



**LEFT** Fishing boats and sailboats bob on the water facing Morro Rock as the fog clears. **ABOVE** White pelicans in the bay.



## Getting real in Morro Bay

Take a break (and a kayak) to the Central Coast town just outside San Luis Obispo, where things still feel truly authentic

BY MATTHEW JAFFE | PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS LESCHINSKY

**I'M SITTING IN THE MIDDLE** of Morro Bay in an inch of water, my kayak grounded on a mudflat. Maybe growing up I read too many true-life adventure books, but the prospect of quicksand—if not the body-swallowing variety, then something where I'm left thigh-deep in slime—keeps me from getting out of the kayak and carrying it into deeper water. (Maybe I really should read *The Dangerous Book for Boys*.)

The tide will start rising in about half an hour; however, I have no idea just how much time a bay needs to fill back up. My predicament has an upside: I have a front-row seat to wildlife. Harbor seals swim by in a nearby channel. An otter cracks open a shell, and a great blue heron is on the wing. A white pelican tosses back its bill to swallow a fish.

I hadn't pictured my trip to this Central Coast town quite this way. Then again,

being away from everything was kind of the point. Maybe it's the fishing boats and the long miles of beaches, an atmosphere more hardworking than precious, with just enough distance from the San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles to stay out of either orbit. But whenever I'm in Morro Bay, I feel as though I've gone to a place a bit more authentic than much of the coast.

So I'll skip a side trip to Hearst Castle, 30 miles north, and tastings in the always-

## Southern California Escape



Kayakers set out on a paddling adventure for some on-the-water wildlife-spotting in Morro Bay. **BELOW** A moment of inspiration in nearby Los Osos facing Black Hill.



## 48 hours in Morro Bay

**GETTING THERE** Morro Bay is 244 miles from San Francisco on State 1, and 213 miles from Los Angeles on State 1 via U.S. 101. [sanluisobispo.com](http://sanluisobispo.com) or 800/634-1414

**FRIDAY** Drop your bags at the **Anderson Inn** (from \$259; [andersoninnmorrobay.com](http://andersoninnmorrobay.com) or 805/772-3434) and check out views of Morro Rock from your private balcony. Build a sand dune at **Morro Bay Museum of Natural History** (\$2, ages 16 and under free; 20 State Park Rd.; [ccnha.org](http://ccnha.org) or 805/772-2694), or brag that you hiked a volcano and walk up **Black Hill**. Try the "naked fish" at the restaurant below the hotel, the **Galley Seafood Grill & Bar** (\$\$\$; 893 Embarcadero; 805/772-7777).

**SATURDAY** Pick up a free map at the **Morro Bay Estuary Nature Center** (601 Embarcadero, Ste. 11; [mbnep.org](http://mbnep.org) or 805/772-3834), then head out for a paddle on the bay through **Kayak Horizons** (rentals from \$9 per hour; 551 Embarcadero; [kayakhorizons.com](http://kayakhorizons.com) or 805/772-6444). Picnic at the sand spit, or grab a fish sandwich at the **Bayside Cafe** (\$; 10 State Park Rd.; 805/772-1465).

**SUNDAY** Breakfast with locals at **Top Dog Coffee Bar** (844 Main St.; 805/772-9225), then walk along the boardwalk and catch a glimpse of a "pygmy oak" at the **El Moro Elfin Forest Natural Area** (at the northern end of 16th St., Los Osos; [siostatoparks.com/morro\\_bay/mb\\_elfin.asp](http://siostatoparks.com/morro_bay/mb_elfin.asp) or 805/781-5200). Catch a winged migration at **Sweet Springs Nature Preserve** (free; Fourth St. at Ramona Ave., Los Osos; [morrocoastaudubon.org/sweet.htm](http://morrocoastaudubon.org/sweet.htm) or 805/772-1991).



expanding Paso Robles wine country on the other side of the hills. I'm here for some of California's best autumn wildlife-viewing on a back-to-nature weekend of beach hikes, as well as paddling on a big blue bay—at least when the tide is high.

I look up at Black Hill, a volcanic peak that I had summited yesterday: all of 661 feet. Modest, to be sure, but Black Hill is the place to get your bearings in Morro Bay. The scent of sunbaked sage filled the air as I looked down at channels braiding a

delta of marshes and mudflats that looked like something that original danger-loving dude Huck Finn would light out for. Instead of Big Sur's epic clash of rock and waves, on Morro Bay there's a mutual surrender: Land melts into water, and water gets slurped up by land.

From Black Hill, I headed over to one of the estuary's hidden spots. At the Elfin Forest, poor soil, salt air, and ocean winds have stunted the growth of stands of California live oaks. Some no more than 4 feet tall, these natural bonsai spread along the ground, all coiling limbs washed in broken, golden light. From there, it was back to the Embarcadero, Morro Bay's harborfront strand of shops and seafood joints for seasonal sand dabs and Morro Rock views from the balcony of a new boutique hotel. Gritty authenticity is great, but so too are high thread counts.

All that was yesterday, and right now I have to get unstuck. I'm restless, so I start rocking the kayak while pushing off like I'm punting on the Thames. Nothing. Then I'm moving, briefly feeling a sensation of floating as the water deepens. Four to 5 inches is all I need and I'm finally free, paddling into the bay. There's a spot called Shark Inlet; now that sounds good and dangerous.