

City Gems: Exploring Cannery Row in Monterey

Jenna & Lisa



Weekend in Cannery Row

If you aren't already familiar with the area, [Cannery Row](#) is a street that runs parallel to the coastline of Monterey Bay in the middle of California, made famous by American author John Steinbeck, who captured the lives of workers and residents who worked in the fish canneries that gave the area its name. Once the area was fished out, the bay was made into a marine sanctuary, but the canneries remained.

Following a period of revitalization, this little section of Monterey now boasts beautiful hotels, restaurants, shopping and other activities, as well as opportunities to explore the water and coastline. Some of the original canneries are still standing, and you can see and even walk in the iconic "crossover" bridges that joined the canneries to the old shipping houses across the street.

Just an hour and a half drive from San Jose airport, Monterey is also home to [Monterey Bay Aquarium](#), the famous scenic [17-Mile Drive](#), and a marine sanctuary for sea otters, elephant seals, sea lions, and many species of birds. The area enjoys a temperate climate, so it's a perfect place to bring your family during the summer for a road trip stop or a final destination.

**Where to STAY**

[The Victorian Inn](#) is located just blocks up the hill from Cannery Row itself, and the higher floors offer views above the rooftops to Monterey Bay. Centered around a large Victorian home built in 1907, the decor of the inn reflects the style of the period. Rooms are spacious and comfortable and each one has a gas fireplace which is nice when it gets chilly at night. There's free continental breakfast and daily wine receptions in the lobby, complimentary in-room internet, and in-room massages if you need one. There's no pool at this hotel, so your kids will have to get their swimming fix in the ocean.

**Monterey Bay Inn**

A little bit more upscale for adult travelers, the boutique [Monterey Bay Inn](#) is perched above the ocean at the southeast end of Cannery Row, adjacent to San Carlos park and beach. Rooms have sleek updated decor and each has a small balcony overlooking the coast – binoculars are provided, too. The bathrooms have double sinks, private toilets, and large showers. With two hot tubs on site, the hotel also provides comfy spa robes ready for you in the closet when you arrive. In-room breakfast is complimentary, as long as you hang your order on the door by midnight.

**Where to PLAY**

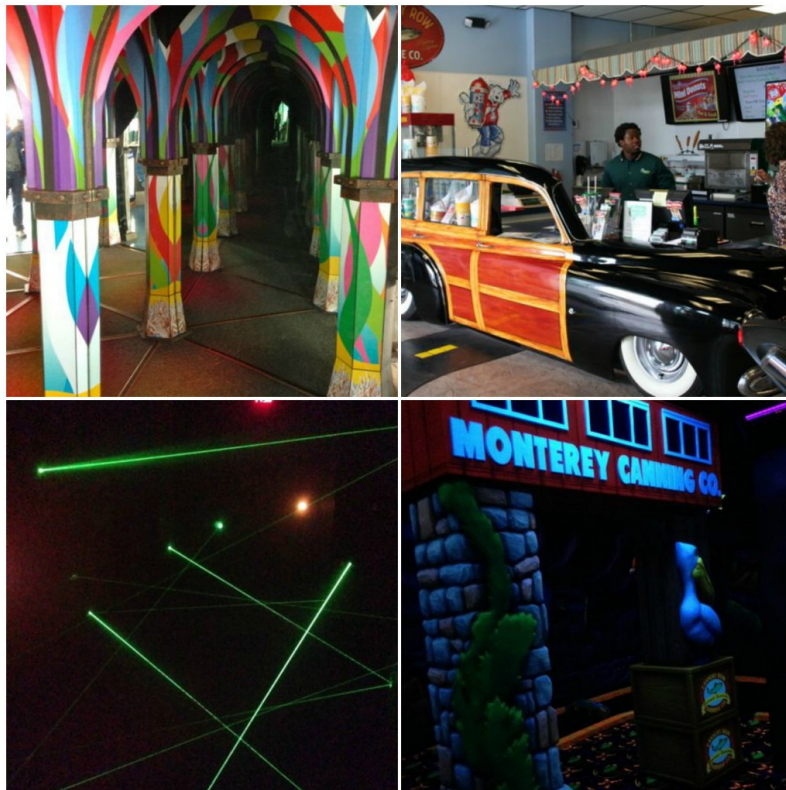
When at Cannery Row you'll definitely want to visit the oceanside. A great way for an active family to see the sights and get some exercise is to rent some equipment from [Adventures by the Sea](#) and either paddle around the bay or ride around town. I rented an adult-sized cruiser for maximum comfort (braking by pedaling backwards, which I haven't done in decades, took some re-learning) and there are also two-person surreys available to rent in three locations along the coast.

