

36 Hours in Carmel-by-the-Sea

Kike Arnal for The New York Times
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WITH its architectural mishmash of storybook English cottages and Swiss Alpine chalets, the small town of Carmel-by-the-Sea in Northern California resembles a Disneyland version of Europe. You half expect a bereted Parisian to saunter out of one of the ridiculously cute, Euro-themed bistros. But walk a few blocks to Carmel's steep, sandy beach and the view is pure California: a rugged Pacific coastline spangled with rocky outcroppings, ghostly cypress trees and the electric green slopes of the famed Pebble Beach golf course. The one-square-mile village has no street lights, parking meters or even numbered addresses, but you wouldn't call it low-key. Once a bohemian outpost for folks like Jack London, Carmel today is prime real estate, and the surrounding valley is abuzz with top-notch restaurants, boutique wineries and precious shops.

GETTING IN AND AROUND CARMEL

Carmel-by-the-Sea is a scenic two-hour drive south of San Francisco. Ten minutes from downtown Carmel is the Monterey Peninsula Airport, which has direct flights from San Francisco, Los Angeles, Denver, Phoenix and Las Vegas. While the town is easily explored by foot, you'll need a car to get to the rest of the valley and coast.

Friday
6 p.m.

1) COCKTAILS WITH CLINT

Carmel has had its share of boldfaced residents, but few more enduring or beloved than Clint Eastwood, who was the town's mayor from 1986 to 1988 and still lives in the area. You might catch a glimpse of him at his restaurant at Mission Ranch (26270 Dolores Street; 831-624-6436; www.missionranchcarmel.com), his 22-acre property just outside of town, where he's been known to eat with his family and greet old-timers at the piano bar. Order a glass of wine and snag a seat on the heated restaurant patio overlooking a striking tableau: sheep meadows, rolling hills and the shimmering ocean in the distance.

8 p.m.

2) MONTEREY MECCA

Drawing foodies are two hotel restaurants that fuse French technique with California bounty. At the chef Michel Richard's new Citronelle (Carmel Valley Ranch, 1 Old Ranch Road; 831-625-9500; www.carmelvalleyranch.com) — the original restaurant was in Santa Barbara, Calif. — the menu features artichokes, asparagus and other vegetables grown within an hour's drive. Don't miss the local abalone served with caviar cream. And for dessert, try the “deconstructed apple tarte tartin” — a whole apple slow-cooked in caramel sauce. Dinner for two is about \$100 without wine.

Saturday

8 a.m.

3) BIKING FOR A VIEW

Beat the gawking motorists and \$9.25 entry fee for cars by waking early and biking the 17-Mile Drive, the jaw-dropping cornice that hugs the rocky coastline between Carmel and Pacific Grove. Adventures by the Sea (299 Cannery Row, Monterey; 831-372-1807; www.adventuresbythesea.com) rents bikes for \$7 an hour and is an easy five miles from the drive's most scenic stretches, which are lined with sandy beaches, golf courses and a 250-year-old cypress tree sprouting from a seaside boulder.

11 a.m.

4) MISSION MUSEUM

The San Carlos Borromeo del Rio Carmelo Mission (3080 Rio Road; 831-624-1271; www.carmelmission.org; \$5) was founded at its present site in 1771 by Father Junipero Serra and was once the headquarters for the entire California mission system. Known more simply as the Carmel mission, the site includes a poppy-filled garden, an abalone-strewn cemetery and a stone Basilica with original 18th-century artworks. At the Mission's Convento Museum, you can peer into Father Serra's spartan living quarters — a table, chair and a highly uncomfortable-looking wooden bed — and check out his book collection, identified as “California's first library.”

12:30 p.m.

