

PLAYGROUND OF PIERS

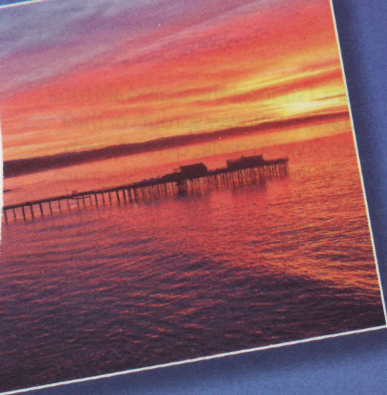
Cruising California's Central Coast is the consummate motorcycling experience. This thin, winding ribbon of asphalt cradles one of the most renowned riding roads in the world. From Hearst Castle, Bixby Creek Bridge, to Santa Cruz, Highway 1 offers breathtaking views of the Pacific Ocean and Big Sur. The piers and towns perched along the Central Coast often reflect this beauty. Sometimes, it's the piers that define and give identity to the community, i.e., Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk and Wharf. Sometimes, it's the area itself that makes the wharf special, as is the case of the quaint Mediterranean-inspired Capitola. And sometimes, even a derelict cement ship run aground at the pier's end draws a crowd.

Be sure and plan your gas stops wisely because if you

need fuel at Loma Vista Inn near Esalan in Big Sur, it'll cost you upwards of six bucks a gallon on a good day! Mildly chided by my Event Coordinator, proclaiming she would have seen that one coming, we fill up.

Pacific Coast Highway (PCH) runs directly through downtown Santa Cruz, and traffic can get really backed up, especially during weekends. With a colorful history, Santa Cruz is very artsy, full of music and youthful creativity. UC Santa Cruz is the largest employer in this city. The Grateful Dead donated their music archive to the campus library and welcomes visitors to watch video content and peruse the thousands of items collected over the Dead's four decades (gdao.org), but it is Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk and Wharf that draws throngs of tourists. It's the last





SANTA CRUZ, CAPITOLA, AND SEACLIFF STATE PARK

WORDS AND PHOTOS: Gary Koz Mraz

remaining oceanfront amusement park on the West Coast. Whether cruising the boardwalk or strolling the pier, a "carny" vibe permeates Santa Cruz Beach. It's the sixth-most-visited amusement park in California with some three million annual visitors. With that comes traffic, congestion, pricey parking, and hucksters.

The Municipal Wharf is far less chaotic and a great place to watch the passing parade. One of only five piers/wharfs you can drive on, there is ample parking along its entire length. There are no designated motorcycle parking spaces, but the first 30 minutes are free, then it's \$1 per hour with a \$21 maximum. Stagnaro Bros. Restaurant near pier's end has the best seats in the house. Located outside on the second floor, there are 12 tables that border the outside perimeter and have a great view. Since 1937, this Italian family has been serving patrons delicious homemade meals, and to this day, nine family mem-



BOARDWALK

SANTA CRUZ BEACH



bers still run the establishment. I suggest the seared ahi tuna sandwich with wasabi mayo and sunflower sprouts or their linguine and clams “Old World Style” in garlic, olive oil, herb broth with a touch of cream. I’d also give their own Stagnaro Bros. Pale Ale a try.

We really enjoyed peering into the large cutouts that pepper the Wharf. They allow visitors to watch the seals lounging, barking, and playing in the ocean and on pilings below. The Wharf is closed from 2 a.m. to 5 a.m. daily but is open 365 days a year. This is a great place to stop, have a snack, and people watch, but for us motorcyclists, the real fun here isn’t riding the roller coasters; it’s riding the miles of twisties in the nearby Santa Cruz Mountains.

The Santa Cruz Loop is only about a 60-mile loop; this route can take three to four hours. From the ocean’s edge to the 3,000-foot elevation, it winds through lush green canopies; hairpin turns into deep canyons of redwoods, dropping back down to Bonny Doon Beach. You’ll really need to pay attention to directions because you can get lost fast, but that’s okay. Sometimes, getting lost is the real find. We started the ride from Bay Street in Capitola. It turns into Soquel San Jose Road and then connects to Summit Road. Go left and continue on Summit Road over SR 17. The SR 17 has a reputation of being one of the most dangerous highways in the state. You will pass half a dozen wineries on Summit Road alone.

Stop in with your Event Coordinator and have her sample the wares. Finally, connecting to Bear Creek Road, this will take you all the way to the town of Boulder Creek. We had lunch at The Brewery in Boulder Creek, and I ordered the veggie hoagie. I was pleasantly surprised with sautéed bell peppers, mushrooms, onions, zucchini, squash, garlic, and marinara sauce on a toasted baguette.

When you leave Boulder Creek, turn left on to Highway 9, take it into Felton, and turn left on Felton Empire Grade; then turn right on Empire Grade. Finally, turn left on Pine Flat Road, which becomes Bonny Doon and T-bones Highway 1 at Bonny Dune Beach. As stated, you need to pay attention; I took a few wrong turns, but fortunately for my Event Coordinator and me, they led to wineries. Once on Highway 1, head right back to Bay Street in Capitola because this is where you are going to spend the night.

