

THE CURIOUS TRAVELER

by Jerry Camarillo Dunn, Jr.



The Curious Traveler received the gold medal for Best Travel Column from the Society of American Travel Writers.

In Carmel: the Dog-Friendliest Town in America



In life, it helps to be cute. Especially if you're a dog.

I speak from experience. If you Google "most adorable dog in the world," your search will turn up a small poodle named Diggity who lives at our house. He looks like a little black lamb, snuggles against you to snooze, and has an excellent sense of humor.

Diggity Dog technically belongs to my wife, Merry, who likes to tell his origin story. A friend saw a classified ad for "miniature poodle, black," so we drove to Ventura to check him out. The address turned out to be a bail bonds joint in a strip mall.

"We're just here to look," said Merry to the girl behind the counter. "Not to buy." The girl leaned down to a basket and lifted out a little black fuzz-ball. When Merry reached for him, he immediately laid his head against her heart.

"Um, how much?"

"\$158," said the girl – apparently the price of a bail bond? Today if Diggy misbehaves, we remind him that he could be a little more grateful about our springing him.

Diggy is a good traveler, so it was only natural to take him with us to Carmel-by-the-Sea, often touted as the most dog-friendly town in America. The town rolls out the stain-proof red carpet for its canine visitors. Dogs are welcome at many hotels, as well as restaurants with patios, and shops put out water bowls and offer treats. Pooches are allowed to romp off-leash on Carmel Beach and splash in the startling aquamarine water.

We strolled down Ocean Avenue, the main shopping street. Every two seconds, it seemed, we met another



Rodrigue Gallery – author, Diggity Dog with Blue Dog painting

dog with a person on a leash. An apricot poodle visited us, then followed its owner into a shoe boutique. Next came two sleek Italian greyhounds accompanied by an equally sleek couple. A silky-white Lhasa Apso rounded the corner, saw Diggy, and began leaping and flirting. It was like a scene out of *Lady and the Tramp*.

Dogs serve as icebreakers, prompting friendly conversations with strangers. "What breed?" "How cute!" Kids would see Diggy and ask, "Can we pat him?" Sure, we'd say, and they'd slowly and properly extend the back of one hand to be sniffed, then scratch him behind the ears.

One outgoing 10-year-old boy wanted to pat Diggy, but our doglet was distracted and uninterested. "He rejected me!" said the boy, laughing.

"Yes," said Merry, "take that with

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you through life.”

Next we walked to the Rodrigue Studio, one of more than 100 art galleries in the single square mile of Carmel village. Diggy wanted to visit because it's the home of the famous Blue Dog paintings by the late Louisiana artist George Rodrigue. The paintings were inspired by the French-Cajun legend of the *loup garou*, a sort of bayou ghost or devil dog. But pictorially, they were based on Rodrigue's cute terrier-spaniel mix. He named her Tiffany, the painter's wife explains, “to make her feel important as the runt of the litter and the last puppy left in the box.”

You've probably seen the artist's depiction: a blue dog with big pointy ears, staring directly at you. The pooch usually appears against a surreal background, ranging from a cardboard carton to a red gothic mansion; he may be sporting a necktie or gazing across the back of a green lizard.

Today, Blue Dog paintings start at \$60,000. I liked the ones I saw at the gallery. Still, I couldn't totally shake the nagging feeling that a repeated gimmick might be at play here, so I was pleased to learn that the artist shared his good fortune, leaving behind a philanthropic organization dedicated to educating children through the arts.

We walked to the beach, where a broad slope of white-sugar sand leads to the water. Waves roll ashore as if in a painted seascape. The coastline sweeps from Point Lobos in the south to a peninsula of manicured golf links at Pebble Beach to the north.

There were tots with sand pails, local mothers chatting, and all kinds of dogs. Free of their leashes, some romped through the cold shallows – the paws that refreshes! A big black lab and a small pug, recent acquaintances, chased round and round. I've never seen so many dogs having so much fun.

After a time, Diggy suggested we head back to our hotel for a rest. The Cypress Inn, a handsome 1929 Spanish-Moorish hotel with thick white walls, is partly owned by singer and actress Doris Day, a longtime champion of animals and a pioneer in pet-friendly travel since the 1980s. Her love of animals explains why you can bring any critter; these have included not just dogs and cats, but a three-foot-long iguana and a parrot perched on a guest's shoulder. “Que Sera, Sera,” as Day sang in her 1956 hit: “Whatever will be, will be.”

