trip to the Ano Nuevo Reserve is highly recommended. This is the protected home of the elephant seal, which came close to extinction in the late 1800s. The best time to visit the reserve is during the winter months when many elephant seals come ashore to give birth, mate, and molt their fur. Because of their size (bulls can measure 16 feet and weigh three tons) and numbers, a reservation is required for the guided hikes offered December through

March. For travelers not up for the walk out to the point, there is a short walk from the Visitor Center on the New Year's Creek (Ano Nuevo) Trail to the ocean edge, which displays the grandeur of the scenery, but without the drama of the large fauna.

Turning back to the north, at Pescadero Beach, veer right and drive inland a mile to the small town of Pescadero. The drive passes Pescadero Marsh, a favored birding area with a walking path through the lush wetlands. There are opportunities to see as many as 200 bird species here, especially late fall and early spring. Great blue herons, kites, and egrets share the space with deer and raccoons. The marsh includes two large saltwater ponds and lush flowing creeks where steelhead trout spawn each winter.

Duarte's is the famous restaurant in Pescadero, good for local fish and crab in season. Inquire about the side road to Harley Farms if you want to see a place where artisan goat cheese is made. You can buy direct at the farm shop their flower petal and herb-decor cheese. Also near Pescadero, a mile into the hills toward La Honda, the Phipps Ranch is a fun place for U-pick berry and strawberry harvesting in season, plus nursery plants year-around. A menagerie of farm animals on display makes Phipps a satisfying stop for children even if the berries aren't ripe.

Drive back north from Pescadero along the inland road, Stage Road, paralleling the main highway, Highway 1. You'll pass miles of bucolic countryside, some of the most gorgeous countryside and winding backroads available in California. It's a marvel that such a road still exists so close to the urbanized Bay Area, offering the urban person an antidote to human encounters. Stop at the Peterson & Alford General Store, built in 1889, which sells everything from Levi's to nature books, kerosene lamps to vegetable seeds. The local populace carries on social life around the bar inside the store.

For a cool, green, and rural day trip from the Bay Area, the San Mateo Coast has few equals.

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Visitor information for San Mateo County comes from the San Mateo County/Silicon Valley Convention and Visitors Bureau at www.visitsanmateocounty.com

San Mateo County Coast: If You Go

Coastside information comes from the Half Moon Bay Coastside Chamber of Commerce & Visitors' Bureau, www.visithalfmoonbay.org and www.halfmoonbayecotourism.com.

Contact also the San Mateo County/Silicon Valley Convention and Visitors Bureau, www.visitsanmateocounty.com.

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This article is one of thirty chapters in Lee Foster's new book *Northern California Travel: The Best Options*. The book can be ordered on Amazon [or](#) through other retailers as a printed book or ebook. The ebook version is also available in the Apple iBook Store and the other ebook stores for B&N Nook and Sony Reader. Lee's books/ebooks on Amazon can all be seen together on his Author Page. See the Lee Foster Author Page [.](#)