CAPITOLA WHARF

Capitola is only 5.6 miles south of Santa Cruz, and Capitola Wharf is without a doubt one of the top-five destinations of my “Piers of the West Coast” series. The first Capitola Wharf was built in 1856 as a commercial pier for shipping lumber and farm products from Soquel to San Francisco. Sometimes, it’s the piers that define and give identity to the community, but here it’s the area itself that makes the Capitola Wharf so special.

Capitola is the oldest seaside resort along the Pacific Coast. The main area near the beach is really only a few square blocks, but it is made up of commercial buildings, old Victorian houses, and an old railroad depot at the front of the pier. California’s first condominium built in 1924, the Venetian Court, is splashed with vibrant pastel colors and ornate architecture. It looks and feels like Morocco, Greece, or Southern Spain.

You need to stay here and make this your home base. All rooms feature Mission-style furniture with Tiffany-type lamps to reflect the Mediterranean style. Each room is unique in size and design with one-, two-, or three-bedroom units complete with kitchens and living rooms. All kitchens have full-size refrigerators and gas stoves and are stocked with basic cookware, dishes, and an in-room coffeemaker. Some rooms offer fireplaces and ocean views. The key here is booking months in advance. Rooms range from \$69 per night for a single bedroom in the off-season to \$509 (minimum two-night stay) for a three bedroom that sleeps eight with fireplace and ocean view in the



TIP: During the summer on Monday and Tuesday evenings, the rides are only a dollar, and parking is \$10 (\$5 in the winter). On Friday nights during summer, there are free concerts—everything from Herman’s Hermits to The Tubes—with shows at 6:30 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. Bring lawn chairs or a blanket and arrive early to get seating; it’s a very popular event. The food is typical carnival food, from deep-fried Twinkies to \$8 beers. The train trestle at the south end of the Boardwalk was in the really cool vampire movie *The Lost Boys*.



peak season. The best deal is this same three-bedroom ocean-view room that rents for \$169 per night Monday through Thursday, October 16 through January 31.

Every restaurant in Capitola Beach has the best seat in the house, and we partied at them all. A must-stop is Margaritaville. No, it's not Jimmy Buffet's chain of kitschy tourist traps; Capitola Margaritaville opened its doors July 3, 1984 (Buffet opened his first restaurant in 1985 in Orange Beach, Alabama). Capitola's Margaritaville quickly became *the* hangout for bikers, artists, surfers, and travelers. Grab an outside seat, a margarita, and you will enjoy one of the hottest bars on the central coast and one of the best views of the Monterey Bay. A stark contrast to Santa Cruz and its weekend hordes, Event Coordinator gives Capitola Wharf two thumbs-up!

SEACLIFF STATE PARK PIER

Only 4 miles south of Capitola is Seacliff State Park Pier. Few piers have truly unique features, and Seacliff Pier is one of them. The end of this wooden, 500-foot-long pier connects to the old cement ship, Palo Alto, a bad idea turned good... gone bad. The ship is made completely of cement and designed for the US Navy in World War I but was not completed until the war was over. She sat at her dock in Oakland until 1929 when she made her only voyage to her present spot. The 435-foot-long ship was filled with water, a pier was built from the beach to the ship, and the ship was turned into an attraction. A café was constructed above deck, the main deck was turned into a dance floor, a heated swimming pool was added, and carnival booths lined the back of the ship. Within several years, the company that owned the ship went bankrupt. A few years later, winter storms smashed the craft beyond repair, and now she lies listless—home to massive pelicans and hordes of seagulls.

Seacliff is nothing but a fishing pier. There is \$10 parking fee for the day, and the lower parking spaces fill up quickly. However, there is ample parking above. Trotting down the 157 steps to the beach might seem fun, but, unless you're training for a triathlon, it's a real workout back up. There's really not much to do here but kick back, relax, and soak up the sun and sounds of the seashore.

HONORABLE MENTIONS

The Mystery Spot is another Santa Cruz landmark located just 5 miles from Santa Cruz. Speculation on its odd properties include cones of metal secretly brought here and buried in our Earth as guidance systems for alien spacecraft or that it is, in fact, a spacecraft itself buried deep within the ground. Other theories include carbon dioxide permeating from the earth via a magma vortex, creating the strongest biocosmic dielectric in the world... You be the judge. Once inside the house, everything feels like they're defying gravity. You'll walk straight, but throw balls and they come back at you. You feel like you're going to lose balance, but it's simply an illusion. If you do go, buy one of their famous yellow bumper stickers. Be aware that on weekends it can be a five-hour wait, and I would rather spend that time searching for my own personal mystery spot, defying gravity on my motorcycle in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

EPILOGUE

Don't stay in Santa Cruz. Capitola is as fun and romantic as it gets. You need to make reservations months in advance, but it's well worth it. The Santa Cruz mountain ride is also a great ride, but remember it actually snows here in winter sometimes, so be prepared for extreme climate changes. Whether it's the roller coasters of Santa Cruz Boardwalk, the Mediterranean romance of Capitola Wharf, or the solitude of Seacliff State Park Pier, you and your Event Coordinator will absolutely love cruising this playground of piers.

