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Visiting Carmel-by-the-Sea

by Janet 7 hours agoLast edited 7 hours ago

This seaside village on the Monterey Peninsula came to international attention back in the 1980s, when Hollywood legend Clint Eastwood was mayor. But that was just a blip in the history of this tiny community, founded as an artists' colony after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. It's still an art haven, and still a showcase for the emblematic, fairy tale architecture that came to define it in the 1920s and 1930s. But it's also a renowned fine-dining destination, a great jumping-off point for golfers and hikers, and a wonderful, walkable place to hang your hat for a few days. Here are a few of our favourite things to do when visiting Carmel-by-the-Sea.

Let's Walk



Storybook architecture contributes to the flavour of Carmel © [Carmel California](#)

Part of the pleasure of visiting Carmel-by-the-Sea lies in wandering its warren of back streets and passageways, admiring the shop-window eye candy and absorbing the delectable aromas wafting from restaurants and bakeries. But as with any other destination, the more you know, the more there is to appreciate.

That's where Gael Gallagher's [Carmel Walks](#) comes in. Her two-hour tours regale visitors with history, trivia and an understanding of how the mile-square village, with its forest motif, storybook cottages, captivating gardens and

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preponderance of art galleries, came to be. As she so aptly illustrates through anecdote and example, the bohemian ethos that arrived with the displaced artists, writers and poets who settled here in the early 20th century still thrives, albeit beneath a façade of extreme tidiness and affluence.



Carmel's main streets are linked by a warren of narrow passageways © [Carmel California](#)

One of the first thing visitors learn: The name “Carmel-by-the-Sea” refers to the 30-block village incorporated in 1916, while the more generic term “Carmel” is applied to the village and unincorporated area surrounding it.

Gallagher has a tip for visitors willing to let serendipity be their guide: “Follow the passageways,” she says, “and don’t come out the same way you go in. There’s a surprise around every corner.”

Savour the Flavours

If you can find a bad meal in Carmel, go ahead and Yelp about it, but know that you’ll be an outlier among a constellation of stars. The culinary competition here is fierce, and with more than 60 restaurants packed into a small area, it’s no wonder that dining out is a highlight of most visitors’ days.

In the cosy and romantic restaurant category, rambling [Casanova](#), spread over a series of intimate rooms and courtyards, evokes the ambience of a country inn in France or Italy. Top billing also goes to [Anton & Michel](#), an elegant venue with an emphasis on imaginative continental cuisine; and [Aubergine at L’Auberge](#), an intimate, 12-table establishment where reservations are required far in advance for the 12-course tasting menu that has won many accolades for chef Justin Cogley.





Portabella is one of many wonderful restaurants in Carmel © Janet Fullwood

Many of Carmel's more casual eateries offer outdoor dining most of the year. **Forge in the Forest** is a shady and popular lunch spot, while the menu and ambiance at **Le St. Tropez** are as sunny as the name suggests. Highly regarded **Basil**, with a menu based on seasonal local produce, and **Mundaka**, specializing in Spanish-style tapas, are both relative newcomers to the Carmel dining scene. **La Bicyclette**, a European-style café known for its thin-crust pizza, is a locals' favourite, as is **Village Corner**, a bistro especially popular for breakfast. For Mediterranean cuisine, **Bistro Giovanni** and **Portabella** are solid and long-standing favourites. For happy hour with a view, head to the rooftop bar at **Vesuvio**, where the late-afternoon scene erupts around blazing fire pits, \$5 cocktails and half-price bar bites.

Can't decide? Join a three-hour **Carmel Food Tour** and sample the goods at seven restaurants, wine-tasting rooms and specialty shops. You'll soak up some interesting history in the process—and you definitely won't be hungry for dinner.

Sipping and Shopping



Sample the best wines in the region at the local tasting rooms © **Dawn's Dream**

The bucolic Carmel Valley wine region is just minutes from Carmel-by-the-Sea, (should you fancy a day trip), but with so much on offer at local tasting rooms there's no real need for a designated driver. For \$65, the **Wine-Walk-by-the-Sea** passport program provides tastings at any nine of the 13 (and counting) establishments that have recently opened in the village. Pinot noir and Chardonnay are the region's signature varietals, and you'll sample some of the best at **Dawn's Dream** and **Caraccioli Cellars** (which also boasts stunning interior design). As a bonus, the passport comes with a list of restaurants that will waive corkage fees if you arrive with a bottle bought at any member establishment.



