

California Dreaming | HuffPost

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There is so much to do in California, it's no wonder why so many people make it their summer vacation destination. The challenge lies in just trying to decide where to go in this great state! Everyone knows the three big cities, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego, but you may want to consider some of the smaller cities that really represent the iconic California beach vibe. So, with the help of some other awesome travelers, I'm taking you on a drive down the California coast, but we'll jump over to a famous hot spot in the desert too!

So, without further ado, I bring you: 5 Sunny California cities you should definitely not miss.

[Monterey / Cannery Row](#)



Let's start in Northern California just south of San Francisco. California girl [Kim Tracy Prince](#) takes us to Monterey, home to the Monterey Bay Aquarium, the famous scenic 17-mile drive, and a popular area known as Cannery Row. To enjoy a day at the beach, head to [Lover's Point Park](#), a calm beach for young children with crystal blue waters, a spacious green park, and a large rocky outcropping perfect for climbing. A great way for an active family to see the sights is to rent some equipment from [Adventures by the Sea](#) and either paddle around the bay or ride around town on bikes. There is also more fun to be had at the Monterey Mirror Maze and Dennis the Menace Park, which has a zip line!

Cannery Row is not short on places to eat, but three favorites are the The Fish Hopper, which is perched on the far end of Steinbeck Plaza and Schooner's Coastal Kitchen and Bar for a local "farm to fork and sea to table" menu. If you're looking to grab a burger and a beer then look no further than [Cannery Row Brewing Company](#).

[More Monterey City Gems](#)

[Pismo Beach](#)



Take it from traveling mom [Claudia Laroye](#) that Pismo Beach is a California seaside town not to be missed! Start your day at the [Honeymoon Cafe](#), a locals' favorite for a variety of sweet and savory breakfasts that aim to please, then soak up the California coastline on the beach near the [Pismo Beach Pier](#) and grab some clam chowder at [Splash Cafe](#). Sections of Pismo Beach offer the only drive-on beach in California; perfect and popular with dune buggy enthusiasts. Need to spend the night? Check in at the [The Dolphin Bay Resort](#), a great property that has a pool with a nice view of the pacific ocean. The one and two bedroom suites come with full kitchens and patios,

perfect for traveling families. Be sure to take advantage of the resort's walking trail along the cliffs which offers gorgeous sunset views of the coastline. For dinner you'll want to make a reservation at the popular [Ventana Grill](#), where you can bring your own bottle of wine and take in a gorgeous California sunset.

[More Pismo Beach City Gems](#)

[Santa Barbara](#)



Local mom of three wild boys, [Kate Bayless](#) knows the best places for family fun in Santa Barbara. She highly recommends [Kids World at Alameda Park](#) and claims it's the best park in Santa Barbara. With a large wooden structure that has something for all ages, her boys are never bored and can spend hours here. This park is just two blocks away from gelato at a place called Spoon! [The Santa Barbara Zoo](#) is another family favorite, it's the perfect size to see everything, but not so big your kids start to complain! One of the most popular things to do is slide down the ant hill on a piece of cardboard in the Kallman Family Play Area. Kids love it.

If you make a stop at [Goleta Butterfly Grove](#) not only will you spot beautiful butterflies but you can take a small hike along the mesa bluffs for a great view of the pacific ocean.

Hungry yet? [The Lark](#) is a must-eat stop if you're exploring the Funk Zone in Santa Barbara! Open only for dinner, it's a delicious addition to the downtown dining scene. Kate highly recommends the Brussel Sprouts appetizer or the Smoked Pork Belly!

[More Santa Barbara City Gems](#)

[Palm Springs](#)



According to [Claudia Laroye](#), Palm Springs is a happening little desert town that can get packed with families from the greater Los Angeles area in the summertime. They're sure not escaping the heat, but Palm Springs is an easy getaway with posh hotels and plenty of pools! Looking for luxury and relaxation? Check out [La Quinta Resort](#). The property boasts 41 pools, private haciendas, villas, fitness facilities, kids' club, and professional tennis courts. Another great family resort in Palm Springs is Rancho Las Palmas, known for their lazy river, waterslides, and kids' splash pads. Don't worry, there are also a few things to do to escape the desert heat. Aviation fans and history buffs of all ages will enjoy a day spent exploring the impressive [Palm Springs Air Museum](#). The Museum houses an extensive collection of World War II airplanes, interpretive historical information and displays that bring the past to life. Take the tram to the top of [Mount San Jacinto](#). It's cool at the top - around 5°C or 41°F - so be sure to pack a jacket. The views of the Coachella Valley are incredible. There is a leisurely 1.5 mile Desert Trail loop hike that is beautiful and quiet; a nice place to cool off and escape the busyness of Palm Springs.

[More Palms Springs City Gems](#)

[Carlsbad / Encinitas](#)



Local mom [Christine Fox](#) says you should start your day at the [Lofty Bean Coffee Bar](#) which is just steps from Moonlight Beach. They also offer a full breakfast menu and have a variety of delicious pastries. It can get busy, but the food is well worth the wait in line. The beaches here can get crowded in the summer so she recommends heading to [South Ponto](#), which is a great beach for families with gentle waves and plenty of space for everyone. Most stay for the day and into the night, making campfires for roasting hot dogs and s'mores. To get out on the water head to the [Carlsbad Lagoon](#) where you can rent stand up paddle boards, kayaks, and jet skis. Sometimes they even have water trampolines out and the kids have a blast! If you're looking for the best fish taco in town, you'll find it at [Encinitas Fish Shop](#). Try the TKO fish taco and the shrimp ceviche. It's also a very kid-friendly spot with some non-fish items on the menu.

[More Carlsbad/Encinitas City Gems](#)

These five California cities might not be the biggest or the most well known, but bigger doesn't always mean better. Smaller cities offer plenty to see and do with a variety of family friendly activities. If you are planning to visit California this Summer take a look at my [California Dreaming notemap on Findery](#) for even more city gems you should be sure not to miss!

Post written and curated by Andrea Fellman of [Wanderlust Living](#). Follow [Andrea's travel adventures on Findery](#).