

On the Central Coast, a slough of sights

Moss Landing is the jumping-off-point for boat tours of a wetland research reserve, with its wealth of marine life.

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Moss Landing, Calif. — The setting sun streaked the sky red above the sand dunes by the harbor. It was Friday in this fishing village about 25 miles south of Santa Cruz. Although warmed by dinner and wine from Phil's Fish Market & Eatery, we still needed sweatshirts in the crisp air of dusk. Overhead, huge flocks of pelicans circled. They traveled in a sweeping arc over Monterey Bay until, by some unspoken agreement, they descended to low rock pilings where seemingly thousands had already retired for the night.

Fishing trawlers and gill-net boats were silhouetted in the harbor, their engines still. Beyond lay the mouth of Elkhorn Slough, a salt-marsh wetland that stretches across more than 4,000 acres and supports almost 300 species of resident and migratory birds. About 1,440 of those acres constitute the Elkhorn Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve, one of only 25 such reserves in the country.

As we turned toward our car, my partner, Leah, took hold of my arm. She said the only place she had seen as many birds was the Galapagos. How, she asked, had I thought to come here?

We have driven up and down the state innumerable times, stopping at can't-miss places like the Santa Cruz boardwalk, the Monterey Bay Aquarium and Hearst Castle and wondering about turnoffs along the way. Moss Landing and Elkhorn Slough promised something out of the ordinary: a funky seaside town and the opportunity to see wildlife in the wetlands.



FAUNA FEATURED: Elkhorn Slough Safari offers two-hour pontoon boat tours for viewing the marine mammals and birds that feed on smaller organisms in the salt marsh. Numerous otters and harbor seals are among the resident species. *Photographs by Ann Dwyer for The Times*

Last month we flew into San Jose on a Friday morning, rented a car and drove south, first down Highway 17, then Highway 1. We stopped for lunch in Capitola at Gayle's, which has a nice retro ambience: Formica tables and countertops, curtains made from vintage tablecloths. We carried our order -- a spicy Texas barbecued chicken sandwich, turkey on focaccia and fruit salad -- to the patio and relaxed in the sun.

Our next stop was neighboring Aptos and Sand Rock Farm, a B&B; run by the mother-daughter team of Kris and Lynn Sheehan. Its Web site had drawn our attention because it listed Lynn's credits as a chef, including stints at the respected Bay Area restaurants Postrio, Citron, Rubicon and Mecca.

When we pulled into the gravel driveway of Sand Rock Farm, we could not believe our good luck. Shaded by redwoods and live oaks, the two-story, white-clapboard farmhouse was larger and more picturesque than we expected: 10 acres of quiet gardens and woodland, an inviting redwood deck and an enclosed wraparound porch.

Kris recounted the history of the property while showing us around. Dr. August Liliencrantz, an Oakland surgeon, built a small cottage, barn and vineyard on 1,000 acres he purchased from his friend Claus Spreckels, the sugar baron. Liliencrantz's son later took over the property, built a larger farmhouse in 1910 and, with Prohibition looming, shut down the wine operation and moved into cattle ranching. By the time the Sheehans bought the farmhouse two years ago, it had fallen into disrepair, requiring a year of renovation.

The results are impressive. Light streams through beveled glass windows, authentic Roseville and Rookwood pottery sits atop the curly redwood mantel, and a spinet piano graces the living room.

The dining room table seats 18. It was a pleasure to wander the home, admiring details like the Wedgewood stove in the kitchen and the grandfather clock in a hallway.

We stayed in a corner room upstairs called Eva's Garden, which overlooks a rose garden. The room had a half-poster queen bed, a gabled ceiling and a private bathroom with two-person Jacuzzi tub.

It was hard to leave, but we were itching to see Moss Landing, which awaited 15 minutes south. We caught the weekly 4 p.m. open house at the Moss Landing Marine Laboratories, a graduate school run by the California State University system. A lecturer discussed recent efforts to save leatherback turtles, and in the hallway we found museum-quality displays about the Monterey Bay ecosystem.



