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Home > Discover Carmel-by-the-Sea's hidden gems with a walkabout

Discover Carmel-by-the-Sea's hidden gems with a walkabout

By Janice Nieder on Oct 14, 2015 in Accommodation, Bed & Breakfasts, California, Food and Drink, Hotels, Leisure Travel, North America, Regions, Speciality Travel, Travel Miscellany, USA - Read 7521 times

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Living proof that "smaller is better", Carmel-by-the-Sea consists of one square mile, fabulously jam-packed with 45 cozy to elegant inns, 60 scrumptious eateries, about 80 unique art galleries and even a doggie therapist! For geographically challenged tourists like myself, it's a dream come true since once you make the scenic 120 mile drive down from San Francisco, you won't have to touch your car for the rest of your stay. You can explore Carmel on your own by wandering aimlessly around or I'd suggest signing up for a guided walk or three, to really discover this beachside beauty's charms. Here are three of Carmel's best walking tours.

Carmel Food Tour

If you're having trouble choosing where to eat (so many restaurants, so little time) then take the guesswork out of it and join a [Carmel Food Tour](#), where all you have to do is show up in comfy shoes, roomy pants and of course, pay for your ticket. The fattening three hours flew by as our informative guide, Staci Giovino, the food-obsessed owner of Carmel Food Tours, led us down back alleys and hidden courtyards sharing her favorite eateries with us, all the while dishing on all the latest foodcentric gossip. We met iconic restaurateurs, many who have been in business for decades, as well as exciting entrepreneurs while sampling signature dishes at each of the seven stops.



Thankfully we had the private courtyard to ourselves so no one saw me sop up every last bit of the slow-braised Kobe beef short ribs at Anton & Michel, a fine dining establishment where you'll definitely want to use your indoor voice. We returned to A & M's later that night for a memorable Bananas Foster prepared table-side with dramatic flair.

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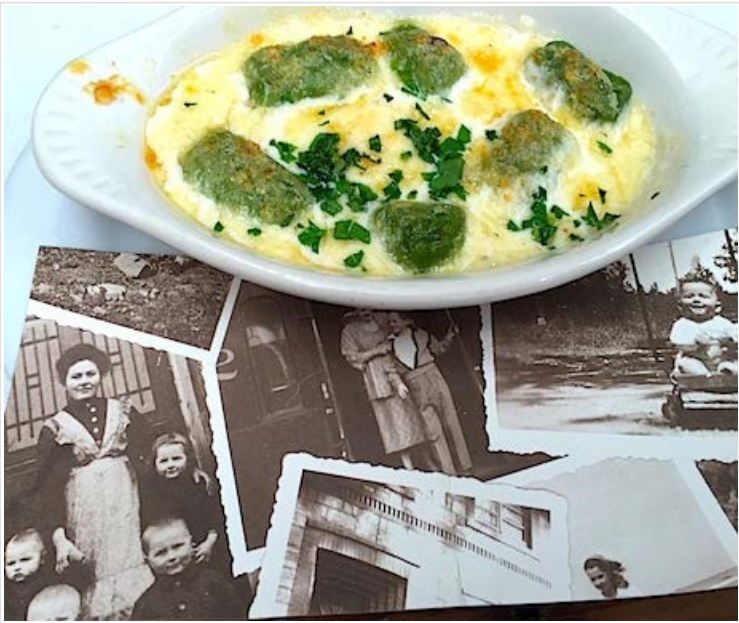
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On to Casanova, touted as Carmel's "most romantic" restaurant, serving impeccably presented French-Italian fare to pair with your choice of wine from their 34,000 bottles housed in their hand-dug cellar. For half a century this quaint old house belonged to Aunt Fairy Bird, who was Charlie Chaplin's cook. The eclectic, antique filled restaurant oozes atmosphere with rustic wood tables and fresh flowers filling the many small fire-lit dining rooms and their charming outdoor patio. The hidden gem here is the intimate Van Gogh dining room with the actual table Vincent Van Gogh used when he lived "Chez Rachoux".



Again I'm reaching for the breadsticks to scrape up every last bit of the sinfully rich Parmesan sauce ladled over the ethereal spinach gnocchi.

The rest is just an epicurean blur of succulent treats and interesting tales that Staci shared with us enroute. There was the seasonal heirloom tomato-cheese salad we enjoyed at the Affina, a new hipster on the block; an eye-opening ultra-premium olive oil and balsamic tasting experience at the trendy Trio Carmel (who would have thunk that a drizzle of white truffle oil over vanilla gelato could change your life forever) and the New-Classic Manhattan cocktail which complemented the North African lamb meatball perfectly at Doris Day's historic Cypress Inn (circa 1929). This inn is so dog friendly that they even host a "yappie hour" for your furry friend.

