

The quiet San Luis Obispo coast

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Around Avila Beach you go back to the '50s, even the '40s

ONCE A BUSY PORT, Avila Beach--14 miles south of San Luis Obispo--is today a quiet coastal sanctuary with much of the charm of neighboring Pismo Beach and Morro Bay, but without the sprawl of hotels and curio shops or the emphasis on tourism. If you're visiting the county or traveling along the California coast, you might consider a detour for a few hours, or a few days. Laid-back little Avila and adjacent Port San Luis can give you a taste of California coastal towns as they were in the '40s and '50s.

An additional reason to visit is the weather: Avila Valley's microclimate usually means sunny skies even when nearby beaches are fogged in. In most any weather, two local mineral hot springs are attractive prospects (but be aware that some people find the sulfur smell a bit overwhelming).

Avila Hot Springs, 1/4 mile west of U.S. Highway 101 on Avila Beach Drive, is a family recreational campground, open year-round, with a large pool and private hot tubs. Sites range from \$16.50 to \$26; charges for the hot springs pool are \$5 to \$9. Call (805) 595-2359.

Sycamore Mineral Springs, also on Avila Beach Drive, has 26 simple hotel rooms, each with private outdoor spa; rates run \$99 to \$114. Redwood tubs, tucked under oaks and sycamores, rent for \$10 per person per hour (\$5 for guests), 24 hours a day. Call 595-7302.

In Avila Beach, shops along Front Street's six blocks offer saltwater taffy, beachwear, fishing gear, and fish and chips. The Old Custom House, at 324 Front, is the preferred local hangout.

A picturesque afternoon outing in this area would be a drive along See Canyon Road (2 miles northeast of Avila Beach, off San Luis Bay Drive), where several small orchards sell cider, honey, just-picked vegetables, and apples (in fall).

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