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OFF-BEAT TRAVELER: TRACK WILD CONDORS, TRACE LOST GHOSTS OR TREK POINT SUR LIGHTHOUSE BY THE LIGHT OF THE MOON

Monterey County Goes Off-Grid With Tours Tailored to the Jaded Traveler

MONTEREY COUNTY, CALIF. -- Urbanites seeking an off-grid adventure can tap into the underbelly of Monterey County for a cache of unique tours focusing on the region's natural assets. From a *Raiders of the Lost Ark* adventure set deep in the redwood forests of Big Sur to sleuthing Elkhorn Slough Reserve via pontoon, touring Monterey's classic coastline, historic cities and unrivaled rugged wilderness adds dimension to a destination visit. Elevate the senses and educate the palate touring an artichoke ranch, organic farm or "Salad Bowl of the World." Bald eagle and historic ghost tours round out the options, available via www.SeeMonterey.com.

CULTURAL KICKS

Seeking a star-studded rendezvous, Big Sur-style? Moonlight tours of the historic **Point Sur Lighthouse** offer a surreal trek through time. The three-hour guided adventure kicks off at sunset April through October at the base of a giant moro rock formation 19 miles south of Carmel. The one-mile hike rising 360 feet in elevation delivers an eerie tale of ghosts and lost souls of the sea. Visitors can climb the tower or trek the exterior catwalk.

A silent sentinel to a by-gone era, Point Sur Lighthouse is the only complete turn-of-the-century light station open to the public in the Golden State. Built in 1887-1889 and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, this stone lighthouse still guides ships through an automated system (\$10; adults/\$5; children; www.pointsur.org)

Ancient burial grounds, hidden treasures, historic hangings and modern-day hauntings are on tap via **Ghost Trolley Tour of Old Monterey**, a riveting trip through historic downtown including a flashlight stroll through old Cemeterio el Encinal-Monterey in search of Ed Ricketts tombstone (*Cannery Row*). The 90-minute evening adventure chronicles the old capitol of Mexican California -- a textbook tale of intrigue, murder, swindles and shipwrecks while showcasing many of city's key landmarks including the Stevenson House, Stokes Adobe and beautiful San Carlos Cathedral (1795.)

Grab a flashlight and board a classic trolley with local historian Gary Munsinger and his big and burly English setter sidekick -- Harrison. Resident ghosts such as Manuela Giradin, "the lady in black," are said to be seen leering out of the upstairs window of the Stevenson House (\$28; www.montereyghostwalk.com).

Play like a poet and shimmy up a cylindrical staircase to a 40-foot perch that inspired Robison Jeffers' 400+ free-verse poems. **Robinson Jeffers Tor House and Hawk Tower**, a serpentine English-style stone cottage and cathedral spire nestled between multimillion-dollar mansions and Carmel's craggy surf is a tour de force in both fortitude and architectural bravado. Built by hand by Carmel's only laureate, this inspirational Dickens's-style abode speaks to Jeffers' passion for Ireland, England and Old World romanticism. He began construction of the residence in 1918 using ancient Egyptian methods of pyramid-building to raise 300- and 400-pound boulders off the ground. A block-and-tackle system then hoisted boulders into the air to create the 40-ft. Hawk Tower. Peek into the poet's past via lavish English gardens, a pet cemetery, home with 11 fireplaces and Steinway grand piano once played by Gershwin and Chaplin (\$7; Friday & Saturday only; www.torhouse.org).

Travelers interested in setting their own scene can link the dots on a trek through Monterey County's storied past via the new **Scenes for your Senses Literary & Film Map**. From Steinbeck's *Long Valley (1938)* to Eastwood's *The Eiger Sanction (1975)*, the new guide combines the region's 50+ points of inspiration with a jet-set list of "Hot Stops" for recharging and variety of insider jaunts to stretch one's legs and mind. In an easy day's drive go from *East of Eden* to *Treasure Island*, power walk Point Sur (*Women at Point Sur, 1927, Robinson Jeffers*) or pack a picnic and hit Carmel River Beach where Jack London set the abalone picnic in *Valley of the Moon (1913)* (Free via 1-877-MONTEREY; www.SeeMonterey.com).

WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

Sleuthing for something big, bold and wild? Venture to Big Sur, the undisputed breeding ground of the California condor, a massive creature clocking in with a wingspan of nearly 10 feet. Track the heralded comeback of North America's largest land bird and one of the largest flying birds in the world via a tour with **Ventana Wildlife Society**. The two-hour tracking tour led by a wildlife biologist uses specialized equipment to monitor nesting, feeding and flying habits. On the endangered species list since 1967, the California condor now thrives on Big Sur's rugged coastline. Since 1998, Ventana Wildlife Society has released many condors reared in captivity (\$50; www.ventanaws.org).

It's not often an area can lay claim to being a hotbed for wintering eagles. Enter Lake San Antonio and its annual **Eagle Watch Tours** that kick off every January. Known as one of the largest bald and golden eagle winter habitats in Central California, this region's bonanza of fresh fish, mild climate and limited human impact make the 17-mile long lake and environs a hot ticket from November to April with birds migrating south from Alaska, British Columbia and Oregon. The 2 ½ hour tours run January and February aboard a 56-foot boat that enables visitors an insider's perch. Nearby Mission San Antonio de Padua, the third of 21 missions and still an active parish is definitely worth a visit (\$12 adults; www.co.monterey.ca.us/parks/sanantonio.html).

