

exploring

Get Out and Play New Brighton and Seacliff Beaches

Neil Wiley

East of the busy urban beaches of Santa Cruz and Capitola are two side-by-side state parks that share Monterey Bay. They have quite different environments. Both are known as camping destinations, but **New Brighton** spreads 109 campsites over a forested hillside. Nine premium sites overlook the ocean. One-hundred sites accommodate RVs, trailers, or tents. Some offer full hook-ups. Five are wheelchair-accessible. The park supplies picnic tables, fire-rings with grills, food-storage lockers, showers, and dump stations. Three sites are designed for larger groups. Another serves hikers and bikers. All require a walk to the beach. Dogs on leash are permitted. I saw several families pushing strollers along the beach. There are a few trails in the interior of the park, but no hike-in campsites.

In contrast, **Seacliff** packs sixty parking spaces for RVs and trailers in a single row along the beach. It's fine for ocean-lovers, but more crowded. While New Brighton is a camp, Seacliff is more of an ocean-level parking lot without showers or a dump station.

On the other hand, Seacliff has a wider, longer beach and some attractive features, including a small, but excellent, well-staffed visitor center/museum, fishing pier, beached ship, and a mildly challenging beach-to-bluff



stairway. (As I walked up just once, an even older man walked up and back ten times. He told me that he does it every morning.)

Unlike most Monterey County beaches to the south, Seacliff supports safer swimming, surfing, and boogie boarding, with lifeguards from Memorial Day to Labor Day. The water is usually cleaner than the popular Santa Cruz or Capitola beaches, but I did see some red tides. (They are usually not dangerous, but dead fish and shellfish can carry harmful bacteria.) Dogs are not allowed on the beach.

You can fish from the pier without a license. (Fish and Game limits apply.) I don't know how Seacliff pier fishing compares with other sites, but it is popular. Anglers have caught sole, flounder, mackerel, anchovy, bocaccio (tomcod), kingfish, and even salmon and steelhead.

At the end of the Seacliff pier is perhaps the most interesting park attraction: the SS Palo Alto, a broken old ship purposely grounded on the beach. Called a cement

or concrete ship, it was built with cement and brick reinforced with black iron. It was launched near Oakland in 1919, sailed across San Francisco on its only powered voyage in 1921, and was towed to Aptos where it was purposely beached in 1930.

For two years it was an entertainment center, with a ballroom on the main deck, a restaurant in the superstructure, and carnival concessions on the afterdeck. Fun never lasts. Storms cracked the hull and collapsed the Seacliff Amusement Corporation. In 1936, the broken ship—built for \$1,500,000—was purchased by California State Parks for one dollar. Over the following years, time, salt water, and storms slowly but surely destroyed the ship. In 1978, the hull cracked so much that it was considered unsafe. Throughout the eighties, attempts were made to reopen, but in 2000 the ship deck was permanently closed. In 2016, storms caused another break in the stern and the pier. Only part of the pier remains walkable.

What is left of the broken hull still has value. It supports hundreds of pelicans, cormorants, and migrating birds. Acting as an artificial reef, it is home to fish, mussels, barnacles, sea stars, sea anemones, and ocean worms. Although it isn't a haul-out for seals and sea lions, they can be seen in the water near the ship. Dolphins, whales, and sea otters also make appearances. Perhaps best of all, it is an historical icon: sad, ravaged, but still uniquely present.

New Brighton Beach has a different



What's left of the SS Palo Alto today



SS Palo Alto in 1921



New Brighton Beach

flavor. The narrow beach, low rocky sea wall, and steeper bluffs make it seem wilder and more natural. When I was there in late July, it was quiet and almost empty. I found out why. The gatekeeper told me that the park was open only to campers, because the China Beach parking lot was closed.

Fortunately, I remembered taking pictures of New Brighton for a *Mountain Network News* cover last year. I drove back up Park Avenue (misnamed because there is very little parking on this street), to some off-street parking near the sign for the Antigua Apartments.

I walked across the railroad tracks to a small, unsigned, unofficial trail along

the coast toward New Brighton. I walked through a eucalyptus forest with dramatic views down the full length of New Brighton Beach. When the Park trail ended, I continued along the railroad tracks until I found a short dirt path that took me down to the large, but empty, China Beach parking lot.

At the end of the parking lot, a metal plaque overlooking China Beach tells of the Chinese fishermen who set their nets by boat and hauled their catch to this beach for drying and selling throughout the 1870s and 1880s. By 1890, an expanding resort industry and anti-Chinese sentiment forced them out of Santa Cruz County. Greed and



racism are an unfortunate part of its history.

As I walked along the narrow beach, I could see back up the coast to nearby rocky bluffs. In the distance were views of boats sailing out of Santa Cruz Harbor. A pod of dolphins surfaced a few feet from shore. It was simply, naturally beautiful.

We can't live on beauty alone. After visiting either park, I recommend Marianne's take-out ice cream store at the Seacliff entrance, 218 State Park Drive at Center Avenue. You deserve a great dessert after your explorations.

Directions. To reach the parks, take Highway 17 or Soquel/San Jose Road south, and turn left to Highway 1 south.

For New Brighton, turn right at the New Brighton/Park exit. For your GPS, use the address New Brighton State Beach, 1500 Park Avenue, Capitola, 95010.

For Seacliff, continue on Highway 1 past the New Brighton/Park exit. Take the next exit, State Park Drive, toward the ocean. Follow the signs to the end of State Park Drive. For your GPS, use the address Seacliff State Beach, 201 State Park Drive, Aptos, CA 95003.

The parking fee for day-use for either park is \$10 (\$9 for a senior). Camping fees vary. For camping reservations for either park, call 800-444-7275, or visit www.parks.ca.gov.

Please remember: We are not lost; we are exploring.

