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Pet-friendly and quirky Carmel-by-the-Sea is California's favorite small town

On the California coast, Carmel-by-the-Sea honors its charming history and windswept location.

By Donna Tabbert Long Special to the Star Tribune | SEPTEMBER 9, 2016 — 1:45PM

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Gallery: Carmel Beach

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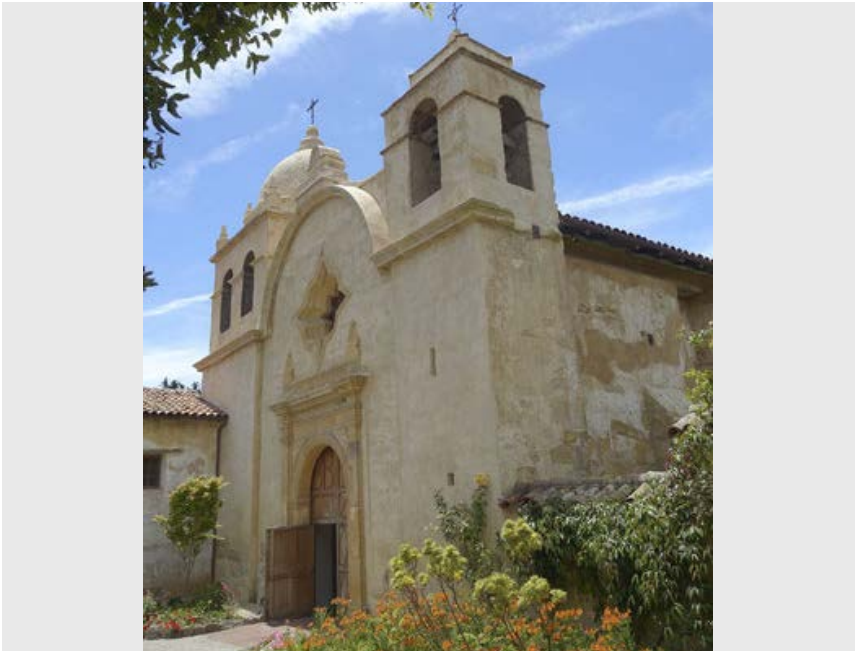
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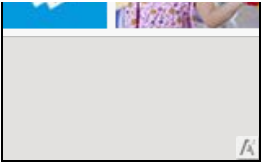
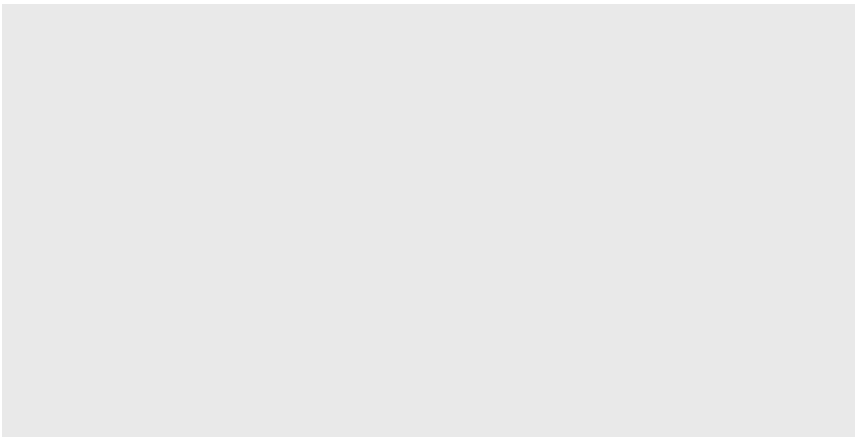
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 Gallery: Carmel Beach



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 Gallery: Carmel's Mission San Carlos de Borromeo was founded at its presnt site in 1771.



