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How to Tour the California Coastline

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California's Pacific coastline covers 800 miles with diverse topography and climate. Its variety is remarkable, even to natives. Among the highlights are a mix of nature's best and man-made contributions. The majesty of mature coastal redwood forests and gray whale migrations are complemented by Golden Gate Bridge towers rising above layers of fog and historic lighthouses perched upon rugged bluffs. Pair the seascape with a backdrop of mountain foothills covered with vineyards that give way to palm trees farther south, and you can begin to paint a picture of California's dramatic coastline to explore by car, train, boat or trail.

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California Coastline

Behind the Wheel on California Route 1

The Pacific Coast Highway, appearing on maps as California State Route 1, is featured on National Geographic's worldwide top 500 "Drives of a Lifetime." Not for the faint of heart, the most spectacular part of the route at Big Sur features a 90-mile stretch with curves and switchbacks on a narrow, elevated roadway occasionally requiring slowing to 15 miles per hour. Take advantage of turnouts to gaze at waves crashing on rocks at the foot of cliffs hundreds of feet below. Those choosing to drive from north to south will be on the correct side of the road for pulling over at scenic layovers. Monterey's 17-Mile Drive with its signature lone cypress tree and Hearst Castle near San Simeon are two of the celebrated spots on the Pacific Coast Highway.

On the Tracks of the Coast Starlight

Amtrak operates the Coast Starlight on a 36-hour journey of 1,377 miles between Los Angeles and Seattle every day. The nation's only overnight train of its kind still in operation, the carriages include spacious coach seats, a dining car and an upper level lounge car with floor to ceiling windows. Overnight accommodation includes roomette sleeper cars providing access to a parlour car with armchair seating. Grab an observation seat on the Pacific coast side of the train for ocean-hugging vistas that are the standout moments of the trip. Some aspects of old-fashioned train travel have not survived into the 21st century: outstanding dining, luggage porters and on-time departures among them. Wi-Fi is unreliable. Note that in partnership with the National Park Service, interpretive guides present "Trails & Rails" talks for interested travelers.

Using Pedal Power on Two Wheels

Some stretches of the Pacific Coast Highway roadside have no shoulder at all, coupled with sharp drop-offs on the ocean side and steep inclines. While some experienced cyclists may be happy to tackle these challenging passages from Oregon to Mexico, others are best directed to bike routes published by the California Bicycle Coalition. Along the coast, these include Mendocino County north of San Francisco, the Monterey Bay Coastal Bike Path and the San Diego Bayshore Bikeway. Staying away from vehicular traffic provides safer and better opportunities for appreciating the scenery and wildlife, too. Depending on the time of year, this may include whales, dolphins, elephant seals, harbor seals, sea otters, sea lions and a multitude of bird life.

On Foot and On the Water

Get a backpack and go. The California Coastal Trail has divided the territory into 15 regions, mapping them out for walkers. Hikers can absorb smaller slices of the California coastline for a long, slow look and combine walks with a boat ride to see the coast from another perspective. In the San Francisco Bay Area, match a Mt. Tamalpais hike in Marin County with a sailboat ride to hike Angel Island, accessible only by boat, in the middle of San Francisco Bay. Above Carmel in Pebble Beach, 5,000 acres of cypress and pines in Del Monte Forest abut the mansions and golf courses near Monterey's Cannery Row, where kayak and whale-watching trips depart. Forests, ranches, vineyards and surf converge all along the 350-mile-long Central Coast where horseback riding and a clambake on the beach are all in a day's itinerary for hikers around San Luis Obispo.

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