

Home / Experiences / What's New and Cool in Carmel-by-the-Sea

Travel

What's New and Cool in Carmel-by-the-Sea

Created with Hyatt

Written by: [Kully Martin](#) | Published on: May 2, 2024



The greatest secret of Carmel-by-the-Sea isn't its storybook charm or its delightfully misty weather, although both of those are good reasons to visit. It's how stealthily cool this town has become.

What was good before—the beach, the cottages, the slow pace—is all still good. But new players make Carmel even more appealing, reviving what made this town an artists' enclave in the first place.

STAY

[La Playa Hotel](#) is the former retreat of a Ghirardelli heiress. And everything about it calls up Carmel's boozey, bohemian past. The rooms aren't generously sized, but they are beautiful, and the service is great. The bar scene at the restaurant, Bud's, is one of the buzziest in town. (Bring dimes in case you happen to order during "dime time," when drinks are 10 cents for just 10 minutes.) Ghirardelli chocolate chip cookies are, aptly, baked nightly.

[Le Petit Paj](#), the first bed-and-breakfast by Palisociety, occupies two properties down the street from each other in downtown Carmel: one on Ocean and the other on 8th. There's breakfast in the lounge and a well-curated happy hour. We do prefer the 8th Street location, which has a darling stony courtyard where you can hang in the sun eating caviar and chips.



Photos courtesy of Chris Mottalin for La Playa Hotel

We haven't stayed at [L'Auberge](#) since its recent renovation. But we did eat at the restaurant, chef Justin Cogley's Michelin-starred [Aubergine](#), which has had a facelift as well. The food and service were great, and we spent a lot of the meal admiring the plates, which looked like they could have been lifted straight out of the sea.

If you'd rather settle farther from town's touristy crowds, two options: [Carmel Beach Hotel](#) is 50 steps from the beach in Carmel's quieter, more residential south end. Aubergine's Cogley oversees the menu at the restaurant. Fluffy lemon cookies appear in your room at turndown. The bathtubs are a little hard to figure out, but once you do, they're a delightful place to soak. [Villa Mara](#), just one block up the hill, feels like staying in a friend's private home. The hotel bar serves quiche, juice, and coffee in the morning and cocktails with the freipats at night. The 16-room property is also adults-only, which gives it an edge in an otherwise kid-friendly town.



EAT

Eating out in Carmel tends to be a splurge, which makes doing your research important; don't expect to pop in just anywhere and get your money's worth. For breakfast: The best bread in town comes from [Ad Astra](#), which is based in Seaside; you can pick up their loaves and seasonal pastries—raspberry danishes, cardamom buns, yuzu curd tarts—at the [Carmel-by-the-Sea Farmers' Market](#) on Thursdays. [Rise + Roam Bakery](#) roasts its own coffee and makes some magnificent pastries and tartines. And [Dutch Door](#) has really good doughnuts and beignets.

The best brunch in town is at [Stationery](#). The menu looks standard—scrambles, pancakes, granola bowls—but it's executed beautifully, and you'll notice the town's younger crowd congregates here on weekends. I still think about the gooey butter cake I had there last summer.



Santa Monica staple [Lady & Lardet](#) just opened a shop in Carmel Valley. It's a little detour outside Carmel, but if you're hosting a celebration, it's a valuable entry in your little black book for charcuterie boards and custom cheesecakes. They also pack mini snack boards that make a perfect picnic for two.

For dinner, [La Bicyclette](#) is a classic, and it's good for wood-fired pizzas and hearty French-Belgian fare, like buttery mushrooms and steak au poivre. [Chez Noir](#), run by husband-and-wife pair Jonny and Monique Black, won its first Michelin star last summer, just a year after opening. It's incredible what they do with abalone.

SHOP AND GALLERY-HOP

The most quintessential Carmel experience is puttering around. Downtown is about one square mile of shops, galleries, and cafés in cottages that look straight out of a storybook, and time spent milling through its charming alleys is not wasted.

The shopping scene leans grandmother-y, admittedly. But there are some standout boutiques that do grandmother at its highest (and highest-end) expression: [Essey Couture](#) is a treasure trove of Hermès scarves and Roberto Cavalli gowns, plus other modern and vintage finds, from Alafia to Zimmermann. [Eoustanté Jewelers](#) has a new flagship here, and it's a stunner, with a Carolina Bucci bead bar and a watch shop down the street. [Girl Boy Girl and Palooah](#), which operate under the same ownership, feel more contemporary without interrupting Carmel's cherished current of old-lady eccentricity.