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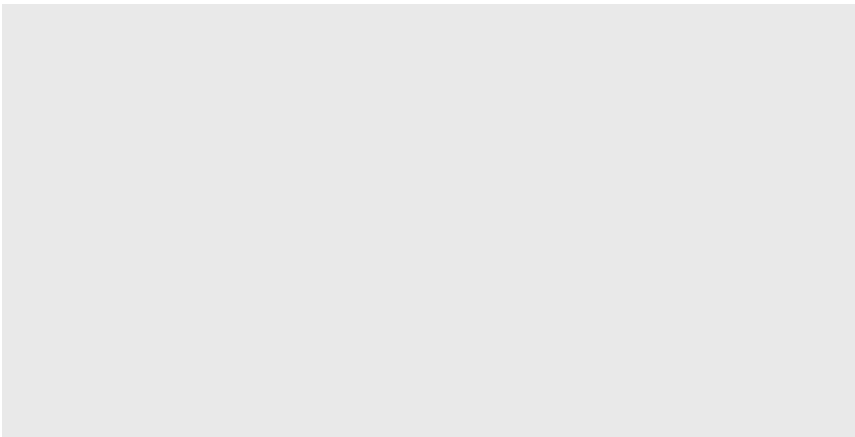
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 Gallery: Because there are no street numbers in Carmel-by-the-Sea, everyone who lives there has to collect their mail at the central post office downtown.



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 Gallery: In Carmel-by-the-Sea, California, "Abalone Joe" sells some of his polished iridescent abalone shells he has collected on his travels.



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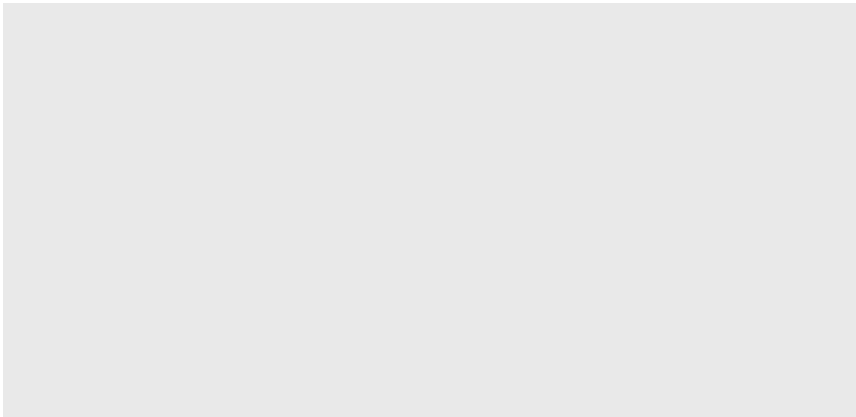
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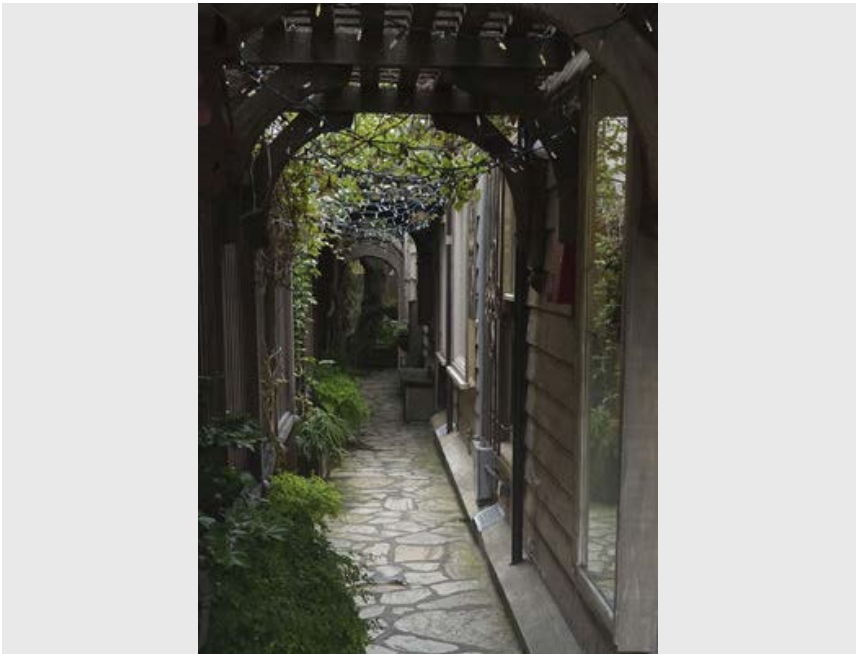
 Gallery: Boutique specialty shops like the Twigery abound in Carmel-by-the-Sea.



