

Whales & Dolphins of Monterey Bay

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly San Francisco; transfer Monterey
- Day 2/7** A full programme of whale-watching cruises combined with land-based marine mammal and birdwatching excursions, based in Carmel Valley, CA
- Day 8** Depart San Francisco
- Day 9** Arrive London

Departs
August

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code USA03) or brochure

Grading

Grade A. Easy walks only (all of them optional)

Focus

Whales, dolphins, other marine mammals (including Sea Otters) and seabirds, land birds and waders.

Highlights

- Superb whale watching
- Possibility of Orca & Blue Whale
- Entertaining Sea Otters floating on their backs while eating shellfish
- California Sea Lion & Northern Elephant Seal
- California Condor
- Opportunity to observe bird migration at a ringing station
- Fantastic selection of seabirds including albatrosses, shearwaters, petrels & skuas
- Impressive coastal scenery of the 'Big Sur'
- Comfortable Monterey County hotel base for seven nights



Humpback Whales



The Golden Gate Bridge and San Francisco



Black-footed Albatross

All photos by Peter Dunn



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NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Introduction

This is a 9-day holiday to California's Pacific seaboard to enjoy its birdlife and, particularly, the wealth of whales, dolphins and other exciting marine mammals for which Monterey Bay is justly famed.

Indeed, the California coast is renowned for its rich marine-life, particularly its wide variety of marine mammals, and there is no better place to search for it than in Monterey Bay which offers some of the very best whale and dolphin watching in the world. Although in recent years their appearances have been somewhat erratic, the offshore waters here have a reputation for being one of the best places in which to see the giant Blue Whale, the largest creature on earth. Late summer and early autumn are the times when Blue Whales are most likely to be found in the Bay, together with good numbers of Humpbacks and other whale species. These can be seen together with large numbers of resident dolphins and porpoises, whilst inshore and along the beach we shall be looking for Sea Otters, California Sea-lions, Harbour Seals and the rare Northern Elephant Seals.

A single-centre holiday, our base this year is in Carmel Valley, 30 min drive from Monterey. It is known for its sunny, fog-free days, cool nights, and warm ambience. The family run hotel is set in three acres of lush flowers and water gardens and boasts an outdoor pool. All meals will be taken there.

Day 1

Saturday

Monterey

We take a scheduled flight today, from London to San Francisco. On arrival at San Francisco airport we collect our tour vehicle and drive south to our accommodation in Carmel Valley.

Day 2 - 7

Sunday – Friday

Monterey

With six full days at our disposal we have a flexible programme of excursions in order to make best use of the prevailing weather conditions which can influence the timing of pelagic outings. At least two days will be spent on land seeking out other typical wildlife and we will utilise our time to the fullest extent to see as much of this as possible.

To fully exploit the rich maritime environment we plan to take to the ocean, weather permitting, for at least five half days aboard specially designed whale-watching vessels. These inshore waters are protected within the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, the largest marine sanctuary in the United States, in which nearly thirty different species of cetacean have been recorded. It is possible to observe whales from the mainland, but our best chances of encountering cetacea will be during our pelagic outings. It is the nature of these cruises in Monterey Bay that some will be far more productive than others but large whales are regularly sighted during August and September, including occasional appearances by the largest of all, the impressive Blue Whale. These trips are famous for the

variety of seabirds recorded and, if we strike lucky, we could see Black-footed Albatross, Sooty and Pink-footed Shearwaters, Ashy Storm Petrel, Sabine's Gull, skuas, Xantu's Murrelet, and both Cassin's and Rhinoceros Auklets. This area of northern California has been the subject of so many films and novels that the landscape seems strangely familiar. Images of the mist-shrouded Golden Gate Bridge and undulating streets of San Francisco are part of contemporary culture and yet there are still plenty of surprises to discover as we explore the coastline. Near San Simeon, huge Northern Elephant Seals are scattered about the beach in various states of repose, occasionally stirring to bellow at rivals or to snort at passing visitors. Rather quaintly the area a few metres around an Elephant Seal is classed as a sanctuary in California, wherever the beast chooses to rest, but here the entire beach is set aside as a reserve. These giant seals are not the only marine mammal we will see during our travels: Harbour Seals, California and Steller's Sea-lions are three other residents of the Pacific coast and, in favoured bays, delightful Sea Otters float amid beds of kelp, munching Abalones. As a result of over-hunting for the fur trade, Sea Otters were almost extinct in California at the beginning of this century but in 1935 a small community of 94 was discovered and, with strict protection, this entertaining creature has gradually increased to the present day population level, which each year witnesses the colonisation of a new stretch of coast.

The birdlife of coastal California is excitingly different from that of the inland areas of the State. Brown Pelicans, and both Brandt's and Pelagic Cormorants are widespread along the coast, reflecting the abundance of fish in these inshore waters. As we stop at various points along the coastline we are also likely to see a variety of divers, grebes and auks. Rocky bays and sandy beaches, flanked by lines of Monterey Pines, are frequented by Heermann's, Western and California Gulls, Black Turnstone, Surfbird, Willet, Marbled Godwit, Wandering Tattler and Black Oystercatcher whilst passerines may include Bushtit, Tri-coloured Blackbird, Brewer's Blackbird and Black Phoebe. Our programme will be somewhat flexible but included will be visits to the Carmel Valley (where Yellow-billed Magpie is one of the attractions), Cannery Row, 17 Mile Drive, Fisherman's Wharf and Moss Landing. A forty-minute drive south of Monterey along the spectacular coastal Highway One, brings us to Andrew Molera State Park which harbours a great wealth of avian life. The Park is about 5,000 acres in extent, offering a range of different habitats which include the estuary of the Big Sur River. Over 350 bird species have been recorded in the Park, including seasonal numbers of passerine migrants. Nearby is the centre of the California Condor re-introduction scheme and if we are lucky we may see one of these immense birds soaring over the hillsides.

Many regard this as the most picturesque coastline in the United States, and with so much to see, our days in California are sure to be filled with exciting natural history encounters on both land and sea.

Day 8

Saturday

In Flight

Depending on departure time we will either have a little more time at our disposal for a last look around or may have to head straight back to San Francisco airport to catch the return flight to London

Day 9

Sunday

London

Our scheduled flight from San Francisco arrives back in London early this morning.

Grading

Grade A. Easy walks only (all of them optional).

Weather

Whilst often fine and sunny, with temperatures climbing into the mid 20s, this is a region noted for sea-mists and blankets of fog can sweep in off the ocean at any time. Cooler conditions may prevail and warm garments are advisable for the pelagic outings. This is the season when the California coast experiences least rainfall, so dry days are expected.

Food & accommodation

The cost of all food and accommodation is included in the price of this holiday, with evening meals eaten at the Hotel and packed lunches will be traditional fresh deli style sandwiches

Focus

Whales, dolphins, other marine mammals (including Sea Otters) and birds.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.



Acorn Woodpecker