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A quiet stretch of beach

The Central Coast is free of the madding crowds

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It's summertime in California and the beaches are beckoning -- especially to those of us sweltering in the Valley heat. Tide-pooling, digging in the sand, fishing, whale watching, soaking up the scenery, eating one's fill of delicious seafood: That's what makes a vacation on the coast so memorable.

Although it's not the easiest area to reach by car, the 70 miles of shoreline in San Luis Obispo County offer some of the most spectacular beaches in the state. The best part is that these strands are not as crowded as those farther south.

"Everything you need is right here," says Carrie Head of the San Luis Obispo County Visitors and Conference Bureau. "If you are looking for peace and quiet, head to the beaches in the northern end of the county. If you are looking for more active entertainment, the beach towns at the southern end of the county, like Pismo or Avila, have plenty to offer."

Unlike the winding drive on Highway 1 along the Northern California coast, this stretch of shore is easy to navigate, with plenty of spots where travelers can pull over to watch the surf or explore the neighboring towns. Here's a guide:

Oceano Dunes

This is perhaps one of the most entertaining stretches of beach in California. For a \$4 fee, you can drive your car onto the sand, right down to the water's edge. The area's official name is Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area and Grover Beach.

The 5.5-mile-long beach is a great place for families with children and for people who have difficulty getting around on foot. Have a tailgate picnic, but watch for a rising tide and an occasional horse trotting by. Activities include swimming, surfing, surf fishing, parasailing, camping, horseback riding and hiking.

Beach wheelchairs are available for loan at the pier and Grand Avenue entrances to the beach. Here you can also rent anything from all-terrain vehicles to horses, body boards and surfing gear.

Where: Oceano, three miles south of Pismo Beach off Highway 1.

Information: (805) 473-7220 or ohv.parks.ca.gov.

Pismo State Beach and Shell Beach

The dunes here are some of the highest in the state.

At one time, Pismo clams were plentiful. Although the town and beach still are known for clams, you need a license to dig and there are limits and size restrictions.

The beach is a good place for kite flying, swimming, surf fishing and surfing. Every October, the town celebrates its famous clams with a festival that features kites, volleyball and sand-sculpture competitions.

The town has a special charm with cute shops and restaurants as well as a long pier that is perfect for an evening stroll.

A half-mile south of Pismo Beach is the Monarch Butterfly Grove, which is host to one of the largest overwintering colonies of monarchs in the nation. The butterflies arrive in late October and stay through February.

Along the northern stretch of Pismo Beach, in the Shell Beach area, you will find great tide-pooling. Check the tide schedule at www.classicalifornia.com. With the beach surrounded by cliffs, the views are spectacular.

Where: Pismo Beach, 12 miles south of San Luis Obispo off Highway 1.

Information: Pismo Beach Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Information Center at (805) 773-4382, or www.parks.ca.gov.

Avila Beach

Locals say Avila's protected beach is the warmest in the county. It's a popular spot for kayaking and surfing.

The sand in Avila is soft and clean once again. After oil leaks from Unocal storage tanks were discovered in 1992, the beach was closed so Unocal could bulldoze and replace the tainted sand and many of the nearby buildings.

A biking and walking trail runs along the shore and into the hills. At the southern end of the beach is a boat launch. Look for signs that read Olde Port Beach.

At Port San Luis Pier, sign up for sport-fishing trips, whale watching and harbor cruises. Guided hikes are available along the Pecho Coast Trail to the Point San Luis Lighthouse (call 805-541-8735).

Where: Avila Beach is seven miles south of San Luis Obispo on Highway 1.

Information: San Luis Obispo County Visitors and Convention Bureau, (800) 634-1414 or www.sanluisobispo.com.

Morro Strand State Beach

You can't miss Morro Bay from Highway 1: Watch for an enormous, 575-foot-tall rock formation at the edge of the bay. The landmark was formed by volcanic activity more than 20 million years ago. While you can't climb the rock, you can drive to its base. It is designated an ecological reserve to protect endangered peregrine falcons that nest there.

The restaurants of Morro Bay, a quaint fishing village, feature fresh seafood. On Saturday nights, fishermen and local farmers sell their bounties at street markets.

Visitors can cruise the bay by boat and catamaran or view it from a helicopter. Watersports equipment such as paddle boats, canoes and kayaks can be rented from the pier. In the surrounding village, visit art galleries and shops.

North of the fishing village and docks, you will find a state park with a long, white-sand beach. This area is a national bird sanctuary and estuary, so bring binoculars.

Where: Morro Strand State Beach is two miles north of Morro Bay.

Information: Morro Bay Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Center, (800) 231-0592 or www.morrobay.org. For information about Morro Strand State Beach: (805) 772-8812.

Cayucos

The farther north you travel up the coast, the sleepier the communities become. Cayucos is a perfect example. While watersports equipment rentals and tours are available, the most popular activity seems to be walking on the beach. The shoreline is a mix of sand and rocks framing a 953-foot pier. There are picnic facilities and the pier is lit for night fishing. Antique shops, gift boutiques and restaurants are found along Ocean Boulevard, the main street in town.

Where: Five miles north of Morro Bay.

Information: Cayucos Chamber of Commerce, (805) 995-1200, www.cayucosbythesea.com or www.cayucoschamber.com.

Moonstone Beach

Probably the best-kept secret along this stretch of coast is Moonstone Beach. You can't see it from the highway, and it isn't marked on some maps, but watch for signs about five miles south of San Simeon. It is a wonderful hideaway where you can spend hours on the black sand, searching for smooth, translucent jasper stones, called moonstones.

Skip Moonstone if you are looking for night life, noise and a busy beach. High tide is about the most exciting thing that happens all day.

Moonstone Boardwalk, which runs along the beach and the main street (there's just one road through town), has viewing platforms and stair access to the beach. It's especially nice at sunset.

You'll also find some great restaurants and cute hotels in Moonstone, including San Simeon Pines Resort, which has a pitch-and-putt golf course. On Moonstone Drive, the main street, are the White Water Inn, Blue Whale Inn, Fireside Inn and Castle Inn, all with ocean views and easy beach access.

Where: Directly across Highway 1 from the town of Cambria, about five miles south of San Simeon.

Information: (805) 927-3624 or www.cambriachamber.org.

San Simeon and Ragged Point

As you travel north past San Simeon, the shoreline becomes more rugged. Here's where you'll find colonies of California elephant seals. On weekends, docents stationed at many of the turnouts along Highway 1 answer questions about the habits of the seals and explain various activities that tourists see -- such as pups learning to swim or fights between bulls.

Where: Along Highway 1, several locations about three to five miles north of San Simeon.

Information: Groups can arrange for docents by accessing www.elephantseal.org or by calling Friends of the Elephant Seal, (805) 924-1628.

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