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Monterey, Carmel and Santa Cruz offer quintessentially California experiences

by Carolyn Blackburn



Hiking, Big Sur

The slice of California that is home to Monterey, Carmel-by-the-Sea and Santa Cruz is foremost known as a picturesque place that lures outdoorsy types who appreciate beautiful coastal sights.

While meeting attendees also enjoy soaking in the views here, there are other quintessential experiences that set the area apart from other West Coast meetings contenders.

Coastal Excursions

Water-focused pursuits in Monterey County can be both laid-back, such as a whale-watching outing on the Monterey Bay, or active, depending on the group's wishes.

Jerry Diaz, director, strategic client services for the Monterey County CVB, says hiking in nearby Big Sur is certain to morph a staff into a team.





“Take them on an exhilarating hike up a mountainside or through a canyon of redwoods to astounding ocean views at the top of the mountain,” he says. “Pack a lunch and camera,

and witness a marked change in your team.”

Carmel-by-the-Sea in Monterey County is famous for its white sand and according to Safarina Maluki, destination marketing manager for Carmel-by-the-Sea Hospitality Improvement District (HID), it’s a lovely setting to watch the sunset, take a walk along the ocean, surf, boogie board or just sit and listen to the waves.

And Point Lobos State Reserve, Maluki adds, is a great place to enjoy spectacular coastal scenery via either a guided tour or self-guided trails that vary in difficulty.

The stand-up paddle boarding craze has brought many outfitters to Santa Cruz County, according to Krista Rupp, sales and marketing manager responsible for group sales at the Santa Cruz County Conference and Visitors Council.

“It’s great for groups that want to do something active but still be able to chat and enjoy the coastal scenery,” she says, citing the SUP Shack, which operates out of the Santa Cruz Harbor, as a great launching pad for a SUP adventure.

And at Seabright State Beach there are bonfire rings for public use if the group is interested in a truly California experience.

“Pack some beach chairs, s’mores fixings, maybe even a guitar or two, and kick back as passing dolphins and sailboats set the perfect backdrop for this memorable coastal gathering,” Rupp says.

Teambuilding

From drumming to driving, the area’s teambonding activities are fun and memorable.

Adventures by the Sea is a Monterey-based outfitter for group kayaking events.

“They take you out to Monterey’s kelp forest habitat for viewing dozens of species of wildlife,” Diaz says of the popular teambuilding outing.

Maluki adds that Carmel Valley’s Quail Lodge & Golf Club offers an exciting Land Rover Driving Experience that runs groups through an obstacle course with lots of surprises.

“We introduced this to a group of meeting planners during a fam and they loved it!” she says. “Everyone has the opportunity to be at the wheel and participate.”

And in Santa Cruz, surf classes, beach cleanups and instructed group drumming sessions with Jim Greiner’s Hands-On! Drumming are go-to events for teambuilding when convening in the area.

“Jim will guide your drumming session on the beach, in the redwood forest or any indoor or outdoor space, utilizing a variety of percussion instruments, Rupp says. “Groups are surprised by the rhythms they create together and how they relate to fostering communities and teams in the work environment.”

Culinary Temptations

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While an exclusive culinary experience, including the four-day Pebble Beach Food & Wine event held this year in April, is an “unforgettable incentive for your organization’s top producers,” says the Monterey County CVB’s Diaz, there are other delicious options that can be arranged any time.

During a Carmel Food Tours outing, according to Carmel-by-the-Sea’s Maluki, groups are introduced to hidden courtyards, fun unknown nuggets of information and stops at a number of restaurants where participants sample tasty offerings.

The tour guides, she says, “open your eyes to the charm and uniqueness of our beautiful city.”

Carmel Wine Walk-by-the-Sea is another great tour covering 14 wine tasting rooms located in Carmel-by-the-Sea and featuring wines grown on the Monterey Peninsula.

Santa Cruz is also a proud purveyor of wines, and Santa Cruz County Conference and Visitors Council’s Rupp says groups will enjoy tastings at the Vino Prima Wine Bar, which has a serving area for private group gatherings.

Rupp also recommends groups hop on a Brew Cruz, a new guided microbrewery bus tour aboard the Betty Jane, a refurbished 1989 Thomas International school bus.

“This flagship Brew Cruz vehicle is outfitted with comfortable lounge seating and stops at three local Santa Cruz County breweries,” she says.

Rooms with a View

It’s not every destination that boasts so many guest and meeting rooms with spectacular views of natural surroundings.

Standout group-friendly properties in Monterey County with excellent views include Monterey Beach Resort, which Diaz calls a “definitive beach property where groups can gather at feet-in-the-sand receptions or in meeting rooms with magnificent ocean views,” and InterContinental Clement Hotel, which sports meeting space over the Monterey Bay at famed Cannery Row.

Another waterfront meetings favorite is Portola Hotel & Spa, which surrounded by coastal trails and beaches and the historical ambience of Old Monterey.

Meanwhile, Maluki says La Playa Carmel, located two blocks from Carmel beach, has three meeting rooms with ocean views as well as guest rooms with ocean or garden views, and Pine Inn Carmel has guest rooms with ocean views.

“And Pine Inn’s ocean meeting room steps out onto a patio that also faces the ocean and perfectly complements outdoor F&B events,” she says.

You can’t get Santa Cruz County meeting space closer to the beach than at the Santa Cruz Dream Inn, Rupp adds.

“With floor-to-ceiling windows and a stellar location, meeting attendees may gaze upon Cowell’s Beach, the Santa Cruz Wharf, the Beach Boardwalk and clear across the Bay to our southern neighbor, Monterey,” she says.

Seascape Beach Resort in Aptos has a meeting space overlooking a pristine stretch of beach, and Hollins House at Pasatiempo Golf Club enjoys a stunning setting atop a hill overlooking the city of Santa Cruz and Monterey Bay.

Attractions Galore

The Monterey Bay Aquarium is a must-visit attraction for groups that also hosts incredible receptions and banquets surrounded by sea critters.

“Visiting this famous landmark is essential, from a simple group lunch to a gala with dining, dancing and tours,” Diaz says. “A must-see for any visitor is feeding time at the Open Sea gallery. It is an experience of a lifetime.”

The top attraction in Santa Cruz is its Beach Boardwalk, which the Santa Cruz County Conference and Visitors Council's Rupp says offers nostalgic fun, games, rides and great people-watching.

“Take a walk through, and we guarantee you’ll want to stop for a ride on the Looft Carousel, the Giant Dipper or maybe just to take a selfie with Laughing Sal,” she says, adding that a coastal redwoods ziplining outing with Mount Hermon Redwood Canopy Tours is another popular Santa Cruz attraction.

And in Carmel-by-the-Sea is the Sunset Center, a cultural venue that accommodates 700 guests for performances including the annual Carmel Bach Festival and a full calendar of acts such as ballet, comedy and jazz.

Carmel-by-the-Sea’s Maluki says the Sunset Center also has four meeting rooms with natural light that are ideal for small corporate meetings or board retreats.

While preparing this article, frequent Meetings Focus contributor Carolyn Blackburn realized it’s time to get her toes back in Carmel’s white sands.

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