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MUST LIST

SWEET LIKE CARMEL

Fall in love with the sights and sounds of an idyllic town by the sea.

BY STEVE HABEL

Glorious Carmel-by-the-Sea, Calif.: It's hard to even start explaining how awe-inspiring and memorable it is to spend a few days here. So, let's just begin with the ocean—the azure-blue Pacific as it roars into this white-sand cove on the Monterey Peninsula in waves that produce a frothy, cool mist—and work our way up the hill to the European-style village nestled above.



It's the water and the sand and the views and the way of life protected here that lassoed the likes of actor-director Clint Eastwood, authors Jack London and Meg Cabot, musician Michael Nesmith and even indomitable actress Doris Day, who still resides in a home high above one of the area's many fine golf courses.

Sitting amid oceans of flowers and cypress, and bathed in Pacific breezes, the village provides an unparalleled sense of discovery.

Carmel is just 1 square mile, its streets lined with art galleries; small and unique gift shops and boutiques; award-winning, world-renown restaurants; and quaint inns and hotels that are noteworthy for what they are not. You'll find no neon, national chains or conventioners here, just people reveling in the unique rejuvenation Carmel provides.

Of course, there's golf. After all, the Monterey Peninsula is home to Pebble Beach Golf Links, one of the world's most famous courses, as well as a handful of spectacular tracks that will challenge a player's focus, as well as his or her game.

A trip to Carmel can be divided among time together as a couple in one of the most romantic, picturesque towns in the world, and time spent apart to cross off bucket-list travel musts.

Start your sojourn by flying straight into the nearby Monterey Regional Airport after a quick hop from Austin to Phoenix, and by 11 a.m., enjoy a sumptuous breakfast of eggs Benedict and mimosas on the patio at Forge in the Forest, voted the top outdoor-dining experience in Monterey County every year since 1982.

Settle into comfortable but by no means over-the-top accommodations at the Hofsas House before heading to a wonderful early dinner on the lawn at La Playa Hotel, a posh, boutique, 75-room inn within a 1905 mansion.

Let dinner serve as a prelude to a play at the city's Sunset Center, an entertainment space that hosts acts ranging from country singer Trace Adkins to the Twyla Tharp Dance Company to *Fame the Musical* and the Vienna Boys Choir.

Begin day two with a guided walking tour of the city to discover the special charms of Carmel's secret pathways, hidden courtyards, award-winning gardens, enchanting fairytale cottages and the homes, haunts and history of famous artists, writers and movie stars.

From there, seek out separate paths for a few hours. One might spend the afternoon in nearby Carmel Valley at Refuge, a 2-acre haven and spa, taking advantage of a massage and hydrothermal therapy in the sauna, steam bath and the cold water pools, all in a beautiful, natural setting.

One might also head to Quail Lodge & Golf Club, the home of a wonderful course originally designed by Robert Muir Graves and recently refined by Todd Eckenrode. The track is a walkable par-71 routing that features seven lakes and constant encroachment from the scenic Carmel River, and tests all phases of a golfer's skill.

Reunite for a delicious dinner at Cantinetta Luca, where partner and Executive Chef Jason Balestrieri shares his Italian heritage and travels by offering handcrafted dishes prepared traditionally with a simple and rustic presentation.



A secret garden promised only for the adventurous



Cantinetta Luca's tagliolini frutti di mare

On the last day, embark on a guided culinary-and-wine walking tour of some of Carmel-by-the-Sea's most intriguing restaurants, or take in another round of golf.

The culinary-and-wine tour, which has been one of the city's top calling cards since it began in 2012, allows visitors to enjoy the best off-the-beaten-path food and cultural experience possible in Carmel's most unique eateries. Flavored vinegars and wood-fired breads, decadent chocolate, delicious local wines and exotic and local cheeses are among the culinary treats to be savored.

Poppy Hills Golf Course, one of the four tracks that make up the Pebble Beach golf family, provides a superb, if somewhat contrasting, experience. It is the newest course of the Pebble Beach quartet, having undergone an extensive 13-month renovation that was completed in April 2014. The renovation has been warmly received, with the course drawing comparisons to Pinehurst, Augusta National, nearby Cypress Point and even Pine Valley—courses among the pantheon of golf in the United States.

Enjoy a final dinner at Vesuvio, where Chef Rich Pèpe's culinary offerings take so-called Mediterranean-style cuisine to the next level through the infusion of olive oil, grains, fruits, vegetables, beans and fresh fish. The chef calls his creations at Vesuvio an "Italian lifestyle diet." Whatever you call it, it's something special.

A weekend's brief itinerary only samples the unforgettable offerings in Carmel-by-the-Sea. From the performing arts and cultural activities to hundreds of shops, restaurants, wine tastings, art galleries and more, this oasis is rated a top-10 destination in the United States year after year for a reason. You may lose your heart here, or you may find love.



Carmel's culinary-and-wine tour



Poppy Hills Golf Course