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 Gallery: The pet friendly Cypress Inn has been a landmark in Carmel-by-the-Sea since 1929. Today, it is co-owned by animal activist and movie star, Doris Day.





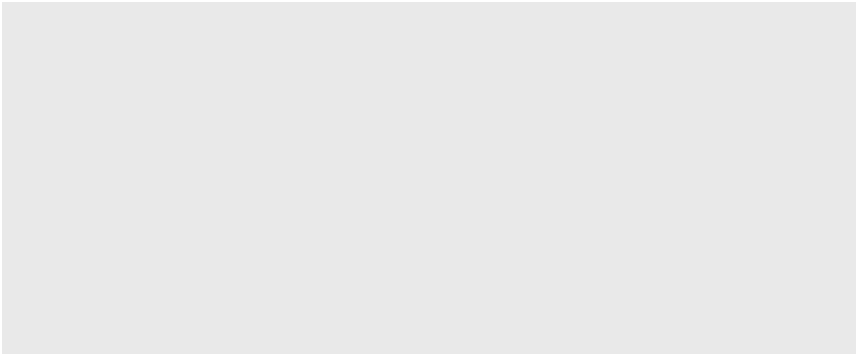
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 Gallery: It's fun to explore some of the 42 courtyards and passageways in Carmel-by-the-Sea, California



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 Gallery: One of the fairy-tale like houses in Carmel-by-the-Sea, California, built by Hugh Comstock.





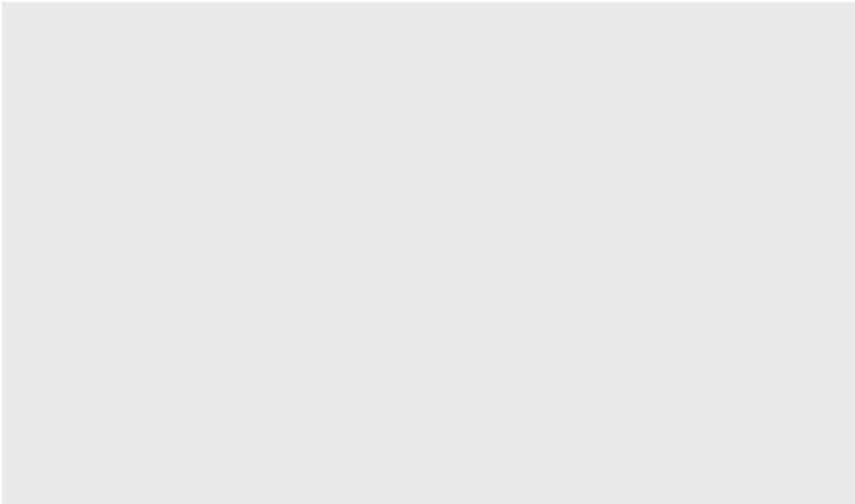
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 Gallery: Homes in Carmel-by-the-Beach are



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 Gallery: One of the 42 courtyards (and passageways) in Carmel-by-the-Sea

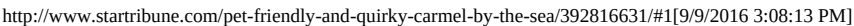




 Gallery: Casanova Restaurant in Carmel-by-the-Sea has a funky, cool charm.



