

exploring

Six Beaches on Monterey Bay Neil Wiley

You can walk twenty-one miles on sandy beaches next to one of the deepest submarine canyons in the world—all the way from the Monterey County line to Wharf #2 in downtown Monterey. I'm not sure you would want to walk that far, but it's possible through connections via six state parks and beaches.

Perhaps a better choice is to pick the beach that fits you. Some require a long walk to the ocean. Others entail a long drive. Some offer solitude and wildlife. One provides an urban environment with herds of people. All are free.

Most are open to fishing, but only one is recommended for swimming. All are open for day use at no charge, but none allow camping. Horses are welcome at several beaches, but one has the best equestrian facilities. Speaking of facilities, none of the parks have running water or clean bathrooms. And speaking of animals, dogs are not allowed at most beaches.

All these beaches have sandy dunes, but some offer better views, allow climbing, or cover more area. The Monterey dunes include five types of geologic landforms: beach sand, unstabilized active dunes, geologically younger and older stabilized dunes, and dissected uplands.

They support many kinds of plant life, including ice plant, which looks beautiful and keeps the dunes from blowing away. Even so, park officials want to remove ice plant because it is invasive and non-native.

Although it is possible to see harbor seals and California sea lions hauling out on any beach, brassy gulls looking for handouts, and flocks of pelicans flying by, the trails belong to lizards and ground squirrels.

I sampled these six beaches in July. Here are my impressions.

Zmudowski State Beach is the Monterey beach closest to the Santa Cruz Mountains. Drive south on Highway 1. A short distance past the Monterey County line, watch for a road sign on the right for Struve Road. (Your GPS may give you another street name, but you should end up on Giberson Road.) Follow a dirt road around a checkerboard of green fields. About the time you feel lost, the road turns toward the beach. At the end of the road is a small,



sandy parking lot. (Don't drive in too far. The sand is soft and deep.)

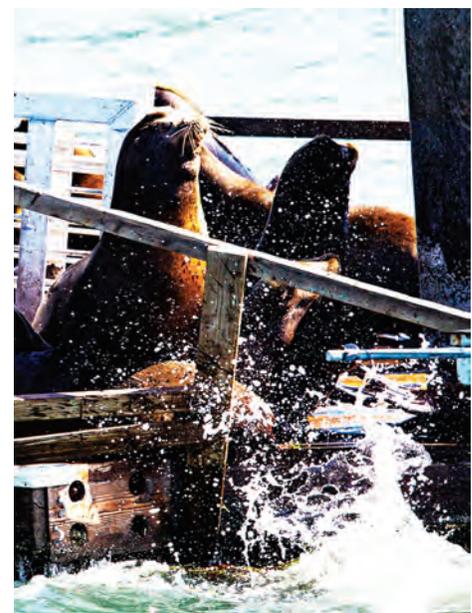
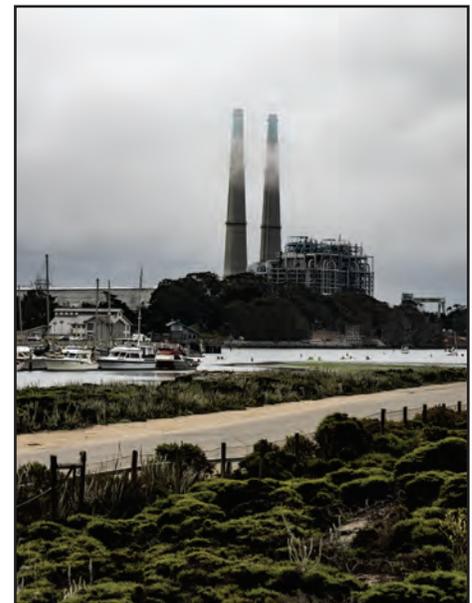
I climbed a small dune to reach the beach. I saw a few fishermen. Some were pole fishing, but one man far out from the shore was using a basket and spear. Fishermen can catch perch, kingfish, sole, flounder, halibut, bocaccio, jacksmelt, lingcod, cabezon, salmon, steelhead, and the occasional rockfish.

While popular for fishing, bird watching, and horseback riding, the dangerous rip currents, frigid water, and deep offshore drop-offs make swimming and surfing hazardous.

