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CALIFORNIA CENTRAL COAST

Central Coast beachcombing in Shell Beach

Shell Beach, Avila Beach, Pismo Beach, Morro Bay and San Luis Obispo offer sparkling vistas, laid-back activities and good eats: the right mix for an end-of-summer trip.

By Donna Wares, Reporting from Shell Beach, Calif.
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As a busy summer raced to an all-too-sudden close, my family and I eagerly headed up the coast for a quick and relaxing getaway to [San Luis Obispo](#) Bay, about an hour north of [Santa Barbara](#). Our no-frills plan: three days of [Central Coast](#) grazing, gazing and beachcombing. Yes to sea kayaking and sleeping in. No to anyplace where shorts and sandals weren't welcome.

We've spent some time in San Luis Obispo on other [California](#) road trips, but the laid-back college town midway between [L.A.](#) and [San Francisco](#) mostly has been an inviting green blur (and sudden flash of pink at the landmark [Madonna Inn](#)) as we zipped by on U.S. 101. This trip, however, I wanted to linger in the beach towns we had previously driven past.

That's how we ended up in Shell Beach, a bluff-top village tucked between the gritty ticky-tack of the [Pismo Beach](#) Pier scene to the south and the revitalized town of Avila Beach just up the coast.

My husband, two children and I checked into the Cliffs Resort, about 10 miles from downtown San Luis Obispo. It renovated all 160 guest rooms this year with modern, sand-colored furnishings and floor-to-ceiling plantation shutters. Many of the rooms are less than \$200 a night.

The Cliffs turned out to be an ideal choice for a soothing and unpretentious escape. We quickly discovered the charms of Shell Beach: It's convenient to everything in the SLO area but not in the middle of anything, except an incredible natural setting. As its name suggests, the hotel sits atop a cliff and overlooks a pristine sweep of beach below.

It's more a comfortable, airy beach hotel, exuding Central Coast friendliness, than a full-blown resort. During our stay, the Cliffs played host to families, business travelers and people traveling with dogs.

We arrived early on a cool and breezy Tuesday afternoon, just as the coast's foggy morning blanket lifted and the sunshine slowly peeked across the hotel's oceanfront swimming pool. My 16-year-old daughter and 11-year-old son made a beeline for the well-heated pool. My husband and I, meanwhile, staked out lounge chairs after the long ride, lapping up the stunning view and proximity to the pool area's fire pit. It's an idyllic spot, and I could have happily spent the entire trip right there, curled up with my book, the sound of crashing breakers and the call of seabirds drifting up the cliff side.

What I liked best about the Cliffs, though, was discovering the path at the edge of the property that meandered down to a secluded cove. On the beach we probably saw more pelicans than people. A pair of parasailors in bright rainbow-hued rigs drifted overhead all afternoon. My son and I explored the cove's rocky peninsula, where dozens of tide pools brimmed with anemones, hermit crabs and pinkie-sized fish darting between crevices and natural aquariums carved into the rocky outcroppings.

When we started to get hungry, we cruised three miles south along California Highway 1 to the Pismo Beach Pier. Touristy beach shops and tattoo parlors dominated the terrain, so it wasn't quite the family destination I had hoped. But it also had some of the best waves we saw during our trip and a wide sandy beach. The surfers were out in force working the swell just before sunset, and it was fun to watch them from the pier.

For dinner, we went to the Splash Café, a rambunctious, colorful and modestly priced fish shack known for its clam chowder. When we arrived, the line was spilling out the door. Fortunately, it moved quickly and the creamy clam chowder (\$4.50 a bowl) lived up to its billing, even passing muster with my fussy, chowder-loving son. I also liked the calamari (\$5.75), which was fresh and served with curly fries.

The next couple of days we did more beach hopping. We explored Avila Beach, a seaside town that was forced to bulldoze its quaint downtown in the late '90s after one of California's worst coastal oil leaks. The funky '60s-era Avila Beach Inn remains overlooking the shore, though much of downtown has been rebuilt with new sherbet-colored shops, cafes and hotels near the beach.

"How come everything is so cute here?" my daughter Gaby wondered as we browsed Front Street, which feels a little bit like Downtown Disney. Two choice stops: the Hula Hut for rich ice cream and Joe Momma's for java.

