

Destination Guides

Camping in Central California

Curl up in a warm sleeping bag among the colossal trunks of redwoods or roast marshmallows over a crackling fire to the sound of nearby crashing waves. The many campsites along California's Central Coast provide a plethora of options for anyone who wants to hike, surf, stroll the beach, ATV, or just escape to the great outdoors for a day or two. Campgrounds and State Parks dot California's Central Coast, from Monterey down to Ventura. The mild coastal weather makes camping an enjoyable possibility, even in the winter months. Big Sur, an immensely popular camping destination, is a palette of red bark and green ferns set against the deep blue ocean. If you're looking for golden sands, beige and olive eucalyptus trees, and pale blue skies, you'll find that beachside splendor at campsites in the Pismo and Santa Barbara area. California State Parks strive to keep the natural beauty of the Central Coast preserved and easily accessible. Be sure to bring layered clothing, since beaches can get chilly as the sun goes down. Surfers will find the waters much colder than Southern California, so a wetsuit is recommended.

Why enclose yourself within hotel walls and lose sight of the apricot clouds at sunset, the graceful tracings of foamy waves on sand, or the sounds of seagull cries buried in the wind? Truly encounter the treasures of the Golden State by camping and sleeping among the colors, smells, and sounds of the area.

Big Sur

Ansel Adams and Edward Weston captured the natural landmarks on film. Jack Kerouac documented the magical region in writing. The Beach Boys even produced an album inspired by poetry on the rugged beauty of the area. It's no surprise why Big Sur inspires so many artists. Cliffs overlook dark rolling waves that explode into white mist where they crash on rocks. The majestic redwoods give tranquil shelter and the red bark adds a warm accent to the scenery. Whales migrate through the area from November to February and can often be spotted from the bluffs. Every campground is adjacent to or a few minutes' drive from popular trailheads with paths that climb to sweeping views of the ocean. The cool and clear Big Sur creek runs through the valley campgrounds where campers can swim and float in inner tubes. The campgrounds at the southern end rest atop bluffs with ocean views. Most campgrounds are first-come, first-serve, but reservations can be made online for Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park and Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park. If you're traveling with your dog, both these State Parks allow dogs on-leash, though they're restricted from many trails or beaches to protect the native wildlife. Here are just a few of the many campgrounds at Big Sur:

Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park: This California State Park has 204 sites for tent camping only, no RV hookups. The sites are tucked between redwoods, conifers, oaks, sycamores, maples, alders, willows, and open meadows. Big Sur Creek runs through the park and the Valley View Trailhead starts from here, leading you to ocean views. Fishing is allowed in season (Nov - Feb). Make campsite reservations online at http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=570.

Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park: This California State Park has only two rustic, hike-in campsites. The park features an 80-foot waterfall pouring from granite cliffs to the ocean, which is accessible by the Overlook Trail. Campsite reservations can be made online at http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=578.

Big Sur Campground and Cabins: This is one of the three private campgrounds in the area. The Big Sur River runs alongside many sites and guests swim and inner tube with the current. The campground also has laundry facilities, store, playground, and a basketball court. Hot showers are available for campers. Sites welcome tent campers, RV hookups are provided, and there are also cabins, tent cabins, and A frames to rent. Check availability at <http://www.bigsurcamp.com/> and call (831) 667-2322.

Riverside Campgrounds and Cabins: This privately owned, 16-acre campground has 45 sites for both RVs and tents. There are also 11 cabins for rent. Just a few minutes' walk from your campsite you can access Big Sur River, the beach, or choose from a selection of hiking trails. You can even receive an on-site professional massage. E-mail reservations@riversidecampground.com or call (831) 667-2414.

Kirk Creek Campground: This campground sits on the bluffs overlooking the ocean 100 feet below. All 34 sites have an ocean view, a picnic table, fire pit, and barbecue. A short trail connects the campground to the beach.