What I liked most about Zmudowski was the relative solitude. You hear the ocean and the occasional cry of a seabird. It is a good place to escape people and think deep thoughts. No dogs. No camping.

Moss Landing State Beach is the next beach to the south on Highway 1. Turn right on Jetty Road, just before the bridge and power plant. You can park on a little strip of land between the ocean and a small inlet. It's not much of a beach, but it's a good place to view wildlife. You may see seals, sea lions, otters, and many birds. You may also see kayakers, fishing boats, and sailboats as they enter and leave Moss Landing. This is also the kayakers' entrance into the Elkhorn Slough, an even better place to see wildlife. To drive to Elkhorn Slough, turn left on Dolan Road, just beyond the power plant, and left again at Elkhorn Road.

No dogs, swimming, fires, drones, or camping. Horses are permitted along designated routes on wet sand beaches. Do not disturb nesting Western snowy plovers.





Marina State Beach has several entrances. I found two. Travel south on Highway 1, then turn right on Reservation Drive. You should find a preserve entrance sign at Lake Street. Limited parking is available. The one trail to the beach goes straight up a big dune. Behind that is an even bigger dune. It's a good place to take pictures of the ocean view.

To find a second entrance, continue left on the same road for a short distance. Take the trail up a smaller dune and to the beach.

The high dunes and strong prevailing winds of Marina State Beach are perfect for hang-gliding, kite flying, and radio-controlled gliders. A launch platform is available for rated pilots. If you want information, call 831-649-2836.



sand below the high tide line is somewhat flat, making it less threatening to the horse (and perhaps the rider). I saw several equestrians enjoying rides along the ocean.

This is a good place to see birds, including California brown pelican, red-tailed hawk, American kestrel, Western snowy plover, Western gull, black phoebe, Western scrub jay, California towhee, and white-crowned sparrow.

No drones, dogs, or fires. Swimming is not recommended. Only experienced surfers should attempt the hazardous tides, strong currents, and steep drop off.

Salinas River State Beach is just one mile south of Moss Landing on Highway 1. Turn right at Potrero. This is a good beach for riding horses, seeing birds, fishing, and walking to the ocean.

It's great for equestrians, because the parking lot is big enough to eliminate the need for backing your trailer. The trail to the beach is relatively short and has an easy incline—it splits, allowing horses and walkers to have their own paths. The wet





Fort Ord Dunes State Park is difficult to find, but worth it. Official directions tell you to take Lightfighter Drive off Highway 1, turn left onto Second Avenue, then follow signs to the park entrance at the 8th Street overcrossing at Highway 1. Following these directions and my GPS, I ended up at a Road Closed sign in front of an underpass. I parked on the street, and walked under Highway 1. On the other side was a sign for Fort Ord Dunes State Park. I followed a flat trail west for three-quarters of a mile, then up through dunes for another quarter mile.

This was my favorite preserve. I saw nice views in every direction, including dunes covered with ice plant and flowers, others in smooth sand, and more with jagged walls. To top it all off, you see a wide ocean scenic view at the end of the trail.

Along the trail, I saw several colorful lizards and busy ground squirrels. I also re-lived my army experience of shooting an M-1 rifle while viewing an abandoned old building once used at the rifle range.

This is a good place to jog, bicycle, hike, and walk the beach. To get a cell-phone tour explaining the preserve nature and history, call 831-998-9458.

Leashed dogs are allowed on the accessible paved trail. Wading and swimming are not advised. Horses and campfires are not allowed on the beach.



Monterey State Beach runs one mile from Sand City at the north to Wharf #2 in Monterey at the south. To reach the beach, drive south on Highway 1, then turn right at Highway 218.



This is the only state beach in this group that is safe for water recreation. Swimmers, scuba divers, kayakers, and young waders can enjoy the water. It even has lifeguards and a truck. On the other hand, it is an urban park that suffers from overuse and poor facilities.

It has some advantages. Thanks to a tip from the lifeguards, I crossed over Highway 1 and around the next corner to grab an In-N-Out hamburger. After walking all day, I almost ate the wrapper. If you can add more to these beach adventures, let me know.



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