



First light on Morro Rock from Montaña de Oro

Chapter 12

CENTRAL COAST

Morro Rock & Morro Strand State Beach

The volcanic plug, Morro Rock, towers 581 feet above the adjacent ocean and beach. There are over two miles of sandy beach north of Morro Rock. The beach close to the rock offers a very gradual slope towards the water. From the southern end of the beach, low tide can provide you with wet sand to capture Morro Rock and its reflection. A minus low tide is even better.



April moonset before dawn

of light occurs just above the earth's own dark shadow at the horizon, before sunrise or after sunset.

Getting there: Just north of Morro Bay on CA-1, take Atascadero Road west towards the ocean. It changes in name to Embarcadero Rd., as it curves left. Continue past the end of the road and curve right into a dirt parking lot, close to Morro Rock.



Sea otter and pup in the kelp beds

There are no trails on Morro Rock and climbing is prohibited, as it is a sacred site to local Salinan and Chumash tribes. You can drive up to its base, though, and park at Coleman Park. In the spring, you may find sea otters with pups here in the relatively calm waters of the entrance to the Bay.

Photo advice: If you do a little research and plan ahead, you may be able to catch the nearly full moon setting while there is sunrise color in the sky. As the image here shows, the pink or magenta “belt of Venus” band

To drive to Coleman Park alongside Morro Rock, take the Main Street exit from CA-1 in Morro Bay, turn right on Beach Street, right on Embarcadero, and continue onto Coleman Drive.

Nearby location: As you drive north from Morro Bay, particularly on windy afternoons, you may see kite boarders surfing the waves.

Morro Bay State Park

Although Morro Rock itself is technically within Morro Bay State Park, another section of the same park next to Morro Bay, south of town, provides better views of the rock.

Photo advice: The Bay itself provides a better mirror surface before afternoon winds come up and in winter months with less fog. The mud flats south of the town of Morro Bay provide excellent habitat for birds such as egrets and herons.

Getting there: From downtown Morro Bay, take Main Street south to the vicinity of the Morro Bay Golf Course and the Morro Bay State Park campground.

Nearby location: Also near the campground is a harbor for small boats, which is one of the calmest parts of the bay and can provide mirror-like reflections.



The view near Morro Bay S. P. campground

Montaña de Oro State Park

Montaña de Oro State Park is a large park of 8,000 acres stretching from the Pacific Ocean to the top of 1,347 ft. Valencia Peak. As you enter the park from the north, there are trails which take you to the sandy spit separating Morro Bay from the Pacific Ocean. Once you're further into the park, you reach the most accessible shoreline of the park at Spooner's Cove, near the park's campground.

South of the cove the shoreline is rocky, accessed via the Bluff Trail. The first section of the Bluff Trail provides an excellent view of Morro Rock, which is lit by the rising sun on winter mornings. Further along the trail, you'll find wave-washed points and rocks, and at the right tide level there's even a small blowhole which sends mist into the air. Place the rising sun at your back to see a rainbow in the mist of the blowhole.



Winter morning light on Morro Rock

Photo advice: This convoluted and wave-washed rocky shoreline is particularly well suited to long exposures of waves washing over rocks. You can use a 10 stop neutral density filter to enable a very long exposure, or stop your lens down and set your ISO low, and add filters such as a circular polarizing filter and graduated neutral density filter. It will also help if you're shooting during sunrise, sunset, or twilight.



Blow hole rainbow on the Bluff Trail

Getting there: From CA-1 just south of the town of Morro Bay, take the S. Bay Blvd. exit and continue 4 miles. Turn right on Los Osos Valley Road and proceed 1.5 miles. Continue onto Pecho Valley Road, 3.7 miles into the park.

Time required: You can spend an hour on the Bluff Trail, and another 2 hours hiking the nearby Point Buchon Trail.

Nearby location: From the farthest south parking lot for the Bluff Trail, you can access the Point Buchon Trail. Opened to the public in 2007, the Point Buchon Trail offers a sea cave and shoreline access at Coon Creek Beach, a sinkhole, sea stacks and natural bridges. In the spring, you may encounter prolific wildflowers, if you are fortunate.

Located on Pacific Gas & Electric property associated with the Diablo Canyon nuclear power facility, reservations are advised since the Point Buchon and Pecho Coast trails share a 275 person limit per day. You must sign in upon entering and sign a liability release. The trail is currently open Thursday through Monday from 8 am to 5 pm from April to October, and 8 am to 4 pm during November through March. The trail closes during rainy or inclement weather.

Cave Landing Trail to Pirate's Cove

Once a landing spot for ships smuggling liquor, today Pirate's Cove serves as a clothing-optional beach. On the way to the beach on the Cave Landing Trail, lies a cave known as Whaler's Cave (or Pirate's Cave), where locals watch sunset.

Photo advice: Photographers may have the best luck including the cave in their shots by either coming for pre-dawn light or waiting after sunset. Then, most of the crowd has left, and capturing the fading light of sunset is easier.

Getting there: From US-101, about 12 miles south of San Luis Obispo and a short distance north of Pismo Beach and Shell Beach, take the San Luis Bay Drive exit to Avila Beach, and head towards the ocean. Continue 1.4 miles. Upon reaching Avila Beach Dr., turn right and go 0.7 miles, then turn left onto Cave Landing Road. Then drive to the dirt parking area at the end. If you're using Google Maps, you can navigate to this location using the name Avila Sea Caves.

The trail to the cave and beach is the dirt trail heading downhill on your left, as you drive into the parking area. Head a few hundred yards downhill and when the trail splits, you can either go left to the beach or right to the cave.

