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Carmel named one of America's '10 best small towns'

Jeanne Cooper, Special to SFGate
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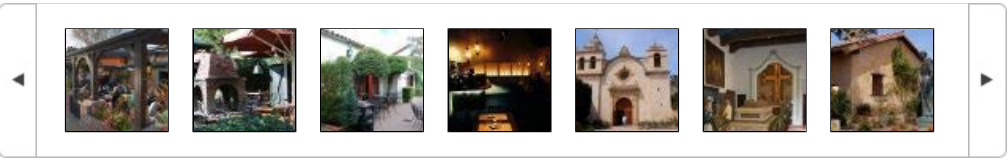
Breakfast: The [Village Corner](#), named for its home at the intersection of Dolores Street and Sixth Avenue in Carmel, has been open for more than 60 years. The indoor-outdoor spot—with heat lamps on the patio to stave off the chill on foggy days—serves breakfast, lunch and dinner. The later meals feature an all-Monterey wine list and Mediterranean-inspired dishes, but breakfast usually draws a large complement of local residents, with specialties such as calamari steak and eggs, omelets and huevos rancheros. Photo: Village Corner



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It may be surprising to hear Carmel-by-the-Sea called a "city," given its population of about 3,800.

But if you grant the Monterey County hamlet "small city" status, as a recent Conde Nast Traveler readers survey does, then it's no surprise to learn Carmel not only made the list of the [10 Best Small Cities in America](#), it came in No. 2 — second only to Santa Fe, N.M., pop. 68,000.

California also scored two more actual cities in the Conde Nast Traveler Top 10: Napa, pop. 77,000, placed third, while Santa Barbara, pop. 91,000, ranked sixth. Colorado claimed the No. 4 and 8 spots with Telluride and Aspen, while Newport, R.I., and Key West, Fla., represented the East Coast at No. 5 and 10, respectively. Jackson Hole, Wyo., and Sedona, Ariz., completed the list at No 7 and 9, respectively. Of the Top 10, only Telluride has a smaller resident population than Carmel, at just 2,500 souls.

Conceding Carmel is actually a "tiny town," the travel publisher hailed it as a former "funky" artists colony, one that attracted authors such as Robert Louis Stevenson and Sinclair Lewis, and photographer Ansel Adams, as well as its celebrity mayor from

1986 to 1988, Clint Eastwood. "These days, tourists come to shop, browse galleries, eat in quaint restaurants and cafes, attend the annual Bach Festival, or simply walk the beach," noted Conde Nast Traveler's report on the survey.

The survey write-up also noted readers' two highest-rated hotels in the area. No. 1 isn't actually in Carmel: [Bernardus Lodge](#), a vineyard-fringed oasis with a highly regarded restaurant and spa, lies 11 miles east in Carmel Valley. No. 2 [L'Auberge Carmel](#) is a jewel box in the heart of the village, but with just about the highest rates in town for a standard (and dare we say teeny) room: from \$455 for a weekday in July.

Fortunately, Carmel offers many more moderately priced but equally charming lodging options within walking distance of all America's second best small city has to offer. From the quaint rooms in the thoughtfully renovated [La Playa Carmel](#) on the west side, it's a short downhill stride to the beach (where bonfires are permitted south of 10th Avenue by [local ordinance](#).) On the quiet, eastern upslope, the family-owned [Hofsas House](#) offers residential-sized suites within a short stroll of restaurants and shops. In between is Doris Day's [Cypress Inn](#), renowned for its dog-friendliness, as is the entire village.

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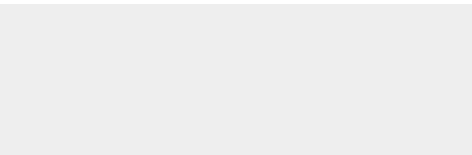
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While visitors can ride [Monterey-Salinas Transit's Route 22 bus](#) to Big Sur daily between Memorial Day and Labor Day (and weekends after that), or take the hourly [Grapevine Express bus](#) to Carmel Valley wineries, having so much to explore within walking distance of the village is a major part of Carmel's appeal.

Here are five highlights, with more details in the photo gallery above:

1. Vintage charm. No sightseeing in Carmel would be complete without a walking tour—formal or informal—of historic buildings, starting with its oldest. Founded in 1771, the [Carmel Mission](#) is a 20-minute walk from downtown on leafy Junipero Street (which becomes Rio Road), but is well worth the effort, given its restored basilica church, gardens and cluster of small museum galleries with permanent and temporary exhibitions.

Fans of the 20th century storybook cottages of Hugh Comstock and other designers can learn more about them, and their often famous inhabitants, on one of Gael Gallagher's [Carmel Walks](#) (\$25), which also include Carmel Heritage Society's [First Murphy House](#), built in 1902. On Fridays and Saturday, docents lead tours of poet Robinson Jeffers' romantically snug [Tor House](#) and striking Hawk Tower, on scenic Carmel Point, a half-hour's walk from downtown.

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