



ILLUSTRATIONS BY TONY GALVAN

Male northern elephant seals.

The land of the supersized seals

Here's a one day/overnight trip that takes you through California history, provides an appreciation of nature and gives you a look at several interesting communities along the Central Coast.

Forty minutes north of San Luis Obispo on Highway 1 you enter the rugged coastal ranges. Jutting mountainsides rising from the ocean and broad coastal terraces provide a hint that this is not the California you are use to. North of Cambria you come across a natural harbor and point where a whaling station was established in 1852. The point was named San Simeon, and it was here whalers would watch from the bluffs for the tell-tale plume of passing whales.



The Day Tripper

Tony Galvan

The Old Days

Once a whale was spotted the whalers would row from shore to catch up with it, harpoon it and then tow it back to shore to render it for whale oil. Shore-whaling, as it was known, lasted until 1878 as the whaling industry slowly became less profitable. As the whaling industry declined so did the town.

The whalers were replaced by Russian and Aleutian fur hunters who sought sea otters along the same rugged coast. Otters were abundant then and there was no lack of hunters and entrepreneurs to cash in on the growing fur market. It was this industry that almost made the sea otter extinct. In 1911 an international ban on sea otter hunting finally allowed the otters to come back, and today that success story can be seen up and down the California coast.

In 1874 the Piedras Blancas Lighthouse was

constructed to help mariners ply the treacherous waters off the coast. That lighthouse still stands, albeit a few feet shorter than the day it was dedicated. See if you can find out why.

In July 2006 the Coastal Discovery Center at San Simeon Bay was opened. A joint venture of NOAA's Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary and California State Parks, the center contains exhibits that highlight the natural and cultural and historical treasures of the Central Coast region.

The center has exhibits that highlight the region's spectacular offshore and land resources and its varied past. It began as Spanish land grants, became a large ranching area, was the site of publishing mogul William Randolph Hearst's grand castle and is today the newest addition to the national marine sanctuary system. A walk along the pier will give you the best views of Hearst Castle to the east and incredible coastal terraces looking to the south.

Supersized Seals

Drive 10 minutes north from the discovery center to the Piedras Blancas Elephant Seal Rookery along Highway 1. This is where you will see the largest seal, or pinniped, in the world, the northern elephant seal. These massive marine mammals weigh in at over 5,000 pounds. Their cousins, the southern elephant seals, are even bigger, with the largest ever recorded weighing more than 11,000 pounds and reached 22.5 feet in length!

January and February is the time to visit the rookery to watch the bulls stake out their territories before the females arrive to give birth to their babies or weaners, as they are known. As is usually the case in nature, there is always one dominant male and he's known as the beachmaster, and his job is to protect his territory. Fights between bulls are frequent this time of the year in the rookery.

Elephant Seals were hunted for their blubber and by 1892 fewer than 100 survived

in Baja California, on the island of Guadalupe. In 1922 the Mexican government gave the seal protected status and the U.S. followed soon thereafter. By the 1950s they began to appear in Southern California waters, and in 1965 males were seen "hauling out" on the mainland. Today haul-outs range from Año Nuevo island off San Francisco to Piedras Blancas.

In 1990, the first seals of what is now the Piedras Blanca colony arrived on the beach. The following year a few more followed. Today, more than 15 years later, more than 8,000 will haul out to the beach to spend the early part of the year resting, giving birth, fighting for females and breeding. Be prepared for the noisiest, busiest beach you've ever encountered. Africa has its migration across the Serengeti, but California has its elephant seals!

Parking and a wheelchair accessible boardwalk is available at the rookery. The Friends of the Elephant Seals, a not-for-profit organization based in San Simeon, has been instrumental in the development of the look-out point. Look for docents in blue jackets; they can answer all your questions. Stop by their center in the town of San Simeon for more information.

Remember, these creatures are large and can inflict serious injury or worse if approached on foot, so do not leave the hiking trails or boardwalks when visiting.

A Little of This and That

The Central Coast offers something for everyone, whether you're a nature lover, shopper, art lover or California history buff. Hearst Castle will astound you with its size and grandeur; Cambria has some incredible antique shops, art galleries and restaurants; and Morro Bay is a great place to spend the night. You'll watch the sun set behind the rock and if you're up early you'll catch the sun's rays kissing the rock at sunrise.

Make 2007 your discovery year of the many destinations we have close at hand.

If you go



Getting there:

Take Highway 101 to San Luis Obispo. Take Highway 1 to Morro Bay and follow the signs to San Simeon/Hearst Castle. Drive time to San Simeon from Goleta is roughly two hours 45 minutes.

Coastal Discovery Center at San Simeon:

William Randolph Hearst Memorial State Beach. Open Friday, Saturday and Sunday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. 805-927-6577. Free.

Friends of the Elephant Seals:

Office / Visitor Center, Plaza del Cavalier, 250 San Simeon Ave. Suite 3B, San Simeon, CA 93452; 805 924-1628; www.elephantseal.org/

Piedras Blancas Elephant Seal Rookery and Lighthouse:

7 miles from the town of San Simeon. Free. Lighthouse tours; reservations can be made by calling 805-927-6811 Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Hearst Castle:

Hours vary throughout the year. Check its website or call 805-927-2070 for hours and fees; www.hearstcastle.com/tours/.