



GET OUT OF TOWN | BY MELANIE HAIKEN

By the Beautiful Sea

Fairy tales come to life on a family trip to Capitola.

Venice Beach revisited: sunbathers in front of the Capitola Venetian Hotel.

There's childhood and then there's *childhood*, that idyllic vision of leaping barefoot over dew-wet, late-night lawns (remember *The Moon Jumpers?*) or running pell-mell straight from the front door to the crashing surf (think of Robert McCloskey's *One Morning in Maine*). A recent trip to the Capitola-Santa Cruz area—two of the region's oldest and most nostalgic beach resorts—permitted us to live, if only for a few days, in the pages of those classic bedtime stories. The clue that this trip was going to transcend the rushed, anxious reality of everyday life came when we opened the carved wooden door of the Black Pearl Cottage, perched high on the cliffs over the

Pacific in southern Santa Cruz.

"Does a magician live here?" asked my five-year-old daughter Melia, gazing at the towering fireplace of stacked and mortared river rocks, a copper cauldron suspended high above it. And indeed, almost every detail, from the red velvet, gold-tasseled curtains to the oddly shortened antique iron chairs and round plank table (which allow you to sit, child-like, just two feet from the ground), seemed straight out of the land of princesses and castles. In fact, it turns out owner Bev Brady's vision arose from a long-out-of-print children's story, "The House of the Wily Gnome." But it was the astonishing proximity of the ocean—we spent one whole evening sitting by the floor-to-ceiling windows watching the glow of campfires strung like jewels along half-mile-long Seabright Beach—that made me feel I was giving my

children the gift of an experience that until now they'd only seen in pictures.

The rest of our trip continued to place us in storybooks and fairy tales: At the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk, Melia was entranced by the Orient Express, a brand-new roller coaster designed so that kids find themselves riding upon a gorgeous Chinese dragon. The barking of sea lions drew us to the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf, where Linnea, age two, couldn't tear herself away from their antics even to eat succulent snapper and sea bass at Riva Fish House, the most popular seafood place on the wharf. My husband and I had to take turns accompanying her outside to spy on the huge beasts and count the glowing maroon and orange starfish exposed by the outgoing tide.

Dragons haunted us again in the town of Capitola, our primary destination just south of Santa Cruz, this time in the colorfully painted plaster details adorning the Capitola Venetian Hotel, a '20s-vintage hodgepodge of suites right on the beach that was built as the first condo development in the United States. But it's the quintessential beach-town atmosphere of Capitola itself—its row of festive restaurants overlooking the beach and curved Esplanade inviting couples and families to stroll the beachfront until late in the evening—that again evoked the magical sense of summer

by the sea from childhood stories. It felt like a step back in time to the Coney Island of my father's childhood recountings, or my own memories of long slow days of sand and saltwater taffy at beach towns from Bodega Bay to Monterey.

We entered the setting of yet another kind of children's book—the classic red-barned farm—when we drove seven miles east of Watsonville to pick strawberries and olallieberries at Gizdich Ranch, a family-owned farm now in its third generation of serving berry pie and fresh-pressed apple juice to South Bay kids. Looking at my daughters' faces, sunburned and smeared with juice as they proudly held up their full buckets, satisfied at least momentarily my craving to be that serene, unharried mom leading her little girl down the hill in *Blueberries for Sal*.

Disney intruded only briefly when Melia said the three-story-high tanks at the Monterey Bay Aquarium made her feel like Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*, but the incandescent magic of the new jellyfish



En plein air: exhibit (picture stars come to life and dancing in slow motion) lifted us back into the ethereal. And a meal at the famous Shadowbrook restaurant, complete with a gondola ride through the terraced, fountain-splashed gardens, led to a whole day of playing "fairies."

On our last evening, we bought a picnic fit for royalty from Gayle's, a popular bakery and rotisserie. As we sat on wooden benches on the Esplanade, eating the creamy enchiladas, stuffed mushrooms, and ginger-spiced coleslaw and looking out at a purple-tinged sunset, Linnea turned to me and said, her mouth half-full of butter cookie, "We're different here, Mama." And it was truer than she knew. *SF*

Destination: CAPITOLA

Miles from San Francisco: 110

Driving time: two hours without traffic

Population: 10,450

Where to Stay

Black Pearl Cottage (and Grey Tower Villa):

Magical house in Santa Cruz where waves are your lullaby. (408) 429-5377; \$525-\$2,575.

Capitola Venetian Hotel: Funky beachside living with no worries about the kids climbing on the furniture. (408) 476-6471; \$120-\$270.

El Salto Resort: Newly renovated 1920s-era resort on a bluff above Capitola with heart-stopping views. (408) 479-9360; \$175-\$325.

The Inn at Depot Hill: Victorian splendor that makes you feel like the butler is about to appear



Truly surfside: the ocean view from the Black Pearl Cottage.

at your door with a tea tray. (800) 572-2632; \$190-\$275.

Where to Eat

Gayle's Bakery and Rosticceria, Capitola: (408) 462-1200; entrées \$3.50-\$8.

Riva Fish House, Santa Cruz: (408) 429-1223; entrées \$7-\$14.

Shadowbrook, Capitola: (408) 475-1511; entrées \$12-\$22.

What to Do

Gizdich Ranch: (408) 722-1056

Monterey Bay Aquarium: (408) 648-4888

Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk: (408) 423-5590