

California's Central Coast, overflowing with attractions

By Bob Carden

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Remember that killer blonde in high school? Sure you do — every school had one. Tall, aloof, didn't give you a second look — or a first. The less enlightened among us might have described her as “smokin' hot to look at but way too chilly to touch.” Well, if she ended up in Avila Beach, Calif., then she's in the right place.

Avila and the surrounding towns of Shell and Pismo Beach sit on some of the most beautiful coastline in all of California. And that's saying a lot. Wide beaches hug towering bluffs. The sun kisses the breaks of large, rolling waves. It makes you want to just dive right in. And I did just that, taking the leap on an impossibly bright June morning.

Ouch.

The water's cold. Thermal wet suit cold. Not sure if the Beach Boys ever got up here. Avila Beach is four hours south of the bone-chilling beauty of the San Francisco Bay and almost as cold. But that's not a bad thing, say the locals. “The colder water means fewer people, less pollution and easier surfing for me,” says local realtor Lance Morales.

The coast here is pretty raw and relatively undeveloped. The average ocean temperature in July is 57 degrees. In Newport Beach, more than 200 miles south, it's about 70. What does that mean? Fewer tourists, more cows. Yeah, cows.

Just north of Avila is a beautiful strip of land overlooking the Pacific. In, say, Laguna Beach, this property, with those majestic views, would be littered with McMansions, hot tubs and Kardashians. Not here. This is ranch country. Cattle hang out in the bright sun, munch on grass, gaze into the ocean. If you're a cow, you want this gig.

[Details: California's Central Coast](#)

“We have beautiful beaches here, but they're more of a backdrop,” says Jason Haas, the owner of Tablas Creek Vineyard in nearby Paso Robles. “The Central Coast isn't really much of a beach culture.”

Not encumbered with overdevelopment, or much development at all, the area easily accommodates those wonderfully Californian pursuits of self actualization and awareness. For instance, at my hotel, free WiFi and HBO simply weren't enough. It also offered a YogaDome, a rock-laden Meditation Labyrinth and a Healing Arts Institute. I'm still not quite sure what any of this stuff does, but I love telling people that I did it.

The aesthetic feel of the area draws people such as Michael Laboon, a celebrated local tile artist who bought a house in Shell Beach 17 years ago. “The natural beauty of the place attracts a lot of artists,” says Laboon, whose tile work appears on public areas around San Luis Obispo County. “The beach is spectacular and there’s not the traffic and crowds of Southern California. The water is really inspiring.”

Fruit of the vine

Inspirational, artsy — that’s good for him. But what about the rest of us, who can’t summon our inner Gauguin? Turns out, there’s plenty to do. Most of it’s inland and involves grapes. In fact, the wine industry here is why the Central Coast is no longer California’s best-kept secret.

The SLO wine region, which includes Paso Robles, is now considered one of the best in the country. Grapes were planted here in the 18th century by monks to make altar wine. San Luis Obispo, the largest town in the region, is one of the oldest cities in California, founded in 1772 by the Spanish, who were bent on expanding their empire in America and spreading the Catholic faith.

There are about 280 wineries in San Luis Obispo County, and wine accounts for about 8,000 jobs. The entire Central Coast wine region — which extends from Monterey to Santa Barbara — is the third largest wine-producing region in California, behind Napa and Sonoma. But the areas couldn’t be more different. “We have much more diversity here,” says Austin Hope, president of Hope Family Wines. “We have different microclimates, which produce more types of wine.”

In fact, the cooler coastal region averages 68 degrees, ideal for growing pinot noir or chardonnay. But in Paso Robles, just 35 miles inland, the summer temps routinely hit the high 90s, making the area better for cabernet, merlot and zinfandel.

Toby James, the plain-spoken co-owner of Paso Robles’ Tobin James Cellars, says that the differences between Napa and the Central Coast are more than just about climate and soil. “Some guy sells an oil company, buys a vineyard in Napa and calls himself a winemaker,” James says. “Most winemakers around here are farmers, not celebrities. We work the soil, the tractors, we’re from this land.”

Napa and Sonoma draw about 10 million tourists a year, the SLO region about 1.2 million. There are no major population centers here; Los Angeles is 3 1 / 2 hours south. It’s mostly a collection of quaint small towns and family-owned vineyards. And although that’s its appeal, it makes me wonder why more people don’t live here (San Luis Obispo County has a population of only about 300,000). Besides the wine — we’ll get to that later — it has everything.

Beach to bar

Wherever I am in California, I start with the beaches. Avila Beach, my home base on this trip, is small, just 1,600 residents and one stoplight. It is, to use an overused word, charming. The main street, wide and

pedestrian friendly, is blissfully devoid of chain stores and leads directly to the beach. The entire beachfront is less than half a mile and contains a few restaurants and shops. Early mornings, particularly in June, are shrouded with fog.