We ended with a pop- as we sipped the gold medal winning Brut Rosé at the upscale Caraccioli Cellars tasting room before darting into the Lula's Chocolates, the Tiffany's of candy stores, where we clamored for "more please" samples of their famous chocolate caramels topped with various seas salts from around the world.

I sadly bid my new best bud, Staci, a fond farewell before waddling away. But I'll be back soon to try her new "Gimme A Break-fast Tour".



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Art Walk

After all the great eats, it's time for some non-caloric eye-candy. Carmel-by-the-Sea has long been a haven for artists, including photographer Ansel Adams and Edward Weston. For a quick overview, you can pop into the Carmel Art Association, founded 1927 (the second oldest art cooperative in the country) that features the work of more than 100 professional resident artists. However, for a truly inspiring look at the local art scene, sign up for a [Carmel Art Tour](#) led by the engaging Rohana LoSchiavo. Rohana takes all the intimidation out of walking into an upscale gallery and transforms the experience into a non-threatening, educational, fun-filled afternoon. We were invited behind the scenes, receiving warm welcomes from the gallery owners who introduced us to new artists and hear firsthand about their creative process as you explore a variety of art including all forms of painting, art glass, sculpture, and photography on a leisurely walk through downtown Carmel.



Just a few standout moments include talking to Steven Whyte, who created the War Hymn Monument, the largest bronze sculpture in any USA stadium. When I asked what his favorite part of creating art was he blithely replied, "Who wouldn't love sculpting naked ladies all day?"

It was also an incredible viewing the vast collection of Edward Weston photographs at the Weston Gallery, one of the oldest photographic galleries in the world. Plus, if I hadn't been with Rohana, I probably would never have found the Winfield Gallery, where we learned that the charming the artist/owner, Christopher Winfield is the son of Rodney Winfield, who sculpted "The Brotherhood of Man" which commemorates the Founding of the United Nations in Nob Hill's Grace Cathedral, and learning the history behind the unconventional "shattered" glass paintings of Cassandra Blackmore, who, because she is dyslexic, sees things in reverse which led to her signature glass shattering process. (Hmmm, Steven Whyte is also severely dyslexic-I wonder if there's a connection?)

Gael Gallagher's Carmel Walks

OK, so this walk won't get any bonus points for its creative moniker but it scores high marks for offering a wonderful tour that reveals hidden courtyards, a labyrinth of passageways, quirky haunts, award-winning gardens and fascinating histories about the quirky characters that add so much to Carmel's charm.

Kelly, our endlessly entertaining guide, held us spellbound with endless stories about Carmel's history and the famous architects, writers, artists who call it home. Basically, it got kick-started in 1902 when Michael J. Murphy (who was 17 years old at the time and had moved to Carmel from Utah) decided to build a home for his mom and sister. After he finished, everyone wanted a Murphy home and his reputation steam-rocketed. By the time he retired in 1941 he had constructed over 300 buildings in Carmel. Today, "The First Murphy House" serves as the town's "Welcome Center".

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But the architect who was largely responsible for the whimsical fairy tale cottages sprinkled like fairy dust throughout town, was Hugh Comstock. He built the first storybook cottage in 1924 for his wife, Mayotta, to house her handmade "Otsy-Totsy" rag dolls. Kelly told us that while most people adore the 21 remaining Comstock Cottages, former Mayor, Clint Eastwood, disdainfully refers to them as "Smurf homes". In his defense Eastwood did manage to overturn Carmel's Ice Cream Ordinance, a law that prohibited selling and eating ice cream on public streets.



Kelly educated us about other idiosyncratic Carmel charms such as the fact that there aren't any curbs, postal delivery, parking meters, streetlights, house addresses or wearing stilettos, since there is a law still on the books against wearing shoes with more than 2 inches heels! (Fashionistas need not worry since permits are available without charge at City Hall.)

Where to stay

1. On the edge of town you'll find the charming [Carriage House Inn](#), where you'll want to reserve the Premium three-room King Suite, which features French Country décor, the world's comfiest feather bed, a two-person Jacuzzi tub, two fireplaces, mile-high vaulted ceilings, complimentary breakfast in bed, evening wine and appetizers in the elegant library, in-room snack basket, valet service and off-street parking, plus an exceedingly friendly staff.



If you're looking for something a bit more luxurious, the elegant European style of the historic [L'Auberge Carmel](#), a Relais & Châteaux property, that circles a private courtyard and stone fountain. The guest rooms feature French windows, premium bedding, large bath areas with radiant floor heating, and original black-and-white photographs by hotelier Helmut Horn. Your reservation includes Aubergine's Signature Breakfast, featuring the freshest seasonal ingredients of the area.

For other fine inns and B&B choices, try the [Carmel Innkeepers Association](#) who will play matchmaker for a perfect stay.



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