More than 60 art galleries help carry on Carmel-by-the-Sea's legacy as a creative haven © [Carmel California](#)

On the shopping front, one-of-a-kind merchandise is the rule, and if prices are high, quality is for the most part exquisite. Ocean Avenue, the main drag, is home to block after block of high-end boutiques and galleries, and there are more discoveries to be made along back streets and passageways. One must-see stop for art aficionados is [Dawson Cole Fine Art](#) at Lincoln and Sixth, which features a comprehensive collection of sculpture, paintings and drawings by internationally acclaimed artist [Richard MacDonald](#).

Classic Hotels and Chic B&Bs



The grand dame of Carmel hotels is La Playa, built as a private estate in 1905 © [Carmel California](#)

While the Monterey Peninsula is home to some of California's most renowned resorts, a stay within the village allows you to ditch your car for the duration. Each of the town's 50 or so inns sports its own personality, and most are family owned.



Historic details with added modern touches make La Playa shine © [La Playa](#)

The grand dame is [La Playa](#), which was built back in 1905 as a gift from landscape artist [Christian Jorgensen](#) to his wife, a member of San Francisco's [Ghirardelli](#) chocolate family. Fresh from a recent facelift that preserved the historic details but added modern touches, La Playa offers 75 guest rooms in a garden setting. Its main competitor in the luxury market is [L'Auberge Carmel](#), a graceful Relais & Châteaux property with 20 rooms that open onto quiet courtyards.

Carmel's other accommodations range from small hotels such as the [Cypress Inn](#), [Pine Inn](#) and [Hofsas House](#), to cottage-style B&Bs such as [Happy Landing Inn](#), [The Homestead](#), [Vagabond's House](#) and [Edgemere Cottages](#).

Get in the Swing



Picturesque views over Hole 7 at Pebble Beach © [isogood/iStock/Thinkstock](#)

The Monterey Peninsula is famous for golf, and some of the sport's most acclaimed venues are just a few minutes from Carmel-by-the-Sea. The neighbouring community of [Pebble Beach](#) is home to three courses whose names are familiar to any aficionado of the game: [Pebble Beach Golf Links](#), [Spyglass Hill](#) and [Links at Spanish Bay](#). Those and two additional courses, the nine-hole [Peter Hay](#) and the 18-hole [Del Monte](#) in nearby [Monterey](#), are operated by the [Pebble Beach Company](#), now owned by a group that includes [Arnold Palmer](#), [Clint Eastwood](#) and [Peter Ueberroth](#).

Your best bet for snagging a tee time at Pebble, Spyglass or Spanish Bay is in winter, but even then it's a long shot, as only resort guests can book more than one day in advance. You'll have better luck at the recently renovated and highly regarded [Poppy Hills](#) course, which is open to the public and managed by the Northern California Golf Association.



Serenity and scenic surrounds at the Quail Lodge © [Quail Lodge Golf Club](#)

Two resort courses in the nearby Carmel Valley offer additional options. [Carmel Valley Ranch](#) sports the only Pete Dye-designed course in Northern California, while the nearby [Quail Lodge Golf Club](#), designed by Robert Muir Graves, is flat and wonderfully walkable.

See the Sea

Whether the day is foggy or crystal-clear, a cruise along [17-Mile-Drive](#) on the Monterey Peninsula is a don't-miss experience. Expect coastal panoramas—crashing waves, stunning rock formations, white sand beaches, and deep-green forests—that are among California's most mesmerizing and inspirational.



Horseback riding by the shore along 17-Mile-Drive in Pebble Beach © Janet Fullwood

The roadway, operated by [Pebble Beach Resorts](#), hugs the shore for about half its length and has entrances in Carmel and [Pacific Grove](#). It's best done in a counter-clockwise loop that keeps your vehicle on the right side of the road, next to the ocean. Many turnouts with interpretive signage are available to enrich the experience. Sea lions are year-round inhabitants, while in winter you're likely to spot whales. Activities available along the drive include [guided horseback trail rides](#) in the forest and along the shore.