 Gallery: Wines offered at Casanova Restaurant in Carmel-by-the-Sea





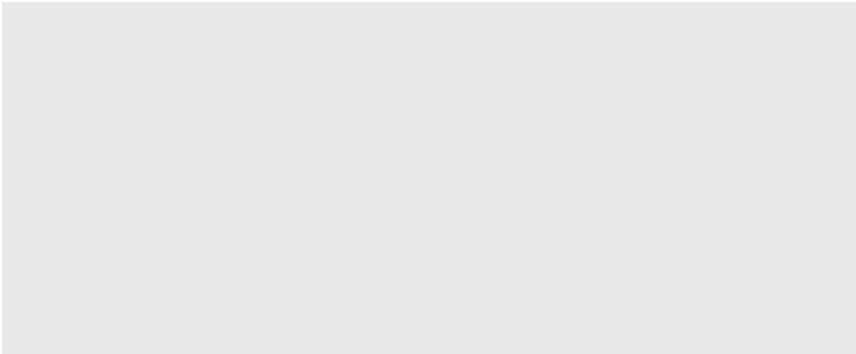
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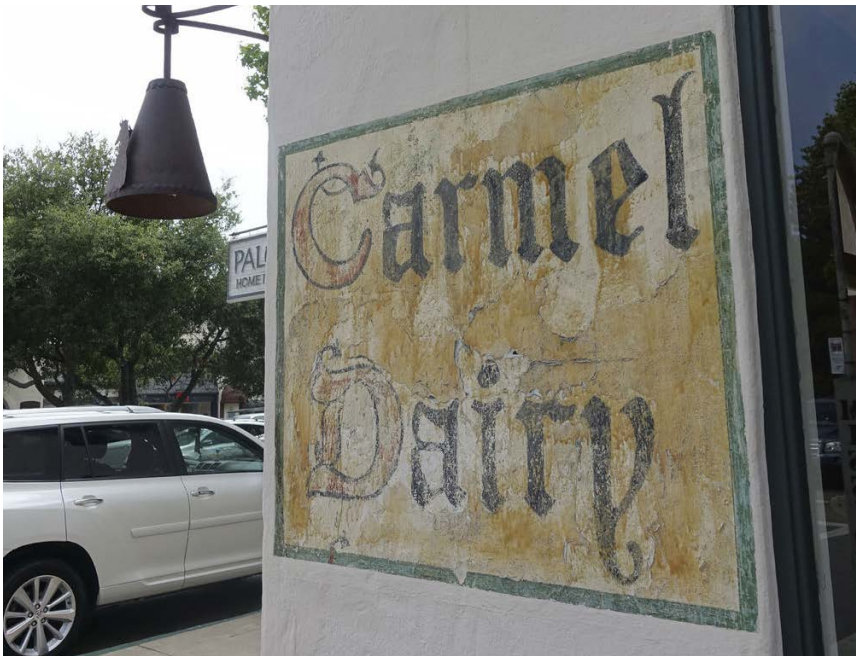
 Gallery: On the outdoor patio at Clint Eastwood's Mission Ranch Restaurant in Carmel-by-the-Sea.



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 Gallery: Another building of Hugh Comstock's, the Tuck Box tearoom, has been a Carmel tradition since 1941 when two sisters from England opened it.





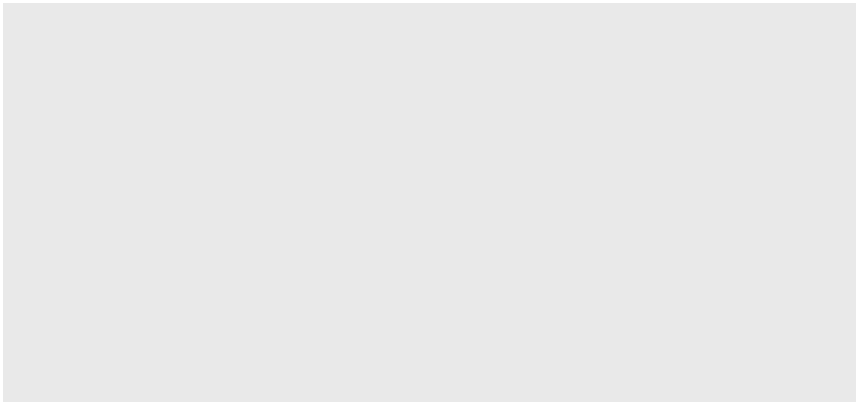
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 Gallery: Signs of what once was



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 Gallery: At Clint Eastwood's Mission Ranch Restaurant in Carmel-by-the-Sea, the view from the terrace includes grazing sheep with the ocean in the distance.