Spreading 1,400 acres and reaching inland nearly seven miles from the coast, the Elkhorn Slough Reserve is ripe for travelers seeking a truly outback experience with some 400 plant species, 340 types of birds (including the

rare Peregrine Falcon and Snowy Plover), sea lions and 80 kinds of fish. The **Elkhorn Slough Safari** is certain to fire up any budding biologist with daily tours led by resident naturalist Captain Yohn. Grab a life vest and binoculars and board a classic 27-foot pontoon for a vivid postcard of this region's ecosystem and wealth of wildlife. Photo Safaris, Birding Workshops and Sunset Hot Chocolate tours are also available (\$32; www.elkhornsloughsafari.com).

Unleash your inner animal with a walk on the wild side at **Wild Things**, an exotic animal training facility sporting 100+ critters on 50 acres of rugged outback. Lions, tigers and ... "Babs" the baboon take center stage for a full day of play including a stint washing an African elephant, training session with Brandi (an American black bear of *Grizzly Adams* fame) or little walk with an big exotic cat. (\$10; www.wildthingsinc.com)

Tucked deep in Steinbeck country, this working facility and rescue camp offers a deluxe seven-hour Walk with the Animals tour including catered lunch and wine and cheese finale paired with a full day of wild animal play. For a true call of the wild, check out the seasonal evening Flashlight Tours or go for the ultimate turn-down: check into the bed-and-breakfast and clock out to the sounds of roaring lions and trumpeting elephants against the sweeping savanna (\$900; \$12-\$14 for Flashlight Tours; www.wildthingsinc.com).

Dive in for a day of play at the Monterey Bay Aquarium, home to 250,000+ animals and plants representing more than 700 species of invertebrates, mammals, reptiles, birds and plants. Book a **Morning Rounds: Behind-the-Scenes Tour** for a rare opportunity to interact with the aquarium's exhibit animals as an aquarist would. The morning begins with a private viewing of the 8:30 a.m. sea otter feeding and training session and continues behind the scenes with a rare look at where food is prepared for the animals and how they get their morning meals as the aquarists get the exhibits ready for the day. At the end of the tour, everyone who takes part in "Morning Rounds" will have a chance to feed some of the animals in the aquarium's Discovery Lab classrooms (Most Sundays, 8:15 a.m., \$65 per person for general public, \$45 per person for aquarium members; www.montereybayaquarium.org).

GOING GREEN

The wonders of Big Sur hit full throttle with a *Raiders of the Lost Ark*-style tour of the region's lost limekilns. Hit the trail with **Big Sur Hiking Guides** on an adventure deep into the towering redwood forest laced with streams, 100 ft. waterfalls and pine-scented solitude. Outback enthusiast Steve Copeland leads visitors along the west fork Kilns Trail of Limekiln State Park to four enormous 100-ft. stone-and-steel kilms, historic landmarks from the early 1880s when limestone was purified to provide cement for California Scenic Highway 1. Enjoy an inspiring insider's take on local flora and fauna as well as visiting some of the largest and oldest redwood trees in the county on the Hare Creek Trail before doubling back for lunch (\$75 including lunch; www.bigsurguides.com).

Flower power takes on new meaning at **Earthbound Farm's** weekly Flower Walk. Stroll through a kaleidoscope of color on 32 prime acres in Carmel Valley as the nation's largest organic grower and shipper of organic produce steps up with seasonal tours of its over-the-top organic floral gardens. Shears in hand, snip a basketful of beauties then belly up to the design table with a local florist to learn the art of flower arranging. Insider tips on the battle of the bugs included (\$20; www.ebfarm.com).

From artichokes to arugula, a technical tour of the “Salad Bowl of the World” is a ripe opportunity to observe the underbelly of one of the nation’s top agricultural producing regions. The seamless sea of row crops that stretch from land to sea in the Salinas Valley have inspired both star chefs and John Steinbeck, who found fodder here for *East of Eden* and *Of Mice and Men*. The 100-mile swath of green sets the stage for a day of exploration via **Ag Venture Tours**. Kick off the tour with a visit to a working artichoke ranch, walk the fields observing harvesting, planting, irrigation and all aspects of organic farming. Muse the micro-greens and learn the low down on new technology from agricultural expert Evan Oakes, whose personal relationships with the farmers make this a true insider’s tour (\$60; www.agventuretours.com).

VISITOR INFO.

Monterey County is located 120 miles/192 km south of San Francisco and 345 miles/552 km north of Los Angeles along the classic California corridor. The region boasts 99 miles of prime Pacific Coastline, the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, three historic missions, 40,000 acres of premium vineyards, 24 golf courses and over 250 lodging properties. Monterey County includes the Monterey Peninsula, Big Sur, North County and the Salinas Valley. The Monterey Peninsula Airport (MRY), just three miles from historic downtown Monterey and minutes from the area’s major attractions, is served by non-stop flights to and from Denver (DEN), Las Vegas (LAS), Phoenix (PHX), Los Angeles (LAX), San Diego (SAN) and San Francisco (SFO). www.SeeMonterey.com.

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