

TRAVEL

Decisions, decisions on California's coastal highway

BY JUDITH DONER BERNE
SPECIAL WRITER

I voted for the 17-Mile-Drive around the Monterey Peninsula. My husband and 20-something daughter voted for the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

After driving down from San Francisco the day before, we really had just the morning in the area if we were to make our 3:15 p.m. tour at Hearst Castle, a couple of hours down the coast. Thus the need for a decision.

Actually decisions are a big part of the famous drive between San Francisco and Los Angeles. Where to spend time. Where to stop and eat. Where to stay overnight. For example, we had our choice between staying in Carmel and Monterey. Since all of us had been to Carmel and none to Monterey, that was easy.

We actually found Monterey more interesting. Once the capital of California, its attractions are based in history rather than on studied quaintness. Fisherman's Wharf, with its attractive assortment of restaurants and shops, was once the center of the fishing and whaling industries. Cannery Row, six blocks of harbor-front which John Steinbeck celebrated in two novels, once was home to fish-packing plants that processed sardines from Monterey Bay.

Then there's the aquarium. Now I'm not an aquarium aficionado. But I have been in some famous ones including in Boston, Chicago and Sydney. But this is the one I liked best. Come to find it's the largest in the U.S. And it's certainly the only one I've been in that featured sardines. I think differently whenever I open a can of sardines now that I've seen hundreds of the small, silvery fish swimming round and round me.

Sardines and 350,000 specimens of the sea life that actually

can be found in Monterey Bay make up this indoor-outdoor sea world. Sea otters from the open bay swim right into an aquarium pool. But what I liked best were the displays of jelly fish moving behind colored glass panels in a kind of "live" art work enhanced by dimmed lights and meditative music.

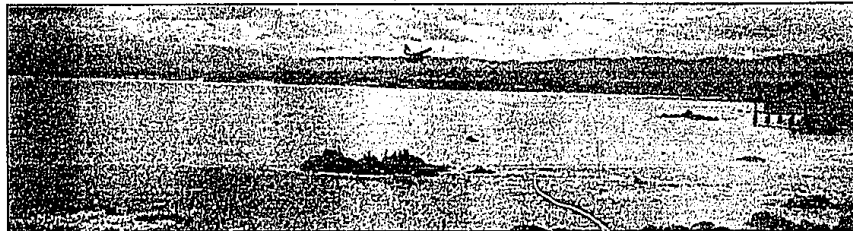
El Nino wrought our trip's only disappointment. The huge mud slides we saw on the news back home washing away mountain-side homes had also washed out Route 1 between the Monterey Peninsula almost all the way to Hearst Castle. So we missed Big Sur and the most spectacular part of the drive.

Instead, we went through Salinas, Steinbeck's birthplace, and the gateway to "America's Salad Bowl," - the Salinas Valley, where we soon picked up Highway 101. I think differently about salad these days, having driven through 60 miles of vegetable farms where much of the nation's lettuce, tomatoes and garlic are produced.

Time constraints had us rolling right by Caswellville, the artichoke capital, where many years before we had stopped and enjoyed an artichoke roll at what in other communities might have been a hot dog stand. With El Nino especially hard on this year's artichoke crop, perhaps it had been converted to hot dogs.

Wineries and horse farms greeted us in the Paso Robles area, as we had to actually go further south than San Simeon in order to rejoin Route 1 and reach Hearst Castle.

Yes, Hearst Castle, the former playground, museum and zoological park of media tycoon William Randolph Hearst, is as spectacular as everyone says. We found it very informative to look up the Hearst Castle web site on the Internet, which gave a good description of the subject matter,



Monterey Bay: This is a view from the aquarium.

length and cost of the four tours offered. Then we booked the two we wanted.

That afternoon, we took the general tour, of the pools and a bit of the gardens, a guest house and the first floor rooms of Casa Grande, where Hearst and his movie star girlfriend, Marion Davies, entertained the rich and famous.

It made our rather rustic, although beach-front, motel where we stayed for the night look even more rustic. Next time I would check out the recommendations in nearby Cambria, which has more charm. The next morning, we toured Casa Grande's upper floors - as well as the kitchen.

The Hearst Castle has been celebrating 40 years of being open to the public this year. The heirs to the Hearst fortune donated the castle and a portion of the surrounding acreage to the state of California - after no buyer could be found.

What I found most astounding was that Hearst didn't just collect thousands of paintings, pieces of sculpture and furnishings. Many of the doors, walls

and ceilings of Casa Grande and the guest houses were imported from churches and castles around the world. It's also interesting that the architect he chose for the entire project was back in 1919 was a woman, Julia Morgan.

As we headed south to L.A., we enjoyed the solitude of the dunes and beach overlooking Morro Rock and lunch in bustling San Luis Obispo, where we did a drive-by of the mission. Everyone told us to stop at the nearby infamous Madonna Inn, but I found it a spoof of Americana that I could have done without.

Pismo Beach not only hosts an eight-mile-long beach but probably eight miles of mobile home parks. We saw strawberry fields forever somewhere south of Pismo; then it was through the Lompac Valley, a world-class producer of flower seeds. Near the renowned Vandenberg Air Force Base, we passed the appropriately named "Spaceport Inn."

By late afternoon, we were ready to be enchanted by Santa Barbara - and we were. Starting at Old Mission Santa Barbara, we loved the art, architecture



Solitude: Judith Berne enjoyed the quiet privacy of the dunes and beach at Morro Rock in Morro Bay.

and landscaping of what is reportedly the most visited mission in the state.

Most of the art is imported from Mexico and South America, but three stone statues - one depicting St. Barbara and the others the virtues of faith and charity - were carved by a mission Indian from pictures in a book. The chapel itself is painted in the warm, deep-hued colors of the southwest.

Stately palm trees line the ocean-front street where we

parked our car and headed for a walk on the beach and no-frills pier. This seaside university town with its graceful theater, regional art museum and preserved adobe deserved more time than we gave it.

Decisions, decisions. We headed on to L.A.

Judith Doner Berne, a West Bloomfield resident, is former managing editor of the Eccentric Newspapers. Now that she has time to travel, she is a frequent contributor to this section.

GREAT ESCAPES

Great Escapes features various travel news items. Send news leads to Hugh Gallagher, assistant managing editor, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers Inc., 30251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, MI 48150, or fax them to (313) 591-7270.

FAMILY SEARCH

The historic Raymond House Inn in Port Sanilac is offering guests a chance to search their family histories.

All guests who stay at the 128-year-old bed and breakfast Sunday through Thursday during the 1998 season will, if they choose, receive a personal genealogical consultation, including details as to how to begin and where to look to discover those elusive past generations, even how to enlist the internet.

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Full sail: The dramatic sight of tall ships in full sail will take place July 25-27 in South Haven.

TALL SHIPS

Tickets to the South Haven Tall Ships Rendezvous, possibly the largest gathering of Tall Ships on Lake Michigan since the nation's Bicentennial, are now available.

The South Haven Tall Ships Rendezvous, which is part of the American Sail Training Association's Great Lakes Tall Ships Race and Regatta, is scheduled through July 28. Eight tall ships

are scheduled to arrive in South Haven's harbor, including the America, a re-creation of the 1851 yacht for which competitive sailings' most coveted prize was named, and the brig Niagara, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's reconstruction of the famous War of 1812 ship.

The ships will be open to the public for boarding 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday-Monday, July 26-27. Tickets are \$10 per day for

adults and are required to board the vessels. Three-day passes for \$25 are also available. Admission for children under 12

accompanying by an adult is free. For information and a brochure, call the South Haven/Van Buren County

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