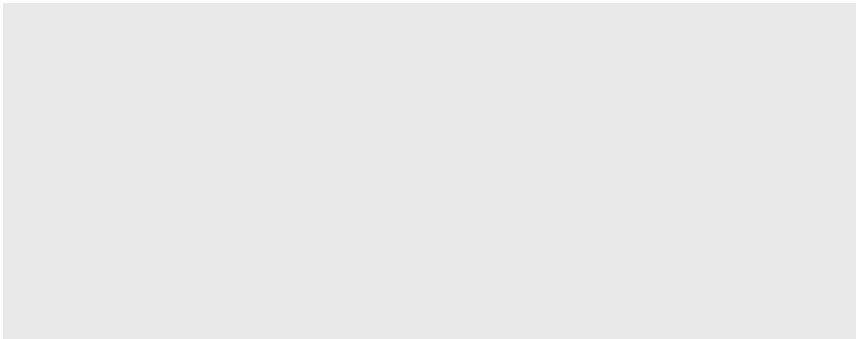
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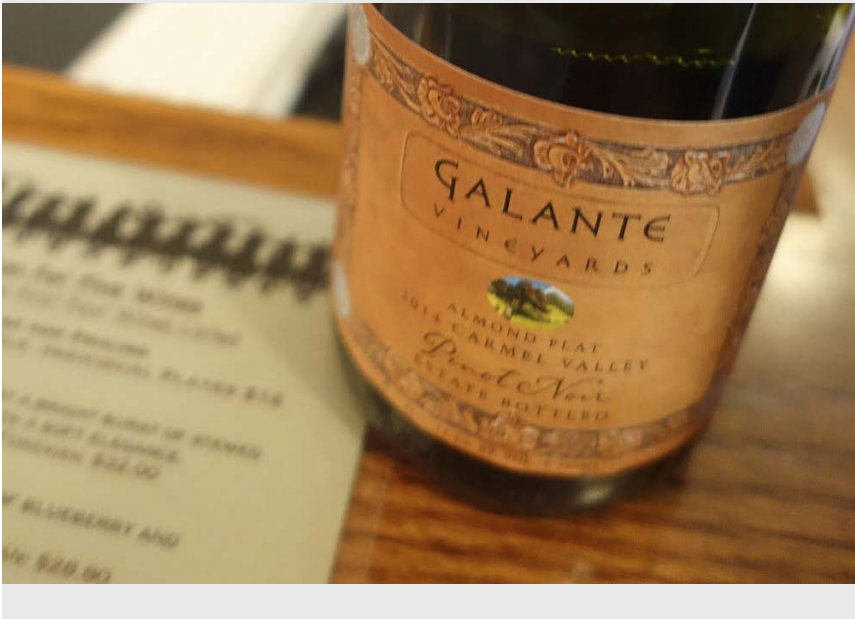
 Gallery: Tor House and its grounds (poet Robinson Jeffers home) in Carmel-by-the-Sea, California



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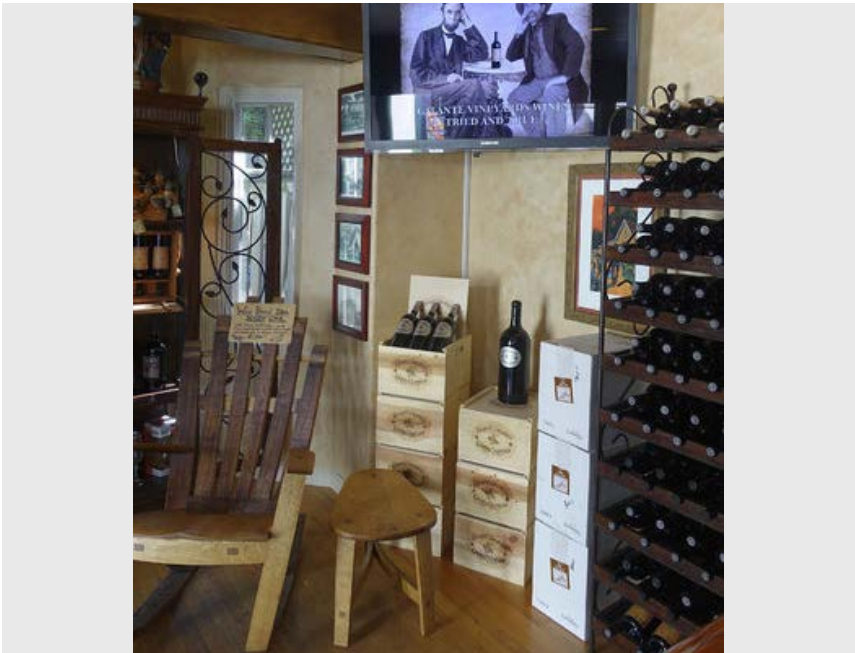
 Gallery: Galante Vineyards & Winery's tasting room in Carmel-by-the-Sea features a western theme. Owner Jack Galante is a great grandson of the village's founder J.F. Devendorf.





