

Carmel-by-the-Sea is the fairytale escape you've been dreaming of

BY GINA PACE

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One of the several stunning homes along the coast in Carmel-by-the-Sea. (GINA PACE)

Sure, Reese Witherspoon and Nicole Kidman were great on HBO's "Big Little Lies" earlier this year, but the true star of the show was the gorgeous scenery of California's Central Coast.

And the quaint city of Carmel-by-the-Sea in Monterey County — with its eclectic architecture and a thriving arts community — makes a great home base for exploring the region.

After arriving at Hotel Carmel, I walked down to the beach, less than 10 blocks away — but steep ones — and I quickly remembered how Californians get that stereotype of being fit and healthy. It was a grey day — there can be a lot of them on this part of the coast — but it didn't deter a crowd from coming to the beach to play with their dogs. The town prides itself on being pet friendly, and dogs are allowed off their leashes on beaches and often welcomed with their own special menus at local restaurants. Don't plan to swim though on most days, since the ocean's chilly and can be rough.



The Cultura Mezcalrita from Cultura, made with mezcal, lime, orange and sal de gusano. (GINA PACE)

Afterwards, I headed back into town to grab dinner at Cultura (culturacarmel.com), a creative Mexican restaurant with a killer mezcal list curated by Sarah Kabat-Marcy, a sommelier who takes frequent research trips to Mexico. Try the Cultura Mezcalrita (\$14), made with mezcal, lime, orange and sal de gusano — which is salt mixed with chili and worms that grow on agave plants. I also braved a few toasted and seasoned grasshoppers from the menu before digging into halibut ceviche (\$14); and queso fundido (\$18, feeds two), made with flaming mezcal, smoked chorizo, cherry tomatoes and green onions.

The next morning I took a walking tour of Carmel-by-the-Sea with Gael Gallagher (gaelgallagher.com), a Boston transplant. Downtown Carmel is an intricate network of courtyards, lanes and passageways and Gallagher points out hidden coffee shops, stores and galleries to stop by later. She also fills me in on the artistic history of the town, which was founded in the early 1900s and has always attracted poets, artists and writers, including photographer Ansel Adams and writer Upton Sinclair.

Perhaps the most famous is Clint Eastwood, who was mayor of Carmel-by-the-Sea from 1986 to 1988 — he ran for the job because he was having trouble getting approval from the town for a building development. The development got approval once he was in office (shocker) and houses the Hog's Breath Inn. Eastwood doesn't own it anymore, but it does pay tribute to the actor, serving up a Dirty Harry burger. He does still remain active in the area, since he owns the Mission Ranch Hotel and Restaurant (missionranchcarmel.com) in Carmel.

The highlight of the walking tour is strolling past the fairytale-like Comstock Cottages, houses built by Hugh Comstock in the 1920s for his wife, a doll designer, to hold her creations. While Comstock wasn't an architect, the creations gained admirers and he was hired to build the cottages throughout the city, as well as some storefronts downtown, giving the whole area a Brothers Grimm Vibe.



The Hansel House, the first fairytale-like cottage constructed by Hugh Comstock in Carmel-by-the-Sea. (VISIT CARMEL-BY-THE-SEA)



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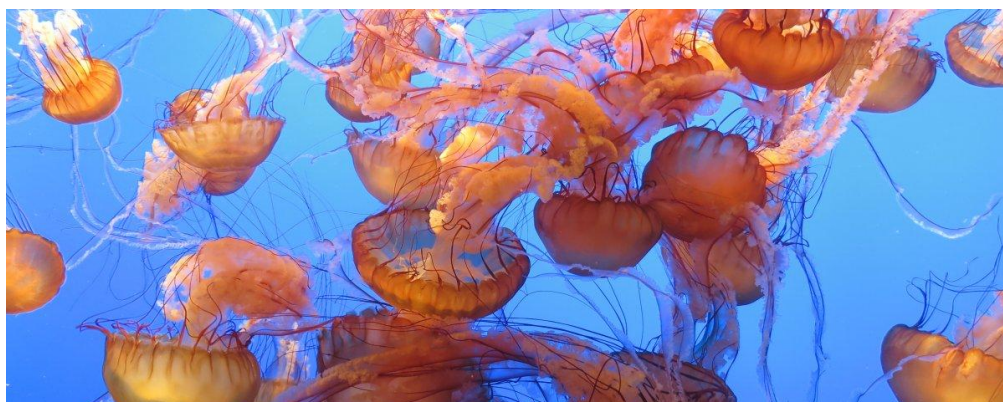
The marina in Monterey, where scenes from "Big Little Lies" take place. (GINA PACE)

Eastwood isn't the only member of Hollywood royalty to have a stake in Carmel. Doris Day is the co-owner of Cypress Inn (cypress-inn.co), a landmark hotel that dates to 1929. After finishing the tour, I grabbed a club sandwich outside at the hotel's Terry's Lounge (\$16), and made a plan to come back to enjoy a classic cocktail later at a cozy leather banquet inside. After lunch, the fog lifted so I headed back to the coastline to gawk at some of the stunning houses. There's a Frank Lloyd Wright house I couldn't get that close to without breaking some trespassing laws, but I spotted other stunners perched on the rocky shoreline.



Artist Mary Titus gives a demo before leading a painting workshop. (GINA PACE)

Seeing all this creative architecture, as well as several art galleries along the walking tour, was inspiring. But I don't really have the skills to come up with my own masterpiece. So to get some help, I went to a workshop with mixed media artist Mary Titus (marytitusart.com, \$150 per person plus the cost of supplies). She showed us how to use different materials, including crumbled up bags, newspaper and the Pollock-style drip technique to create different textures on the canvas. Of course, you don't travel all this way to skip the city of Monterey. So I made a stop at Monterey Bay Aquarium (montereybayaquarium.org, \$49.95 adults; \$29.95 children). Its position right on the bay and high-tech circulation system means that ocean water is constantly cycling through the aquatic animal exhibits. I was mesmerized by the different varieties of jellyfish and charmed by the penguins, but my favorite were the tiny synchronized garden eels that rise and sink back into the sand.





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Jellyfish at the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

(GINA PACE)

Afterwards, I walked from the aquarium down Cannery Row, where former sardine factories are now shops and restaurants. I checked out the touristy marina (where the ladies from “Big Little Lies” got coffee at an outdoor café) and walked a bit in town to Alvarado Street Brewery (alvaradostreetbrewery.com) where I housed a patty melt (\$15) and Best Part of Waking up Coffee Milk Stout (\$7), made in house.

And while I didn’t have time to do much of the famously scenic State Route 1 drive, I did take a drive to Rocky Creek Bridge, hop out and take in the dramatic coastline below — understanding why so many artists wanted to make this stretch of California their home.



The Rocky Creek Bridge runs along State Route 1, with a small parking area and scenic views of stunning coastline below. (GINA PACE)

If you go...

Getting there: The closest airport to Carmel-by-the-Sea is Monterey Regional Airport, about a 20-minute drive from Carmel, but there are no direct flights from NYC. Another option is to fly into San Francisco and make a two-hour drive south, or San Jose and drive south for 90 minutes. Carmel-by-the-Sea is very walkable, but if you want to explore further, you'll need to rent a car.

Stay: Hotel Carmel (thehotelcarmel.com) is recently renovated with a cozy courtyard and fire pit. It's next to Brophy's Tavern (brophystavern.com), a bar with good pub food. Rooms start at about \$300.

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