

SAN LUIS OBISPO

Challenge and indulge yourself in this sweet seaside town

By Kristin Conard

On the 101 just about halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, the old mission town of San Luis Obispo (also known as just San Luis or the even simpler SLO) has mountains, wine country, a year-round farmer's market, and easy access to stunning beaches. It's also got some amazing year-round weather, and no matter what level you're at in just about any outdoor adventure, you can find a way to challenge and indulge yourself in and around SLO.

OUT ON THE WATER

Within a 10 to 20 minute drive from downtown SLO, you can be at the water with a mix of protected coves and harbors and wilder, windier stretches of open ocean. Avila Beach, along San Luis Creek, you can get to by driving or by the Bob Jones City to the Sea Trail – from the trailhead at Ontario Road to the Avila Pier, it's 3 miles along a well-maintained paved trail.

It doesn't matter how much experience you have on your paddleboard or your kayak, if you head out on a tour or a lesson with Avila Beach Paddlesports (3915 Avila Beach Dr, Avila Beach, 805-704-6902, avilabeachpaddlesports.com), you're going to learn something about better paddling and the natural history of the area. You may see dolphins and whales along with the usual coastal creatures like sea otters, sea lions, and pelicans.

Run by Vincent and Emily Shay, it's right on the water, and their passion and excitement for being out on the water is contagious, even if you're stepping outside of your comfort zone. Vincent has even designed some surf kayaks and paddleboards and is psyched to share his favorite local spots.



For more relaxed and beginner paddling, paddle through Port San Luis Harbor. For checking out caves and rapids, check out Fossil Point, south of Avila Beach. At Shell Beach, between Avila Beach and Pismo Beach, you can paddle along the rugged coast through caves and sea arches with easy launch points from the beach.

Along with the beaches along San Luis Obispo Bay, just north and a 15-minute drive from SLO is Morro Bay dominated by Morro Rock, the 581-foot volcanic plug at the entrance to Morro Bay Harbor. Oyster farmers work out in the bay and it's a stopping point for migrating shore birds and a birthing and resting place for harbor seals.

With Central Coast Outdoors (805-528-1080, centralcoastoutdoors.com), you can take a rent a kayak or take a tour to get some invaluable help navigating the shallow channels and tides (and possible fog). The paddling is mellow and fun since you're protected from the open ocean by a four-mile long sandspit. The sand dunes were used by the Chumash Native American people thousands of years ago, and they're a popular destination on warm weekends for day hikers and paddlers.

Pismo Beach pier is a popular local surf spot with a break during high tide – the south side is better than the north and the farther south you go, the fewer people you'll find. As the windiest beach in the area, Pismo Beach is also a great spot for kitesurfing.

THE NINE SISTERS

Thanks to a series of nine volcanic peaks, called the Nine Sisters, SLO is teeming with trails for hikers, bikers, and horseback riders, and with all the options, you can

play here for months without repeating the same route.

A kitschy pink extravaganza-meets-faux Swiss Alps/fairytale castle is one of the only ways to describe the Madonna Inn

(100 Madonna Road, San Luis Obispo, 805-543-3000, madonnainn.com). This San Luis institution is on the eastern edge of Cerro San Luis, and a starting landmark for some of the great trails in the area. You can go for a guided horseback ride up the mountain without having to worry about getting lost on the interconnected trails.

You can also get on the mountain to play on foot or on a bike on your own. For those looking for an easy just over 2 mile loop, there's the Lemon Grove Loop that takes you part way up the mountain, but high enough for some great city views. Keep in mind that this mountain has several crisscrossing trails – the city's recreation department has an Open Space & Trails App that can help keep you on track.

For mountain bikers, the popular Rock Garden trail encircles the mountain. The singletrack trail is a 5-mile loop with a steady climb up with the reward of the boulder canyon at the top of the winding hill. After the rock garden, you'll wind back down the mountain on a series of switchbacks.

If you want more distance, head north of town to West Cuesta Ridge. The mix of technical singletrack and dirt roads makes it great for intermediate to advanced

PHOTOS

Main image: There are great places to kitesurf along SLO's coast (Visit SLO). **Above:** MTB trails built by Freeride and Sustainable Trail Association (FASTA). **Bottom Left:** Avila Beach Pier at sunset (Kristin Conard).



riders, and it's got aptly named trails like Tough and Dirty Slide and Roller Coaster. The Eucs (also referred to as the Yewks) Freeride area is a playground of jumps, wall rides, and more (gofasta.org). Central Coast Concerned Mountain Bikers regularly maintains the trails and has updated maps of the best biking areas (cccmb.org).

Another popular hiking and biking destination is the Irish Hills Open Space. This natural canyon has 8 miles of mostly singletrack trails through grasslands, chaparral, and oak with trailheads at Prefumo Canyon Road and Madonna Road. The doubletrack trails are remnants of old mining roads, and a 1.5 mile connector trails links this area with the Johnson Ranch Open Space.

One of the most popular challenges for hikers here is to take on the tallest of the Nine Sisters – the 1,549-foot Bishop Peak. It's in Bishop Peak Natural Reserve, which you can get to from trailheads at Patricia Drive and Highland Drive. The hike (no bikes allowed) up to the top isn't a long one (about 3 miles out and back), but it's a strenuous series of rocky switchbacks along the southern slope that pays off with photo opportunities and views at the top of SLO from Morro Bay to Cuesta Grade. You can also link up with the more moderate Felsman Loop Trail, which would extend the hike by a couple of miles.

For climbers, Bishop Peak has a mix of trad, top-rope, and sport climbing along with some bouldering, up to V6. Climbers should use the Highland Drive trailhead for the quickest access.

RELAX AND RECHARGE


If you're looking for a cheap and cheerful place to stay, there's a string of chain hotels and motels close to downtown like the Lamplighter Inn and Suites, rooms from \$89. For campers, there are dozens of sites from the state beaches to the lakes to the mountains though they fill up fast during the summer.

To recharge after a long day on the trails, you can do so in style at The Granada

Hotel and Bistro (1126 Morro Street, 805-544-9100, granadahotelandbistro.com). The restaurant has a French classic-meets-California casual feel with a small dining room and a large patio, and the menu is seasonal with dishes like deviled eggs with pork belly marmalade and poached sockeye salmon.

Raise a wine glass to your day at Foremost Wine & Company (570 Higuera Street, 805-439-3410, foremostwineco.com). It's a combination wine shop and restaurant that's all about delicious healthy food and details – from topographic maps on the menus to the packet of seasonal seeds for you as you leave. Or toast with a handcrafted local beer near Bubblegum Alley at Creekside Brewing Company (1040 Broad Street, 805-542-9804).

Ocean Grill in Avila Beach (268 Front Street, 805-595-4050, oceangrillavila.com) gives you dinner with a sunset show. Open for dinner throughout the week and then for lunch and Happy Hour on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, they have wood-fired pizza and good seafood, including local rockfish tacos and local thresher shark.

And if you want a classic and hearty breakfast in an everybody knows your name kind of spot, there's Louisa's Place (964 Higuera Street, 805-541-0227, louisasplace.com). The family-run diner serves breakfast and lunch with servings large enough to last you all day. 

PHOTOS

Top image: View from Bishop Peak (Visit SLO). **Left:** Kayak adventure tour at Shell Beach (Avila Beach Paddlesports). **jpg.** **Right:** Morro rock along Morro Bay coast (Visit SLO). **Circle:** Gourmet snacks (Granada Hotel and Bistro).



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