Speaking of eccentricity, the local bookstore, [Pilgrim's Way](#), has a little of everything but specializes in spirituality and the uncanny. Among beach reads and self-help bestsellers, you'll find books on Taoist astrology, herbalism for hair care, and understanding vibrational frequencies.

The best way to see Carmel's galleries is to pop your head in every door. But if you're looking for the highlights, prioritize [Weston Gallery](#), [Patricia Qualls Gallery](#), [Joaquin Turner Gallery](#), [Monica Graham Fine Art](#), and the [Carmel Art Association](#).



DO

The beach here is a main attraction, obviously. Settle in at the southernmost end if you like a quieter experience, or the north end if you like people watching. If you walk down Scenic Road, which runs along the shore, it'll take you past a Frank Lloyd Wright, then street after street of fairy-tale cottages and architectural landmarks.

One of the best ways to spend a day in Carmel is taking an electric bike up Pebble Beach's 17-Mile Drive. (You can rent one at [Mad Dogs & Englishmen](#) and ride it from there.) The route is scenic and takes you past one of the more beautiful trees you'll ever see, known as the [Lone Cypress](#). Stop at [The Bench](#) for lunch with a view, then bike back the way you came.

If biking isn't your thing, reserve a day to take out a classic car from [Monterey Touring Vehicles](#): Maybe a 1964 Chevy Malibu, cherry red. Or, if you can handle some juice, the original Tesla Roadster. Car obsessives, yes, will love this—but I'm not that guy, and this was the best thing I did on my last visit to Carmel. The shop will give you a route, which is a suggestion; skip the parts that would take you through Monterey's Cannery Row, 17-Mile Drive, and Carmel, which all move very slowly. Instead, head straight for Highway 1 and take it down the coast into Big Sur and over the iconic Bixby Bridge, stopping every so often to take in views of the coast. If you find yourself here on a foggy day, all the better—what would be bumper weather elsewhere is a bit of magic in Big Sur, as long as you bundle up.



VISIT BIG SUR

Big Sur is a destination in its own right, and if you're traveling more than a couple of hours to get to Carmel in the first place, it's worth extending your trip to dedicate a day, or a few, to the craggy coastline that lies just south. There are places to camp if you're so inclined. But if you're called by luxury lodging, [Ailla Ventana](#) is a Big Sur institution.

The hotel has been here since the '70s, when the producer of *Easy Rider* built it as a retreat for road-trippers and seclusion-seeking movie stars. These days, the property retains its reputation as a low-key hideaway with luxury amenities. Guest rooms are well-appointed and comfortable, and the restaurant, Sur House, is excellent for dinner and has a formidable wine list.

Ailla Ventana is the perfect jumping-off point for adventures on this special stretch of coast: Hit up local favorites like [Big Sur Bakery](#), the [Henry Miller Memorial Library](#), and [Nepenthe](#). (Nepenthe is very popular and doesn't take reservations—come spiritually prepared to wait for a table.) The resort staff can take you for (excellent) guided hikes or point you in the right direction to see the purple-sanded Pfeiffer Beach. And if you doubted for a second that the funky, hippie nature of Big Sur would be lost at a luxury resort, rest assured: You can get an astrology reading, take a seminar in beekeeping, or join a guide for a foraging lesson. Cell reception is basically nonexistent. And one pool remains clothing-optional.

If you're craving an even closer touch with nature but your nature is diametrically opposed to tent pitching and sleeping bags, Ailla Ventana has a small collection of camping tents on the property, where dense forest and marsh/mallow roasting live in harmony with turndown service and custom mattresses.

**Note:** Highway 1 is currently closed due to landslides following heavy winter rain on the California coast, blocking access to Big Sur from Carmel. The road is expected to reopen May 27.