The recreational trail that runs 18-miles along the Monterey Bay coast was once a rail line, and you will even see old railroad crossing signs still standing as monuments to an earlier era. In fact, there is an old train car that is now parked right on the trail that is now a bookstore.



There are many spots to stop and run around and take in the natural beauty, and Lover's Point Park is a perfect one: a calm beach for young children with crystal blue waters, a spacious green park, a large rocky outcropping perfect for climbing, and a restaurant for dinner

at the end of your day.



Because of the temperate seaside climate, mornings can be foggy or even drizzly in the area, so some indoor activities might be good to have in your back pocket. The aquarium is an obvious choice but if you want to avoid summer crowds, check these out. [Monterey Mirror Maze](#), Lazer Challenge, and Highway 1 Black Light Mini Golf are all within feet of each other right on Cannery Row. Set up like a small Chuck E. Cheese minus the animatronic cartoon characters, these attractions let kids run amok while providing entertainment, as long as they have the tokens! The mirror maze feels like an extended creep inside a fun house, and the lazer challenge can be tough for the awkward adult (okay, me) but still fun.

On the way into the Cannery Row area as you approach from the airport, you'll pass by El Estero Lake and a colorful children's play area named after Dennis the Menace – his creator donated much of the money that built this park. [Dennis the Menace park](#) is no ordinary park. It has a hedge maze, a climbing wall, an old steam engine, a zip line, and a giant wiggly slide. In the surrounding complex you can rent a paddle boat to cruise around the lake.



Where to EAT

Almost every restaurant at Cannery Row has a spectacular view of the water so I'll just go in order of where I ate! [Schooner's Coastal Kitchen & Bar](#) is a full-service restaurant located in the Monterey Plaza Hotel, a spacious throwback in the classic grand hotel style. Local

food is the star of the “farm to fork, sea to table” menu, and the locally grown artichokes make a great appetizer.

Servers will kindly suggest a perfect local wine to go with your meal: my grilled scallops, served over etouffee and brown rice risotto, went perfectly with the crisp and fruity Carmel Road “unoaked” Chardonnay. Our party tried several desserts and the standout was the unusual butterscotch banana pudding with housemade “Nilla” wafers. Every table looks out over the water. Before or after your dinner, stroll the patio or enjoy a cocktail by the modern fire pit. Schooner’s is open for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.



The Fish Hopper

[The Fish Hopper](#), open for lunch or dinner, is perched on the far end of Steinbeck Plaza, where a monument to the historical figures that made Cannery Row famous claims center stage. You can stand outside in line to just grab a cup of their rich and creamy clam chowder to go, or enjoy a glass of white peach sangria in the bar before going out to the deck to enjoy a meal. Given where you are dining, right above the waters that supplied fish to the entire world at one time, you'll probably want to try some seafood, but there are plenty of meat and vegetarian options too.

For lunch, I had a poached pear salad with seared scallops, a perfect light dish with just enough protein to keep me fueled for more walking around this colorful town. Paired with another local wine, a Blackstone Sauvignon Blanc, it was perfect. The kids' menu includes some nice choices like grilled chicken and fish & chips along with the usual suspects of burgers and fries.

**Bubba Gump Shrimp Company**

Great for families with kids who don't like to be quiet or necessarily sit still at the table, the well-known [Bubba Gump Shrimp Company](#) is full of things to see and touch, all in homage to the award-winning movie "Forrest Gump." Naturally, one orders the shrimp. To keep it real I had Mama Blue's Southern Charmed Fried Shrimp with French fries (and stole my dining companion's remoulade dip), and I paired it with a signature cocktail, Tennessee tea (iced tea with Jack Daniels served in a pedestal Mason jar glass). Mama's Bread Pudding was the favorite dessert, and the kids' menu has popcorn shrimp on it. The servers make it fun by grilling you with Forrest Gump-related trivia. Our table was tough to stump.