The sunny blonde with the sunny voice serves as a warm (if disembodied) hostess at the inn, where the walls are decorated with her silver-screen posters and televisions stream her old movies, such as *Pillow Talk*. (At 95, she now lives in nearby Carmel Valley.)

Defining the idea of “casual but elegant,” the inn has a living room

right out of a movie star's Beverly Hills mansion – a lofty wood-beamed ceiling, a big fireplace at the end of the room, a grand piano, conversational groupings of chairs and loveseats, shelves of books, and doors opening onto a patio.

Merry, Diggy, and I went up to our second-floor room, whose Juliet balcony overlooked a courtyard. A complimentary decanter of cream sherry greeted us, while Diggy got dog treats, a water bowl, and his own plush blanket to curl up on. We all took a little nap.

We had reservations for dinner downstairs at Terry's, passing through the bar on the way. It was packed with Carmel locals and their dogs, who come for the inn's Yappy Hour. All the pooches got along – no bar(k) fights.

We chose a table in the patio garden, where bougainvillea and red camellias grew against the white walls. We were greeted by Toby, a wire-haired fox terrier at the next table. Cream colored, with two gray spots on his back, he was a ringer for Asta in the classic *Thin Man* movies. Upon seeing Diggy, he stood up on his back legs and waved his front paws in greeting – very endearing.

There was lots of doggie crosstalk between tables, and even guests who hadn't brought their pets took out cell phones to show us photos of their dogs back home. A German shepherd sat near us, socializing with a cocker spaniel whose golden fur closely matched the blonde hairdo of its mistress. If I squinted, I could almost imagine it was Doris Day.

As our own four-legged ambassador eagerly met the nearby dogs, and we met their people, I realized something: we had thought we were introducing Diggy to Carmel, but it turned out that he was introducing us.

COMPASS POINTS

GETTING THERE: Carmel-by-the-Sea is 240 miles north of Santa Barbara, a four-hour drive via U.S. 101 to CA 68 and CA 1.

VISITOR INFORMATION: www.carmelcalifornia.com. A visitor center in Carmel Plaza (Ocean Avenue between Junipero and Mission) offers maps and brochures. The plaza has a drinking fountain for dogs called the Fountain of Woof.

DOG FRIENDLY: www.carmelcalifornia.com/dog-friendly-carmel.htm has links to pet-friendly hotels and restaurants.

WHERE TO STAY

CYPRESS INN (Lincoln and 7th St., 831-624-3871 or 800-443-7443, www.cypress-inn.com) Luxurious yet



easygoing, the inn has 44 rooms and suites, some with fireplaces, verandas, and/or Jacuzzi baths. Decorated in warm brown and cream, they have flat-screen TVs, fine linens, and complimentary Wi-Fi. Evening turndown service includes chocolates and dog biscuits. The staff is warm and helpful. Breakfast features fresh berries, excellent scrambled eggs, new potatoes with onions, and baked goodies, including trademark puffy popovers. Rates from \$279 to \$599, pet fee \$30 per night; pet sitters available. Terry's Lounge and Restaurant serves locally sourced Monterey Bay and Mediterranean dishes. I liked the seared sesame-crusted ahi tuna with soba noodles and julienne vegetables. Cocktails are inspired by the era of the 1920s to 1940s.

HOFSAS HOUSE (4th and San Carlos, 831-624-2745, www.hofsas-house.com) This pet-friendly, budget-friendly inn, family-run for 70 years, is a few blocks from central Carmel but out of the bustle. There are 38 simple but well-kept rooms with Dutch doors and some fireplaces,

balconies (distant ocean views), and kitchens. Pool, continental breakfast, Wi-Fi. General manager and co-owner **Carrie Theis**, who sits on the city council, is a trove of tips for enjoying Carmel with your dog. Rates from \$110 to \$390.

WHERE TO EAT

See the link under “Dog Friendly,” above. I especially like:

ANTON & MICHEL (Mission St. between Ocean and 7th, 831-624-2406, www.antonandmichel.com) An airy, elegant restaurant serving creative California cuisine. We had lunch in a sunny courtyard with a fountain pool and rose trees, ordering sand dabs (me), ahi tuna salad niçoise (Merry), and dazzlingly good salted-caramel crème brûlée (both of us, so we wouldn't have a duel of the spoons). Our waitress spotted Diggy under the table and brought a bowl of water. Charming owner **Tony Salameh**, a Palestinian trained in hospitality in Switzerland, stopped by for a chat; ask if he's there when you visit.