

# AfterHours

ENTERTAINMENT, TRAVEL AND CULTURE IN ORANGE COUNTY

## The Mystique of Montecito

Ritzy Santa Barbara suburb combines old Hollywood and contemporary charm. **BY ANN C. SHULTZ**



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orth up the California coast, Montecito beckons. There isn't a bad time of year to visit this bewitching little enclave of Santa Barbara, but spring is especially beautiful. The drive from our home in Dana Point took a little over 2 1/2 hours. My husband Rob and I opted for I-405, which passes through downtown Los Angeles and the Valley on route to the 110.

Soon we were descending into the green valley of Camarillo with its lush fields of strawberries and flowers. Just beyond Camarillo, the highway meets the coast and follows the ocean. The iron bell markers along the side of the road are a reminder that Father Junipero Serra followed this route when founding California's 21 missions. The morning was clear and sunny. The sea looked like a smooth pane of blue glass.

There are a few sights to see before you reach the Santa Barbara peninsula. Summerland is a cute, little beach town of bed and breakfasts, cafes and antique shops. We have stopped on previous trips to catch a bite of lunch and browse.

Carpinteria, just beyond, is home to acres of greenhouses and renowned flower growers. One of the best known is Gallup and Stribling, the largest orchid grower in the country. Rob and I stopped by the Visitors Center where a large, immaculately kept greenhouse contains a stunning display of all varieties and types of orchids.

Montecito Village sits just below Santa Barbara framed by the gorgeous Santa Ynez Mountains. We had booked two nights at the Montecito Inn on Coast Village Road. The Inn was built by



Montecito Inn, built by silent screen legend Charlie Chaplin in the 1920s.





Downtown Santa Barbara

silent screen legend Charlie Chaplin in the 1920s. The Inn's first guests were a "Who's Who" of Hollywood's Golden Years. The new owners have completed a renovation while still maintaining the Inn's famous charm. The lobby, tiled in creamy Italian marble, and accented by a raised fireplace, speaks of a bygone era. Particularly quaint is the original Otis elevator installed the same year the Inn was built. Since that time, it has been kept in mint condition and is still in use. The lower level of the Inn includes a foyer that opens to a patio with a heated pool, spa and sauna.

After checking in, we set out for a drive. Charlie Chaplin and his cronies discovered that Montecito was the perfect getaway from the hustle and bustle of Hollywood. Cruise the roads around the Inn and you'll see elegant mansions, charming Tudor cottages and ranch style haciendas they built.

Montecito is only a mile from Santa Barbara. We ventured down Cabrillo Boulevard past the bird sanctuary and along the beach.

Taking a right at Stearns Wharf we found ourselves on State Street, an enchanting mélange of shops, restaurants and cafes. Lunch was our first priority after parking. We decided on El Paseo, tucked away in a Mission-style shopping center with cobbled walkways and orange trees in fragrant bloom. El Paseo is a traditional Mexican restaurant located in an open courtyard. We sipped frosty Margaritas, and lunched on spicy cheese enchiladas and chicken flautas smothered in guacamole. Then we were off to explore State Street. Its focal point is Paseo Nuevo, an open-air shopping mall that includes favorites like Nordstrom, Victoria's Secret, Gary's and See's. Pots full of flowers decorate the walkways, and glossy green leafed trumpet vines with their purple flowers spill over the roofs and along the walls. The Santa Barbara Art Museum with its fine collection of American, French and Asian Art is only a few blocks away. Old California comes alive in the Moorish style courthouse with its 85-foot clock

tower within walking distance on nearby Anacapa Street.

We capped off the day with dinner at Holdren's, an intimate wood paneled steakhouse. Our steaks were wonderful, complimented by fresh bread, green salad and twice baked potatoes. We enjoyed a glass of the featured wine, a tasty, full-bodied Cabernet Sauvignon from nearby Santa Ynez Valley. This was a perfect entrée to our plans for Sunday morning.

Montecito is less than an hour's drive from the Central Coast's answer to Napa. There are more than 34 wineries and 9,500 acres of vineyards throughout the Santa Ynez Valley. Although the valley's vineyards are some of the youngest in California, they also produce some of the best premium wines in the state if not the country. Part of the fun is getting there. State route 154 takes you high above Santa Barbara. As you descend, you are treated to a stunning vista of the valley below. This is horse country as well as wine country, Arabian farms set amidst acres of vineyards.

A good place to start is Gainey Winery, located at the intersection of SR154 and Armour Ranch Road. We took a tour of the vineyards and the cool, redolent aging room of wood and stainless steel vats. The tour ends in the spacious tasting room where you can sample Gainey's fine wines. A drive along rustic Foxen Canyon Road is a must. Several wineries dot this meandering country road. Don't miss Zaca Mesa, where friendly

staff to greet you in the tasting room. Sample their award-winning Syrah, Chardonnay and Z Cuvee. Sunstone is at the top of the list as well. Its Mission style buildings and grounds afford a fabulous view of the mountains, valley and river gorge. All 3 wineries have beautiful picnic areas. We brought our lunch - bread, cheese, salami and fresh fruit - purchased in the Montecito. You can't beat a picnic under the shade of an oak tree while you enjoy the beauty of the vineyards.

Spring is a wonderful time to see Santa Barbara's Botanical Gardens in full bloom. Located on Mission Canyon Road, in the foothills above Santa Barbara, the gardens boast 78 acres of rare and indigenous California plants, and more than 5 miles of landscaped trails. Golden poppies, pure white Matilija blooms and pastel Pestemons greet visitors. We ended our afternoon with a swim in the Inn's pool.

To finish our getaway we had booked dinner reservations at the Montecito Café. Located in the Inn, this acclaimed restaurant is a favorite with the locals. The menu ranges from fresh salmon to lamb to tender steaks. Everything was delicious, including the mouth-watering pecan tart we shared for dessert.

After finishing our meal, we took a walk. At night, the trees twinkle with lights and the air is filled with the delicious scent of sage. Anticipating our early morning return to Orange County, we said goodbye to Montecito silhouetted against the Santa Ynez Mountains and the black velvet sky. **OCM**