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by Matthew Jaffe

Beach town classics

Check out vintage California style in the Central Coast's Pismo Beach and newly revived Avila Beach



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It's morning at Avila Beach, and the sounds of the sea provide the day's first impressions. In the silence between the rhythmic plunging of waves onto the beach, the calls of shorebirds and the barks of sea lions drift across San

Luis Obispo Bay.

Farther south along the bay at Pismo Beach, the sands are busy with walkers and joggers. Foraging curlews and godwits take off at the beachgoers' approach and fly a few hundred feet downshore, only to be displaced again.

Such morning scenes are a reminder that, first and foremost, a beach town is about the beach. Pismo and Avila are communities that are dedicated to this simple proposition, even as change has come to both. Pismo is enhancing its waterfront and has added a new city park, while Avila, after essentially being closed down for several years during an oil-spill cleanup, is back in business with a new beachfront and an eye toward the future.

Timeless Pismo Beach

The city is upgrading lighting and paving, but downtown Pismo Beach is still a classic beach town. Hints of fish and chips and saltwater taffy drift through the air, and clam chowder is ubiquitous on local menus.

There's a bit of a feeling that this is where the Pacific Coast meets the Jersey Shore. A new beachfront boardwalk connects to the town's popular 1,250-foot-long pier. And the East Coast feel is further enhanced by the section of beach south of Grand Avenue in the hamlet of Grover Beach — the only beach on the California coast where you can drive a car.

A big part of Pismo's atmosphere comes from another influence. "This is the Central Valley's beach," says Don Day, a resident, general contractor, and downtown property owner. "You stand on a corner and the crowd all knows each other. They're all from their valley. For generations and generations, this has been their beach town."

The Pismo oceanfront is definitely one-of-a-kind on the California coast. It's notable as one of the greatest walking beaches anywhere. Wide, flat, and well packed, the sands extend for miles south of the pier, and it feels as if you can walk forever.

Head inland, and a different experience awaits. California's largest coastal dune field begins just south of town. It's worth forsaking the hard pack along the oceanfront to challenge the shifting sands of the Pismo State Beach Dune Preserve, especially in spring when the bush lupine and beach primrose are in bloom.

North of town, the beach's perfect flatness quickly changes, as a line of cliffs fronted by sea stacks and cut by coves rises from the ocean. One of the more intriguing spots is Dinosaur Caves Park, a paleontological misnomer. The name actually comes from a large dinosaur statue that attracted 1940s visitors to an amusement park perched on nearby cliffs.

Once slated for a hotel development, the Dinosaur Caves area became a city park last year. Dinosaurs are conspicuously absent, but there are colonies of pelicans and gulls, as well as harbor seals hauled out along the rocks.

Avila Beach reborn

About 7 miles north of Pismo, Avila Beach is a cul-de-sac of a beach town. The city has no through roads, so unless you're aiming for it, you're not likely to get there.

It might sound like a dead end, but there's new life here. A decades-long underground oil spill from a Unocal pipeline led to an \$18 million cleanup project financed by the company. A good portion of Avila was torn down and rebuilt, and while many historic buildings were preserved, Avila gained a spruced-up waterfront promenade. Some people love the facelift for such touches as the swirling tile time line that portrays the town's history, while others feel that their beach town has been Botoxed.

"One of the admonitions to the designers was to keep the funky feel of Avila Beach," Avila Beach Community Foundation

executive director Boyd Horne explains. "I think most everyone is pleased." But given that local land prices have skyrocketed after the recovery, Horne acknowledges that change is inevitable. " 'Funky' is probably not a good description of what's going to take place," he says.

But plenty remains the same at Avila Beach. Locals still tout the protected microclimate, where temperatures tend to be warmer and days more fog-free than at Pismo and other Central Coast spots. And at the Harford Pier just north of town, you can still watch fishing boats unload, then look through the windows at the Olde Port Fisheries as the catch is filleted and processed.

As hard as it is to leave the coast behind, Sycamore Mineral Springs Resort, set in a wooded canyon a few miles outside of town, has its own allure. The resort traces its origins to 1886, when oil workers discovered the area's thermal hot springs. Several nearby trails wander beneath the sycamores along San Luis Obispo Creek and ascend the canyon's slopes.

The essence of the Sycamore experience is a soak in one of the resort's fancifully named redwood tubs. The one called Shangri La requires a long climb up several sets of stairs to a secluded spot in the forest. The twisting limbs of oak trees are silhouetted against a darkening sky as a nearly full moon rises in the east. The air is cool, the tub is hot, and the last bit of sun glows through the mouth of the canyon as a beautiful day becomes a beautiful night.

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