Taking one for the team

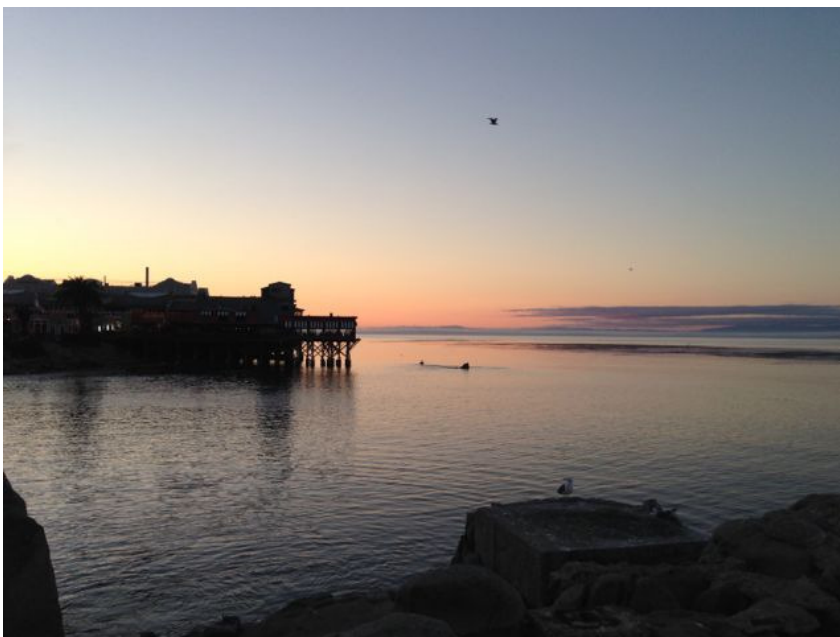
This isn't just another tourist trap – it was the very first location of this restaurant, so it's worth checking out the water's edge view, the gift shop, and the kitschy photo op – put yourself in Gump's shoes.



Cannery Row Brewing Company

My favorite of the restaurants we tried was [Cannery Row Brewing Company](#), which is one block up the hill from the main drag. Once a popular barbecue joint, CRBC has preserved its original smoking oven and still serves smoked barbecue wings – which are pretty spicy and delicious. The restaurant has an extensive beer list, although none are brewed on site, and a tasting flight includes a surprisingly ordinary choice of Sam Adams' cider. Still, the Seadog Blueberry wheat ale and the Youngs & Co. Double Chocolate stout made it eclectic enough. But this is a post about family travel, so for the kids in the house, CRBC has an open, chill vibe that makes it great for dining with your children.

Outdoor seating includes a large round fire pit if your kids are old enough to be trusted not to throw themselves into the flames, and room to move and spread out. There is a children's menu but it's not on the website – it has a long list of choices including PB&J and chicken noodle soup. Overall, the food is satisfying and unique. In fact, the restaurant's tasty giant pretzel has been featured on the Food Network show *Diners, Drive-in's, and Dives* (although I wouldn't characterize CRBC as any of the three). The cheddar bacon biscuits with chipotle-maple butter are a must-try, and the burgers are juicy and delicious, and customizable.



For a splurge – come on, you're on vacation – you must visit [The Chart House](#) at the southeast end of Cannery Row for a luxurious dinner.

This location of the small chain of fine dining restaurants is true to its waterside nature here in Monterey Bay – a seat at the best table in the house feels like you are suspended over the ocean itself, and affords a prime view of the stunning sunsets here. The service is impeccable and the food lives up to the Chart House tradition. A trio of flavored hummus comes with plantain chips and pita bread.



One dining companion declared the coconut shrimp the best she'd had in the area – and she had sampled it almost everywhere we ate. The salad bar was a popular option for this party. You can choose it as your entree or as an addition to a main meal. If you've had enough seafood during your seaside stay, the Chart House filet mignon will be a nice counterpoint. Served with mashed potatoes or steamed fresh vegetables, it's decadent and delicious. Desserts include the signature lava cake, which at our meal came out overcooked (but still chocolatey).



Where to TREAT

Shopping and sightseeing up and down Cannery Row can take a long time because there is so much to see and do and buy. The olive oils and balsamic vinegars at [Monterey's Tasty Olive Bar](#) are sourced from all over the world and you can taste them before you purchase. Gifts and body care items at [La Dolce Vita](#) in Steinbeck Plaza make great souvenirs for the adults in your life. And candy stores abound – inside the Monterey Canning Company building, The Candy Factory makes their chocolate covered bacon right there in-house! (Only one sample of fudge per person, be warned.)



To take a load off, enjoy the endlessly beautiful water view, and indulge in an old-timey treat, visit the [Ghirardelli Chocolate & Ice Cream Shop](#). Resistance is futile, really, since the aroma of baking waffle cones pulls you in as you pass by the entrance. The ice cream itself is delicious but the combination sundaes, like the sea salt and caramel sundae topped with a truly remarkable fresh whipped cream, will make you battle for the last bite, if you're sharing at all.

Have you been to Monterey or Cannery Row? DO you have a favorite I missed?

Disclosure: I enjoyed most of the above attractions and restaurants as a guest of the Cannery Row Company. All opinions (and full tummy) are my own.