



Low-key Carmel

Arty, friendly and unashamedly eccentric, this Californian coastal town provides the perfect holiday getaway

BY JILL K. ROBINSON

A FREETHINKER'S RETREAT and an artist community, Carmel-by-the-Sea has long lured the likes of Sinclair Lewis, Robert Louis Stevenson and Ansel Adams. But then, the town seems custom-built to stir the imagination. Hugh Comstock's fantastical cottages, with their pitched gable roofs, stone chimneys and quirky detailing, are still scattered throughout the town, giving Carmel the air of a fairytale village.

Despite its increasingly vibrant tourist industry, Carmel retains many of its eccentric traditions, such as giving houses names instead of numbers. It still

has a quaint village feel, too, especially during holiday time, when wreaths decorate the doors of cottages and inns, lights are draped on every conceivable spot, and dogs get festive treats when they visit shops with their humans.

Carmel's eclectic galleries, cozy cafes, majestic cypresses and silky white beaches are perfect for a California winter vacation, even if you're not brimming with the festive spirit. And if you are in a holiday mood, the town offers the chance to celebrate without the crazed shoppers, the drunken office parties — and, of course, the perpetually frozen toes.



1 BRIGHTEN YOUR HOLIDAY HOLIDAY TREE LIGHTING

Carmel's central gathering place, Devendorf Park, also hosts the town's annual Holiday Tree Lighting ceremony. Musical performances and an appearance by Santa (brought to the park by the Monterey Fire Department) are highlights before the main event. After the tree is lit, follow the party across the street to the Carmel Plaza's annual open house.
www.carmelplaza.com

2 CANDY CRUSH COTTAGE OF SWEETS

This charming little Carmel cottage, packed

CARMEL STILL HAS A QUAIN VILLAGE FEEL, ESPECIALLY DURING HOLIDAY TIME, WHEN WREATHS DECORATE THE DOORS OF COTTAGES.

floor to ceiling with every kind of candy imaginable, will get the kids excited even before the sugar kicks in. Especially impressive is the gigantic wall of licorice, with soft, hard, chewy, sweet, bitter and salty confections from around the world.

www.cottageofsweets.com

3 HOSTS WITH THE MOST INNS OF DISTINCTION TOUR

Get into the holiday spirit by exploring the town's decked-out inns and B&Bs, some of which open their doors for an annual self-guided tour. Stops include the Candle Light Inn, Carriage House Inn, the Hideaway and the Lamp Lighter Inn (a Carmel mainstay since 1912). Along the way, guests can fuel their exertions with food and wines from local restaurants and bars.

www.carmelheritage.org

4 CHRISTMAS EVERY DAY KRIS KRINGLE OF CARMEL

It's no seasonal display, but holiday time year-round at Kris Kringle, where the walls are decked with all manner of baubles, stars, reindeer, caroling figurines, Santa Clauses and other kitschy treasures, many of which can be personalized to order.

5 FESTIVE DANCE THE CHRISTMAS BALLET

This production, from the San Francisco company Smuin Ballet, ups the festive ante with a performance encompassing ballet, tap and jazz to express the Christmas story via classical and contemporary dance. It's not *The Nutcracker*, of course, but that's the whole point.

www.sunsetcenter.org

6 DECOR TO DIE FOR CARMEL COUNTRY INN

As far as holiday decorations go, this place doesn't hold back: cypress trees festooned with lights, oversized ornaments, topiary deer, a grapevine sleigh. Whether you're a guest at the inn or just wandering by, staff will gladly take your photo beside your favorite extravagance. On Christmas morning, canine guests get a special sock full of treats from Santa.

www.carmelcountryinn.com

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