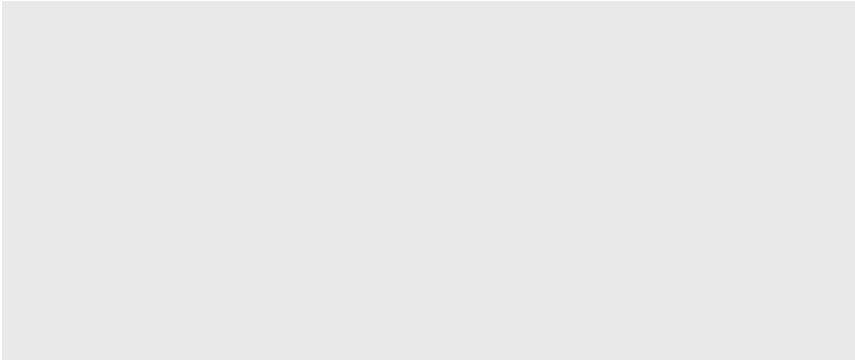
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 Gallery: Galante Vineyards & Winery tasting room in Carmel-by-the-Sea features a western theme. Owner Jack Galante is a great grandson of the village's founder J.F. Devendorf.



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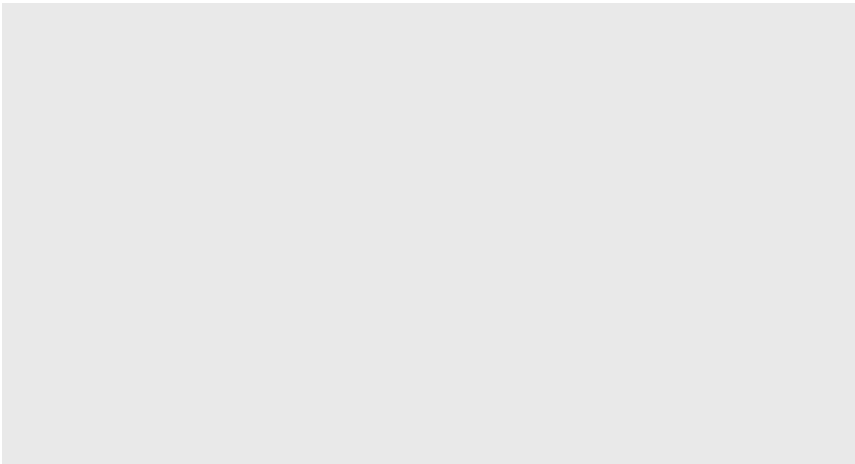
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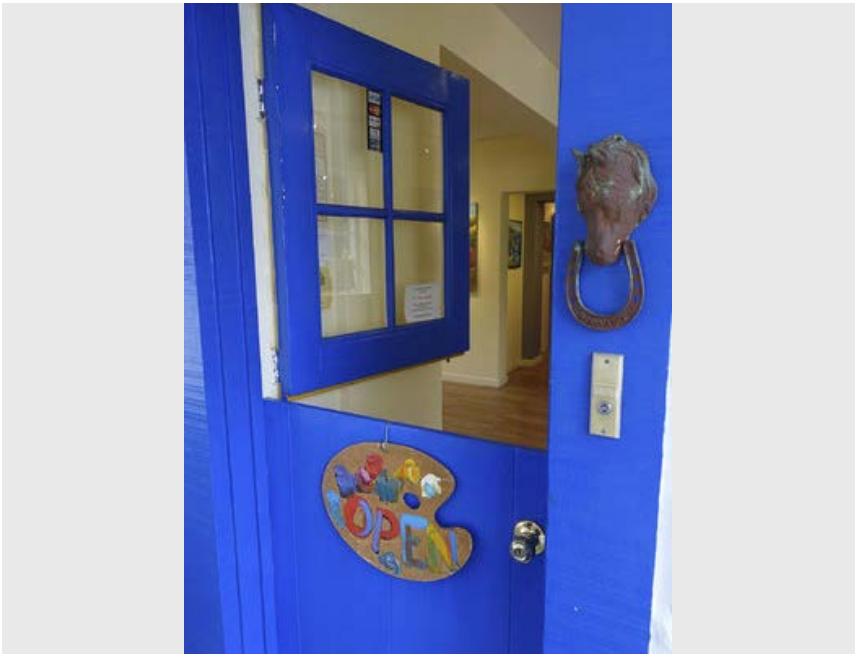
 Gallery: Outdoor dining along Ocean Avenue in Carmel-by-the-Beach, California