Nearby, happy hour was in full swing at Charlie Moss's Restaurant, where platters of calamari, pizza and fried clams covered a table. Here we learned that the restaurant's namesake was a sea captain who founded the town in 1853.

The main drag, Moss Landing Road, curves past antique stores, warehouses and brightly painted cafes, ending at Phil's Fish Market, a favorite with locals. They took seats on the heated patio and worked their way through huge platters of lobster and linguine. We ordered Chardonnay, grilled ahi tuna, artichokes stuffed with Dungeness crab and a Greek salad that arrived piled with bay shrimp -- all simple, hearty and delicious.

Breakfast the next morning at the B&B; was served family style in the dining room. Kris served roasted rosemary potatoes and frittata with broccoli, basil and sun-dried tomatoes. Two of the four other couples at the table had driven from Long Beach to tour a winery. The third couple came for a wedding, and the fourth simply wanted a weekend away from the kids. The highlight of our day, we explained, was to be a tour of Elkhorn Slough.

The slough by pontoon

Several companies offer tours of the wetlands by boat or kayak. (Visit www.monterey-bay.net/ml for a listing.) I made reservations with Elkhorn Slough Safari for a two-hour pontoon tour, \$26 per person. Owner Yohn Gideon piloted the boat as our naturalist, Heather Edwards, described the habitat. She passed out counters so we could track species for the Audubon Society and Moss Landing Marine Laboratories.

Elkhorn Slough, she explained, is 700 feet across at its widest point. Eight feet of water sits atop 25 feet of mud deposits. Worms, crabs, shrimp and clams thrive here, attracting the birds and mammals that feed on them.

It wasn't long before we saw a sea otter and its pup dancing in the water, their bodies entwined. Another otter appeared on its back with a large mollusk on its chest and its paws clutching a stone -- the otter's clam opener.

"Otters use tools," Heather said. "They might keep a special rock for an hour, a week or a lifetime. They have pockets near their underarms where they can store it when they swim."

We were close enough to see the animal's whiskered face. Heather explained that otters, unlike other marine mammals, don't have lots of blubber. They seem so playful spinning around in the water, but they're really working to stay warm.

As we sailed up the slough, Yohn and Heather called out the species of birds we passed. Grebes and marbled godwits fluttered in the air. A long-billed curlew almost blended with the shoreline. A peregrine falcon circled high above. By the time we returned, the count included a cormorant, four great egrets, four snowy egrets, a blue heron, nine otters and 59 harbor seals.

Back in Moss Landing, Leah and I did some more counting: 20-plus antique and collectible stores scattered around the harbor. Also nearby: an interpretive center and hiking trails in the foothills above the slough. For \$5 per person, we parked there and had the mountains to ourselves.

The night ended at the Whole Enchilada, a bright, tropically colored restaurant. The chicken tamales were so-so, but the cucumber margaritas, baked mussels with cheese and garlic, and grilled salmon with a delicious cilantro cream sauce more than made up for that.

Even better was breakfast Sunday morning at Sand Rock Farm: baked French toast that looked more like a brioche, served with blueberry-infused syrup and covered with fresh peaches. It could have been from the cover of Gourmet.

As we drove back to the airport, heeding the rigid white lines of the highway, what swam through our minds was the memory of sea otters, twirling like children at play in the open water.

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(BEGIN TEXT OF INFOBOX)

Budget for two

Actual expenses for this trip:

Air fare

Round trip, LAX-San Jose \$198.00

Car rental

Compact, three days \$69.47

Sand Rock Farm

Two nights, including tax \$407.00

Lunch

Gayle's \$22.09

Dinner

Phil's Fish Market \$28.74

Boat tour

Elkhorn Slough Safari \$52.00

Dinner and drinks

The Whole Enchilada \$55.67

Other food, drink \$8.16

Parking, gas, permit \$12.00

Final tab \$853.13

CONTACTS:

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Elkhorn Slough Safari, P.O. Box 570, Moss Landing, CA 95039; (831) 633-5555, www.elkhornslough.com.