There's not a lot to do in Avila, nor should there be. It's a place for hand-holding walks on the beach, wine at the Old Custom House restaurant, with its 40-foot polished wood bar overlooking the Pacific, and early morning runs along the water.

The next town south is Pismo Beach, just a ways down the road but miles apart in atmosphere. Pismo is to Avila what Dewey might be to Bethany Beach. Like Avila, it has a large, pretty beach. There are some fine restaurants. Guiseppe's serves great Italian food, and the locals meet at the small but jumping bar. But the town is far more congested; lots of traffic lights, loads of surf shops, and if you have the sudden urge to get a tattoo, you're covered. There are at least three parlors in town.

If you're meeting your buddies and want to bop around town for a few beers, Pismo's the place. If you settle down and finally do manage to get a date, then head to Avila.

After some sophomoric beach-bar hopping, I needed a quaint fix. And found it about 60 miles away in Solvang, a too-cute village founded 100 years ago by a group of Danish teachers. At first glance, it looks like something out of Disney World. The town features Danish-style windmills, and statues of author Hans Christian Andersen and the Little Mermaid. The architecture and storefronts are vintage Danish. It's a fun stop with good restaurants, bakeries, etc., but you can do it in a couple of hours.

More than an hour north of Avila is the Hearst Castle, which you should see because, well, it's the Hearst Castle. Stunning, large, excessive, it seems like the appropriate home for newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst. I took the tour. Beautiful grounds, informative, lots of gossipy stuff about old-time movie stars who stayed here. But a bit too reverential toward Hearst. After hearing how Hearst endlessly labored for the "common man," I knew that it was time for a drink. Mercifully, the Paso Robles wineries were only a few miles away. It was time for the tour.

The wine trail

I was never much of a wine guy. Unless, of course, you count my college years, when we mixed Mogen David (Mad Dog 20/20) with cans of cold Iron City beer. A bit later, to cover my ignorance in my dating days, I'd always tell the waiter to pick the wine — secretly praying that he'd bring the \$12-\$14 merlot. But after only a few days here, you can't help but learn. The vineyards are the social engines of the region, and the locals are passionate about their product.

"Wines are a huge part of our culture here," says Mike Sinor, owner of Sinor LaVelle vineyards.

If you want to see that culture but left your Cessna at home, then zip-lining the 14,000-acre Santa Margarita ranch, home to Ancient Peaks Winery, is the ticket. I sailed over acres of grapes, dry forest and a vast nature preserve. It was a fun trip — just make sure you don't do the wine-tasting til after the trip.

If there's a character in the SLO wine region, it's the irrepressible Toby James. "We got the cowboy spirit here, man," he says.

It's more than spirit. I walked into the Tobin James tasting room and thought I'd entered a Western movie set. It's a large, cowboy-type saloon, with three separate bars, complete with brass rails. The place rocks, the wine flows, the music blares. Toby is the maestro, but you probably won't find him sipping his vintage.

"I drink Chateauneuf du Budweiser," James says. "After a long day on the tractor you're not looking for a glass of wine. I mean, the mailman doesn't go for a long walk on his day off, does he? You know what we say around here: It takes a lot of beer to make a good wine."

Another outsize personality is Terry Hoage. Remember him? You ought to. The former Washington Redskins free safety recovered an onside kick attempt by the Buffalo Bills in the 1992 Super Bowl that helped secure the Redskins' third and most recent world championship. The hard-hitting ex-defensive back now crushes grapes at his Paso Robles winery instead of wide receivers crossing the middle.

He still has the athlete's gait as he hops off his tractor. "I've worked harder at this than I did in the NFL, and I worked pretty hard in the NFL," he says.

After 13 years in the NFL, he bought the farm with his wife, Jennifer. He learned the wine business and, in true Central Coast fashion, worked the fields himself and now produces highly regarded Rhone-style wine. It's a small winery, selling just about 2000 cases a year. Most are aged in expensive French oak barrels — clearly not the type of stuff that you'd, say, mix with Iron City.

You can't possibly see all the wineries — driving down Route 46, a wine mecca where well-known brands such as J. Lohr and Hope Family Wines share the road with mom-and-pop outfits, it's tough to figure out where to stop.

Toward the end of the day, it's back to the beach, so my final stop is the Kelsey See Canyon Vineyards, just about a mile from the ocean. It's a small, rustic place where most of the tasting room is out on the lawn. Peacocks roam the grounds, angling to be petted, and a small creek snakes behind the barn.

The sun is starting to set amid the lush vineyards. The scent of the Pacific beckons, a glass of pinot is on the way. Man, those cows have it good.

Carden is a writer and television producer in Washington.

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