5) IN-TOWN TASTINGS

Scrap together lunch on a walking tour of some of Carmel's best food shops. Here's a cheat sheet: Bountiful Basket (San Carlos Street off Ocean Avenue; 831-625-4457; www.bountifulbasketcarmel.com) imports more than 100 olive oils and vinegars from around the world; Bruno's Market and Deli (Sixth Avenue and Junipero Avenue; 831-624-3821; www.brunosmarket.com) has gourmet tri-tip and barbecue chicken sandwiches; and the Cheese Shop (Carmel Plaza, Ocean Avenue and Junipero Avenue, lower level; 800-828-9463; www.thecheeseshopinc.com) stocks picnic fixings, wine and about 300 cheeses. They'll let you taste as many as you like or they can assemble a customized cheese plate that you can nibble at the cafe tables out front.

2 p.m.

6) SIP THE VALLEY

Thanks to its coastal climate and sandy, loamy soil, Carmel Valley is gaining renown for its wines. Most of the tasting rooms are clustered in Carmel Valley Village, a small town with a handful of restaurants and wineries 12 miles east of Carmel-by-the-Sea. Bernardus (5 West Carmel Valley Road; 800-223-2533; www.bernardus.com; tasting fees \$5 and \$10), the granddaddy of area wineries, is known both for the breadth and quality of its wines; its unoaked 2007 Griva Sauvignon Blanc (\$25) and the French-style 2005 Ingrid's Chardonnay (\$50) are particularly intriguing. A newcomer, Boekenoogen Wines, (24 West Carmel Valley Road; 831-659-4215; www.boekenoogenwines.com; tasting fee \$5), is a small family-owned winery and tasting room that opened last summer. It has just three varietals to date, including an exceptionally full-bodied and well-priced pinot noir (\$45).

4 p.m.

7) STUFF FOR HOME

Walk off the buzz back in town, where 42 hidden courtyards and alleys shelter a plethora of stylish new galleries and boutiques. Trouvé (San Carlos Street and Sixth Avenue; 831-625-9777; www.trouvehome.com) is a well-curated collection of modern housewares and global antiques. The whimsical Piccolo (Dolores Street between Ocean and Seventh Avenues; 831-624-4411; www.piccolocarmel.com) is packed to the gills with handmade glassware, pottery, stationery and jewelry. And the working studio and gallery of Steven Whyte (Dolores Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues; 831-620-1917; www.stevenwhytesculptor.com) sells the local sculptor's hyper-realistic cast bronze portraits. Looking for something humbler? The Carmel Drug Store (Ocean Avenue and San Carlos Street; 831-624-3819; www.carmeldrugstore.com) has been selling handmade Swiss combs and grandma colognes and Coca-Cola in glass bottles since 1910.

8 p.m.

8) EAT LIKE A EUROPEAN

For dinner, make a beeline for one of Carmel's über-charming French or Italian restaurants. La Bicyclette (Dolores Street at Seventh Avenue; 831-622-9899; www.labicycletterestaurant.com) resembles a rustic village bistro. The compact menu spans Europe with dishes like beef with Gorgonzola and red wine sauce, and German sausage with homemade sauerkraut. Dinner for two: \$60 without wine. Also worth a try is Cantinetta Luca (Dolores Street between Ocean and Seventh Avenues; 831-625-6500; www.cantinettaluca.com), a two-year-old Italian restaurant popular for its wood-fired pizzas, homemade pastas, all-Italian wine list and a dozen types of salume aged on site in a glass-walled curing room. Dinner for two is about \$60 without wine.

Sunday

11 a.m.

9) SURF AND SEALS

Legend has it that Robert Louis Stevenson hit on the inspiration for the 1883 novel "Treasure Island" while strolling the beach near Point Lobos. Retrace his steps at Point Lobos State Reserve (Route 1, five miles south of Carmel; 831-624-4909; pt-lobos.parks.state.ca.us; \$10 admission), a majestic landscape with 14 meandering trails. Don't forget binoculars: you can spot sea otters, seals and sea lions year-round, and migrating gray whales December through May. Scuba divers take note: 60 percent of the reserve's 554 acres lie underwater, in one of the richest marine habitats in California. Scuba diving, snorkeling and kayaking reservations can be booked through the park's Web site.