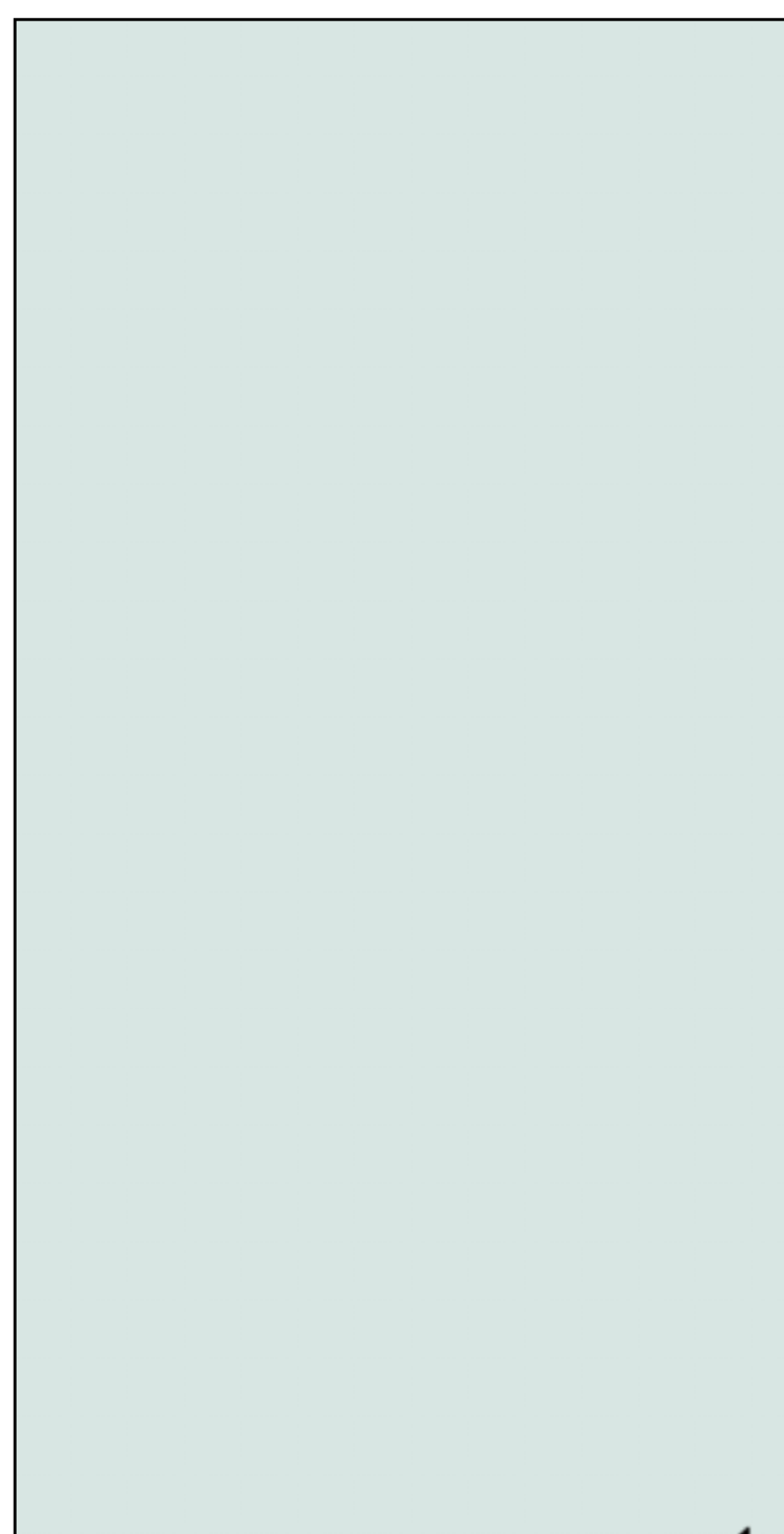
THE GETAWAY SHOP

Related Reading

- [A Coastal California Road Trip](#)
- [5 Luxe Road-Trip Stops on the California Coast](#)
- [Everything You Need to Know to Plan a Weekend in Big Sur](#)

**Shop Travel-Friendly**

- July DAYBREAK WEEKENDER US \$195.00
- ROYCE New York THE TRAVEL NECESSITIES GIFT SET US \$130.00
- Raha VOLUMINOUS TRAVEL DUO US \$19.00
- goop Beauty MICRODERM INSTANT GLOW EXFOLIATOR, 15 ML US \$42.00



**goop your inbox**

Sign up for our newsletter.

Email Address

**SIGN UP**

By clicking "submit," you agree to receive emails from goop and accept our [terms of use](#) and [privacy and cookie policy](#).