Pismo

Head to your campsite to relax under eucalyptus trees aflutter with Monarch Butterflies after an adrenaline-packed day of riding ATVs on the sand dunes of Pismo Beach. You can even drive your car onto the sand, the only California State Beach that allows this. A wooden pier extends from the beach, held up by a jumble of barnacled wooden pillars. Visitors swim, surf, stroll along the pier, and peruse surf shops in downtown Pismo. Some head to the beach with a bucket and shovel to dig for the famous Pismo Clam, one of the largest types of clams in California that grows up to seven inches. And of course, there are ATV and dune buggy rentals aplenty, only two blocks from the park. The two campgrounds in

Pismo, Oceano Campground and North Beach Campground, both have RV hookups and tent camping. Open and grassy sites sit beneath the natural eucalyptus, complete with picnic tables and grills. All roads and driveways within the campgrounds are paved, and each spot is reasonably distanced from others to provide some privacy. There are flush toilets, sinks, and showers, and several restaurants are only a walk, bike ride, or drive away. The campground provides access to the beach, hiking trails, horseshoe pits, and a nature center. Be sure to book your reservation at least a month ahead of time by calling 1- 800-444-7275.

Santa Barbara and Surrounding Areas

Carpinteria State Park: Wake up to the rumble of the ocean and crawl out your tent into the fresh salty air and the endless blue of sea and sky stretching to the horizon. Explore the alien-like terrain of tide pools, where starfish and crabs wait to be discovered. Carpinteria State Park has three loops with 212 sites for both RVs and tents. Palm trees sprinkled throughout the sites add a bit of privacy to the otherwise lively campground, where you're friendly neighboring campers are never out of sight. The park has flush toilets, sinks, and hot showers, as well as no generator quiet hours which preserve the peace at night for dozing campers. All sites are a short walk to the mile-long beach and tide pools. Make reservations online at http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=599.

Jalama State Beach: An hour drive from Santa Barbara, Jalama Beach is worth the fight for sites in the summer months. The campground is on a first-come, first-served basis, meaning a campsite is not always guaranteed the first morning you try. But it's worth the fight - some sites are so close to the beach you might roll over in your sleep and end up in the waves. The 98 campsites all overlook the ocean, and 29 offer electrical hookups. The campground has hot showers and flushing toilets. Head to the beach to surf, whale watch from November to February, bird watch, or just take in the natural beauty of the beach, sand, and native brush. Fishermen can also catch perch, cabezon, kelp, bass, or halibut along the rock outcroppings. The Jalama Store and Grill offers everything from groceries, fishing bait, and movie rentals, and the Jalama Grill boasts a "World Famous Jalama Burger."

Refugio State Park: Beachside camping at Refugio offers fishing, surf or beach play, and trails that take you through palm tree groves or along the ocean bluffs. The campground is only 20 miles north of Santa Barbara so a trip to town is a nice getaway to your getaway. The campground is freckled with palm trees curving protectively over tents just a few strides away from the Pacific Ocean. Entertainment includes a friendly colony of grabby ground squirrels. Make reservations at http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=603.

Morro Bay State Park: Landmarked by the monstrous pyramid of Morro Rock jutting out of the surf, Morro Bay is a man made bay created by attaching the rock to land. About two miles south of the rock, Morro Bay State Park's campground has 115 sites for both RV and tents. Clusters of eucalyptus trees dapple the campsites with organic designs of shade and increase privacy. Each campsite has a fire pit, picnic table, and food closet. Play a round of golf by the ocean at the 18-hole golf course next door. Stroll to the marina across the street to see the colorful forest of sailboat masts and flashy boats or walk down the road to the Nature Museum for exhibits on the history, oceanography, and geology of the bay. To the south is a natural bird estuary where you can spot native birds and examine the changing terrain with every low and high tide. The area is popular for fishing, surfing, hiking, and sailing. Make reservations at http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=594.

Montana de Oro State Park: This park's name, "Mountain of Gold," comes from the carpet of yellow wildflowers that cover the hills in spring. Hikers explore tranquil trails along meadows where black tail deer bound into sight and lead you to the top of the 1,374 foot Valencia Peak. The Panoramic view at the peak gives a bird's eye perspective of the golden hills and Spooner's Cove Beach. In addition to hiking and beach activity, many visitors to Montana de Oro enjoy horseback riding the equestrian trails. The daredevils looking for a rush of fun often use these trails for mountain biking. Explore streams and valleys, hills and beaches, before heading back to your tent or RV. Reserve a campsite at http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=592.