DONNA TABBERT LONG

 Gallery: Art galleries abound in Carmel-by-the-Sea, California





DONNA TABBERT LONG

Gallery: Art galleries abound in Carmel-by-the-Sea, California



DONNA TABBERT LONG

Gallery: Homes in Carmel-by-the-Beach are (

It was 5:30 in the afternoon and “Yappy Hour” was winding down at the Cypress Inn. Two well-behaved Shih Tzus, dressed alike in tulle skirts and hair bows, were settling into what looked like a baby carriage. A beautiful black Lab stretched out on the floor, having consumed her Yappy Hour meal (pet menu choices: chicken or hamburger). Meanwhile, animal owners were still chilling with their happy-hour glasses of wine at the pet-friendly hotel in Carmel, Calif., co-owned by animal welfare activist and movie star Doris Day.

As I left, I stopped by the contented Lab and struck up a conversation with her owner, telling him that the dog looked like the first dog I’d owned as a child. “Well, this is Gertrude,” he told me as he petted her. “She’s something of a food freak, so she always likes staying here when we visit Carmel.”

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It was a good introduction to the quirky, quaint and decidedly pet-friendly village that most people call simply Carmel, though its actual name is Carmel-by-the-Sea.

This charming one-mile-square village on California’s windswept Central Coast is some 120 miles south of San Francisco and 26 miles north of Big Sur. The town has no streetlights, no sidewalks (except in the downtown commercial district), and houses have names instead of street numbers. This means its residents have to collect their mail at the central post office. The reason? When the town’s founding fathers incorporated their beloved seaside village in 1916 (Oct. 29 marks its centennial celebration), they wanted to make sure it did not become “citified.”

The first morning there, I met local Gael Gallagher for a walking tour of the town and learned how Carmel-by-the-Sea has managed to keep its provincial nature intact, even with its global popularity.

We met in the courtyard outside the legendary Pine Inn, the first hotel in town. Before we even headed out to explore the village, I learned that fast-food restaurants, neon signs and parking meters are not allowed in Carmel — and at one time, there was even a ban on selling and eating ice cream on public streets. (Carmel’s most famous mayor, Clint Eastwood, got that one repealed.)



DONNA TABBERT LONG

Strolling on Ocean Avenue in Carmel-by-the -Sea.

The ban against wearing shoes with more than a 2-inch heel — the town challenges walkers with lots of uneven streets — remains on the books, said Gael. “But you can get a permit at City Hall for that one.”

On our walk, Gael shared more of Carmel-by-the-Sea’s history as we peeked into secret courtyards, cut through passageways and strolled by some of the town’s famous fairy tale houses that looked like something out of Hansel and Gretel. In fact, one is named the “Hansel House” and another is named the “Gretel House.”