In nearby See Canyon, we stopped by the Kelsey winery, a likable family farm with a tasting room attached to the barn and a flock of outspoken peacocks roaming the front vineyard, patrolling the gate and staring dolefully at visitors from the farmhouse roof.

Kayaking on the bay

The most fun outing during the trip was our kayak expedition in [Morro Bay](#). We rented kayaks on the Embarcadero at Rock Kayak, an excellent outfitter recommended by a

friend, and set out paddling toward the towering bulk of Morro Rock in the distance, the town's dominant and almost always visible landmark.

Morro Bay is one of California's lushest bird sanctuaries. The estuary abounds with cormorants, herons, pelicans, sea gulls and many other species, and the calm waters have an abundance of sea grass and kelp, excellent environments for sea life and the critters that feed on it.

Just moments after we pushed off from the dock, a young sea lion swam up and splashed alongside the two-seat kayak Gaby and I shared, slapping the water and giving us a whiskery stare before diving from sight. We paddled across the bay to a barge where dozens of sea lions lounged in a heap sunning themselves, while two beefy, bellowing fellows on the end battled for the last spot, like kids piling onto a too-crowded couch. I marveled at being able to get that close to such giant creatures.

We had heard that a family of sea otters was playing and fishing across the bay right in front of Morro Rock, but when we paddled to the area, they were either hiding or had moved on, much to the kids' disappointment. But then, as we climbed out of our kayaks, one of the sea otters found us, floating by in a lazy back-paddle as it cradled a clam on its stomach and rapped it loudly with a rock to crack it open.

We savored lunch on the water at Orchid Restaurant at the [Inn at Morro Bay](#), which sits in the middle of a heron rookery at Morro Bay State Park. The inn is a world apart from the bustling Embarcadero area, though just a few minutes away. (The Inn at Morro Bay is on my must-come-back list.)

We also had a terrific meal at Giovanni's, a fish market/restaurant on the Embarcadero that's been a local haunt for 25 years. This is the place to enjoy fresh fish and Bloody Marys on an outdoor patio overlooking the local fishing fleet. The Dungeness crab quesadillas alone are worth the trip. Even better: Nothing on Giovanni's menu costs more than \$10.

On Thursday, we spent a lazy morning at our hotel and later in the day headed to San Luis Obispo to do some browsing and back-to-school shopping along Higuera Street. SLO has a folksy downtown where you'll find vintage clothing shops and farm-to-table eateries close to Victoria's Secret and an Apple Store, and somehow the mix works.

Of course, we had to stop by Bubblegum Alley, a bizarre nook between Garden and Broad where the brick walls are covered with used chewing gum. We arrived just as a young woman was putting the finishing touches on a gooey message -- "Love the Unloved" -- a feat she accomplished using two packs of pink bubble gum. She beamed when my husband, Ed, snapped a picture of her handiwork.

Farmers market

Thursday night is San Luis Obispo's weekly farmers market and street fair, so we had to stick around for dinner and grazing. By 5:30 p.m., five blocks of Higuera Street had closed to car traffic, and the locals already were lined up (and salivating) near the massive mobile barbecue pit smoking in front of F. McLintocks. The restaurant's cooks piled giant slabs of ribs, chicken skewers, artichokes and bushels of corn on the grill.

The food looked so tempting and the locals in line were so effusive that we followed their lead and got in line too. At precisely 6 p.m., the F. McLintocks grill team belted out a chorus of "God Bless America" and opened for business. I ordered a barbecue chicken sandwich (\$5), which arrived on a buttery soft hoagie roll with a mound of onions and peppers, and a grilled artichoke with a chipotle aioli. Every bite was scrumptious.

Once we filled our faces, the four of us poked around the farmers market, which is actually a giant street party with live bands at every corner and a team of "bike valets" that watches the wheels of patrons who cycle to the market.

We worked our way through the overflowing flower and produce booths, sampling sweet peaches from See Canyon, olives from [Paso Robles](#) and cinnamon-and-vanilla-roasted almonds from I'm not quite sure where, but they were delicious.

By 7:30 p.m., we were stuffed and exhausted and ready to hit the road home. On the way out, my husband made a pit stop to grab a beautiful peach pie from Marcie's Pies of [Santa Ynez](#). Just in case anyone got hungry on the three-hour ride home.

Wares is the editor of the bestselling "My California: Journeys by Great Writers" and author of "Great Escapes: Southern California." Her new book, co-written with photographer Rick