

GOLF & TRAVEL



Portola Hotel and Spa

Old Monterey

By Ray Navis, Contributing Writer

The U.S. Open will be played this June at Pebble Beach and the world will be taking a weeklong look at the Monterey Peninsula. Most of this coverage will focus on the 17 Mile Drive. Next time you visit the area, you may well want to spend some time in Old Monterey right next door. This historic fishing village has retained its charm and has seen many improvements in recent years.

The town

Monterey lies just to the north of Pebble Beach and offers panoramic views across the bay to Santa Cruz. Historic Cannery Row, The Monterey Bay Aquarium and Fisherman's Village are the main attractions. As you stroll along the bay front boardwalks, you will no doubt hear the sound of barking seals and sea lions, an abundance of who call this area home. Cannery Row offers shops and restaurants, all set among the original sites of the fishing business that made the area famous. This is Steinbeck country and most of its original feel is still in place.

Aquatic lovers will delight at the Aquarium, which may well be the best in the country. What sets the Monterey Bay Aquarium apart from its rivals is the unique setting and the devotion among staff to teaching. The site right on the Bay in the Cannery Row area gives it a large selection of sea creatures to study. Daily live programs include: Albatross Encounters, Sea Otter Feeding, Penguin Feeding and Outer Bay Feeding.

If that is not enough, try the Tagging Predators and Mysteries of the Deep Programs presented in the auditorium. The Aquarium has a multitude of kids programs and even gives youngsters the chance to sleepover at the facility. Visit MontereyBayAquarium.org for more details.

The hotel

The Portola Hotel and Spa is located in the heart of downtown Monterey, just steps from Fisherman's Village. The design of the hotel fits perfectly into Monterey's heritage with Spanish Tile roofs and walkways. The rooms are equal in quality to any in the area with the finest in bedding and electronics. Many of the

rooms offer balconies with panoramic views of the Bay, Fisherman's Village and surrounding hills. The Portola is actually connected to the Monterey Convention Plaza, making it the first choice for event attendees.

While there are many great restaurants in the area, one of the best is in the hotel's lobby. Jack's Restaurant and Lounge is as far as you need to travel for the best seafood and beef entrees in town. The ambience is nautical and very elegant similar to an exclusive private yacht club. Chef Jason Giles has created a unique menu of organically grown and locally sourced foods. This extends from Monterey Bay fish to Harris Ranch beef, and even to the Peerless organic coffee and teas grown in northern California. Even the draft beer is locally sourced from PeterB's, the Monterey Peninsula's only micropub.

My order of Monterey Bay Sand Dabs with garlic herb-whipped potatoes was one of the best dining experiences in all my travels. Jack's and the Portola Hotel are ardent supporters of the Monterey Aquarium's Seafood Watch Program, which leads the nation in promoting sustainable fishing practices. The Lounge at

Jack's with its library fireplace is a great place to gather before or after the great meal awaiting. For more information on The Portola Hotel and Spa, visit www.portolahotel.com.

The golf

Everyone knows about the famous courses in the 17-Mile Drive, but there are many other great tracks in this area. Closest to Monterey and the Portola is Old Del Monte Golf Course. This is the oldest course west of the Mississippi dating back to 1897. Tree-lined and traditional in design, it is an excellent day's walk. Those in search of more difficulty can find all they want at Fort Ord's Bayonet and Black Horse courses. These long monsters have humbled all, including the PGA Tour Qualifying Schools and PGA Champions Tour. Both are in excellent shape and can be walked.

San Jose Airport (SJC) is only an hour away from Monterey and continues to offer more flight options. Dollar Rent A Car is currently offering the best deals - especially on smaller SUV's, which can be had for less than a normal-sized rental. I found this Dollar location to be professionally managed and service-oriented.