Downtown, we passed numerous art galleries, exclusive shops and wine tasting rooms. Along the way, I learned that singer Paul Anka raised his five daughters in Carmel.

Walking through the funky Casanova Restaurant, Gael pointed out the huge tree with a table built around its trunk that was growing in the middle of an interior courtyard. City fathers also took care to preserve the village’s trees, Gael said. All are inventoried and none can be removed without city approval.

For a village that began life as a laid-back bohemian community — home to intellectuals, artists and authors like Jack London and poet Robinson Jeffers (even Minnesota’s Sinclair Lewis lived here for a time) — I couldn’t help thinking that Carmel seemed to have an awful lot of rules.

Everywhere, beautiful views

Rules didn’t bother Minneapolis transplant Joann Stone, a friend of a friend

who moved to Carmel after living and working in Minnesota for many years.

“I still feel like I’m on vacation all the time,” she told me when we met for lunch after my walk. “I love the fog, the quaintness, the quietness ... and the temperature. And no matter where you go, there’s a beautiful view.”

At Eastwood’s Mission Ranch, that view included a bucolic scene from the restaurant terrace: sheep grazing in a green field with the ocean in the distance. Popular with the locals as well as the tourists, the restaurant has a piano bar and karaoke nights. Apparently, even Clint shows up on occasion.

I didn’t see the star, but when I returned there that evening, I did see the current mayor, Steve Dallas — who had signed my high-heels permit the day before. When he stopped at my table to say hello, I felt the small town’s spirit personally, like I’d lived there for years.

The following day I was excited to check out some of the shops and wine tasting rooms I had passed on my first day’s walking tour. While wineries are scattered throughout the countryside — Monterey County has some 40,000 acres of wine grapes — Carmel itself has numerous tasting rooms. A stroll on the self-guided Wine Walk-by-the-Sea, along with a Wine Tasting Passport (available for purchase at the Chamber of Commerce Visitor Center) means you can sample flights without leaving town.

I spent my day shopping and occasionally tasting wine. This could have had disastrous results, but fortunately the wine passport allowed only three tastings a day.

Besides the shops along Ocean Avenue — the boulevard that leads to Carmel’s main attraction, the beach — I meandered through some of the 42 courtyards and passageways that led to independent specialty stores, small art studios, cafes, bakeries and clothing boutiques. California-friendly clerks chatted easily — although as I was leaving one shop, I didn’t quite know how to respond when asked: “Are you going to Heaven?”

Turns out that’s the name of a children’s designer shop down the street. So, yes, I said after I understood the question, I was going to Heaven.

That day I had afternoon tea at the Tuck Box, a Carmel tradition since 1941 when two sisters from England opened it. I feasted on hot tea and homemade scones heaped high with California’s olallieberry jam and thick cream. Later I walked it all off when I went to the beach — like everyone else, it seemed — to watch the sunset.

Home of a poet

On my last afternoon, I took a spin out to see Carmel’s Mission San Carlos de Borromeo. Better known simply as the Carmel mission, it was founded at its present quiet and beautiful setting in 1771. I wandered outside and through its abalone shell-strewn cemetery (shells outline the graves). Inside, I admired 18th-century artwork in the beautiful stone Basilica.

It was my final morning that turned out to be a highlight of my trip: I took in a tour of the Tor House, home of American poet Robinson Jeffers from 1919 until his death in 1962.

Jeffers was one of the first residents to fall in love with Carmel’s seaside setting and put down roots. Gorgeous flower gardens surround his picturesque stone cottage loaded with story-rich personal items. From the top of Hawk Tower,

which Jeffers built by hand from rocks he collected along the Carmel coast, the sweeping seascape view of Carmel Bay is magnificent.

As I stood there and looked out at the ocean beyond the curve of white sand that stretches from the rocky coves of Point Lobos to what is now the famed Pebble Beach Golf Course, I felt wisps of fog, a cool sea breeze, and smelled a hint of Monterey pines.

I didn't want to leave.

Donna Tabbert Long writes about food and travel for the Star Tribune and other publications.

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