Hiker’s Heaven



Otherworldly sights at Point Lobos © [Zampelli/iStock/Thinkstock](#)

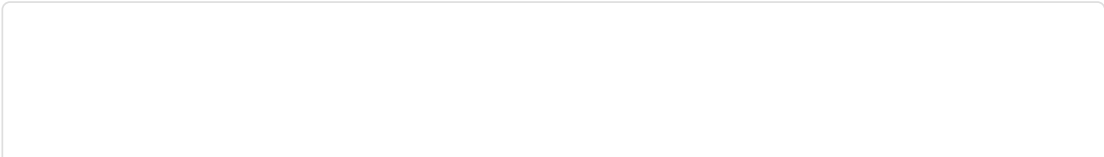
Three miles south of Carmel on Highway 1, [Point Lobos State Natural Reserve](#) protects a spectacular stretch of coastline often called the “greatest meeting of land and water in the world.” No matter what the weather, an hour or two spent hiking will calm the senses, sooth the soul, and if you join one of the docent-led walks offered daily, teach you a lot about the area’s natural history.



Sunset over Point Lobos © Shane Menshik

While the peninsula is laced with trails, the [Cypress Grove Trail](#) is a visitor favourite. It loops for a mile along rugged coastal cliffs and through one of only two naturally growing stands of Monterey cypress trees on earth, offering sightings of California sea lions, sea otters and whales as well as diverse botanical specimens. For insight into the human history of Point Lobos, visit the Whaling Station Museum and adjacent Whaler’s Cabin, built in the 1850s by Chinese fishermen.

Take Refuge





Detox your mind and body at Carmel's Refuge spa centre © [Refuge](#)

The Refuge is a co-ed “hydrothermal relaxation spa” on the grounds of the **Carmel Valley Athletic Club**, situated in the bucolic countryside about 10 minutes from Carmel-by-the-Sea. Upon arrival, visitors are issued robes and ushered into a landscaped, two-acre outdoor space where steam from hot water pools fogs the air and the only sound is the white-noise purr of waterfalls. There begins the hydrothermal cycle: raise the body temperature in a sauna or eucalyptus steam room, go outside, plunge into a pool marked “cool” (the temperature of the Pacific Ocean) or “cold” (the temperature of an icy river), sit around a fire pit for a while, dip into a hot pool, dip into a cold pool, then start the circuit all over again.

The idea here is to let stress drain from mind and body and come away feeling like a rubber doll. It's a highly effective treatment, especially when followed by a massage.

Carmel-by-the-Sea is approximately a two-hour drive (122 miles) from San Francisco and a three-hour drive (189 miles) from Sacramento.

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What are your top tips for visiting Carmel-by-the-Sea? Have we forgotten any of your favourite spots? Let us know in the comments section below.

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The Gamer's Guide To Visiting Tokyo

Our Places

Japan's importance to gaming really can't be ignored. Legendary Japanese games like Space Invaders, Pac-Man, Donkey Kong, Super Mario Bros. and Street Fighter helped mould the industry into a heavyweight entertainment business and today, Japan's capital of Tokyo stands as an energetic hub of all things gaming.

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Why You Must Visit The New Look San Diego Waterfront

Our Places

With its oceanfront location and beautiful harbour you might expect downtown San Diego to have a waterfront to match. Sadly, that hasn't been the case—until now. Major revitalization efforts including new parks, shopping and dining are bringing locals back to the San Diego waterfront and giving the city the “front porch” it deserves.

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About the author: Janet

Janet Fullwood

Janet Fullwood didn't see the ocean until she was 10 or a mountain until she was 15, but once she started traveling, there was no stopping her. In her personal life and professional career, Janet has traveled to 80 countries on seven continents and written about everything from hot-tubbing in Antarctica to threatened cultures in Yap. Her professional career has included more than two decades as a newspaper journalist specializing in travel and tourism. She currently works as a freelance writer and editor contributing to a broad spectrum of magazines, newspapers and websites. Janet is a member of the Society of American Travel Writers, Outdoor Writers Association of California and North American Snowsports Journalist Association. She lives in Sacramento.



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