



San Luis Obispo lands a spot on magazine's list of top surf towns.(Knight Ridder Newspapers)

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SAN LUIS OBISPO, Calif. _ With its laid-back atmosphere, stunning scenery, happening social scene and central location in California, San Luis Obispo has made it on Surfer magazine's list of the top 10 surf towns in the country.

Never mind that there isn't a beach in sight for about 10 miles.

San Luis Obispo, along with nine coastal cities and towns, will be on the list in the February issue of Surfer. The list recognizes communities that not only have good waves nearby, but also provide a great living environment.

Ross Garrett, executive editor of the magazine, said there was plenty of debate over whether a noncoastal community could be among Surfer's top towns.

"It is a unique inclusion," Garrett said. "In the end, it made the list because it's beautiful, it's a college town, there are a lot of other good things to see and do besides surf and the waves are good."

Those waves are the ones that roll into Morro Bay, Cayucos, Pismo Beach and other nearby coastal burgs. Garrett said San Luis Obispo scored points among Surfer staff because of its central location within both San Luis Obispo County as well as California.

"Pismo is more of a summertime spot, and Morro Bay is better in the winter," Garrett said. Plus, San Luis Obispo is halfway between the Bay Area and Southern California, and it puts surfers within driving distance of other California hot spots, such as Santa Barbara, Big Sur and Santa Cruz, which is also included on Surfer's list.

The designation will carry weight in the surfing world, according to local surfers. The magazine is widely considered the bible of the sport. Carl Holm, a competitive surfer from San Luis Obispo, said this area has been gaining publicity steadily over the past few years.

"It used to be that surfers would hit Santa Barbara and then move right on to Santa Cruz," Holm said. "It was like there was a dark cloud over SLO. But over the past five years or so, there's been a lot more people moving here and noticing San Luis Obispo."

But neither local surfers nor the Surfer magazine staff want to see the area become much more crowded.

"I was down in Huntington Beach last week surfing, and it was insane," said Jeff Owen, who works at Moondoggies Beach Club surf shop in San Luis Obispo. "It was just so crowded. It's nice to come back to this."

The publicity will likely be a boost for shops such as Moondoggies, Owen said. But he isn't convinced it will lead to a glut of surfers heading for area beaches.

"I've talked to a lot of people who say the waves are terrible here," Owen said. "I think that's great because it keeps it from getting too overcrowded." Holm said different areas attract different surfers because of variations in the waves.

"The surf here is a lot different than it is in Santa Cruz," Holm said. "This place is the way it is partly because of the people the surf draws.

"Also, it's hard to just pass through here and get the waves because the surf changes. You've got to be here all the time to get the really good surf." Dave Garth, director of the San Luis Obispo Chamber of Commerce, hopes the article does draw more surfers here and that it gets them to explore more of the city than just the nearby beaches.

"Any positive exposure is good for the city," Garth said, "and this is a group of people that haven't traditionally been marketed to.

"It's really good for San Luis Obispo's future if we can keep new generations coming. This is a younger demographic, so maybe when they get older and have families, they will remember their positive experiences in San Luis Obispo."

Garth said 2001 was a big year for such kinds of accolades for San Luis Obispo, with more than a dozen. Early in 2001, high-tech business magazine The Industry Standard (which is no longer being published) named San Luis Obispo one of the best new places to do business. Runner's World called San Luis Obispo one of America's top 10 cities for running, and Sunset magazine featured it as part of a story on California mission towns.

"But we try not to get a big head about these things," Garth said. "The publicity is good, but we could end up on the next magazine's 'Ten Worst' list next week.

"It's very subjective. Some will find us attractive, and others won't. What it does say is that San Luis Obispo is not a secret anymore," Garth said.

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