Nearby location: A second, less prominent trail leads out onto the small peninsula and rock which the cave passes through. Side trails lead to points on the cliff where people have explored for possible shoreline access. One trail offered a thoroughly rotten climbing rope tied to an unstable metal stake weakly pounded into the ground. Even the area around the top of the rope was dangerous, sloping towards a 30 to 40-foot drop off the cliff to the rocks and surf below. From the trail approaching that spot however, you may find a spot to stand sufficiently anchored in surrounding bushes to safely capture a sunset shot of a natural bridge below.



Natural bridge just north of Pirate's Cove

Shoreline Parks, Shell Beach

There are miles of rocky shoreline along the Shell Beach area on the north side of Pismo Beach. Dinosaur Caves Park and Seaciff Park offer views while Eldwayen Ocean Park and Margo Dodd Park offer shoreline access.

Photo advice: Given the southwest orientation of the shoreline in this area and the protruding Point San Luis to the west, the two months each side of the winter solstice (late December) will offer sunsets with the sun setting over the Pacific Ocean.

Getting there: To reach the 1.5 miles of bluffs at Eldwayen Ocean Park and its stairway accessing the beach, from US-101 north of Pismo Beach, exit Spyglass Drive. Head towards the ocean and turn left onto Shell Beach Road. Continue 0.7 miles and turn right on Vista Del Mar Ave. In 0.2 miles you'll reach Ocean Blvd, which runs alongside Eldwayen Ocean Park.

To reach the beach access at



Reef pattern at Eldwayen Ocean Park

Margo Dodd Park from US-101 (north of Pismo Beach) take the Spyglass Drive exit. Head towards the ocean and turn left onto Shell Beach Road. Continue 1.4 miles and turn right on Cliff Ave. Pass Dinosaur Caves Park and in 0.2 miles you will reach Ocean Blvd. and Margo Dodd Park.

Pismo State Beach, Monarch Butterfly Grove

Every year from late October through February, monarch butterflies gather in certain groves of pine and eucalyptus trees along the coast of California. This can be one of the best locations, with 110,000 butterflies present! During the winter of 1990/91, a population of 180,000 was estimated. Another colony of monarchs is often present at nearby Oceano Campground, but it only consists of 20,000 or so butterflies.

Photo advice: You'll want a focal length of 100-200mm, or more, to capture the butterflies in the trees. A lens with macro capability can be handy for butterflies on the ground.

Getting there: From US-101 southbound, take the Pismo Beach exit. Take a slight right onto CA-1/Dolliver Street. Continue 1.5 miles and the butterfly grove will be on your right.

From US-101 northbound, take the Price Street exit, then an immediate left on Ocean View Ave. In 1 block, take the first left onto CA-1/Dolliver Street. Continue 1.5 miles and the butterfly grove will be on your right.

Nearby location: If you stay at the adjacent North Beach Campground, the lagoon of Pismo Creek on the ocean side may provide reflection opportunities if you have clouds and sunset color in the sky.

Oceano Dunes State Vehicle Recreation Area

The 18-mile Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes complex is the second largest coastal dune complex in California, the largest south of San Francisco. The 5.5 miles of beach and adjacent sand dunes, administered as Oceano Dunes State Vehicle Recreation Area, are open to off-highway vehicles. Attracting up to 2 million visitors per year, this is one of the more popular California state parks.

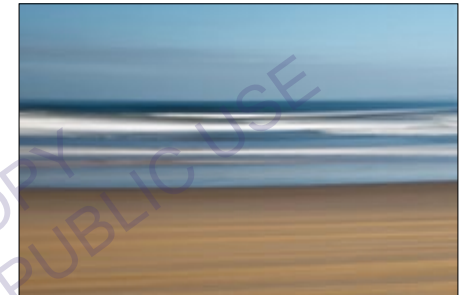
Fortunately for photographers, a scenic and significant area of dunes is set aside to protect sensitive plants and animals. With March through October being the nesting season for the snowy plover, additional portions of the beach may be fenced off during that eight month period.

Four-wheel drive is highly recommended. Not only is four wheel drive useful for soft sand, but in the rainy season, Arroyo Grande Creek is likely to be flowing and can provide additional challenges. During particularly high tides, waves of the Pacific Ocean are coming very high on the beach, even merging with the lagoon of Arroyo Grande Creek. Trying to cross this temporary bay may cause your vehicle to suddenly drop two feet deeper into the channel of Arroyo Grande

Creek. This can happen where the waves have cut through the sand dam normally separating the lagoon from the ocean. If your vehicle stalls or gets stuck, getting your vehicle stranded here could involve an urgent call to 911 and a minimum \$300 tow (don't ask me how I know this). That's if you're lucky enough to have a 4WD tow vehicle in the area which can reach your vehicle before an incoming tide claims it. Vehicles which haven't been rescued promptly or which became too deeply mired in the sand, have required bulldozers to dig a trench to pull the vehicle into. Enough said!

Camping is allowed, for an additional fee, in certain areas after the possible Arroyo Grande Creek crossing. Make sure that you park above the high tide line, or you may wake up to find waves washing around your vehicle. It's interesting to wake up and see a large recreational vehicle camper parked 50 yards out to sea. If you do try to camp, bring earplugs. On my first visit, I woke at 3 am to the sound of an ATV driving in circles around my SUV.

Getting there: Beach driving access is provided from W. Grand Ave. and Pier Ave. Approaching from the south, you can take the E. Grande Ave. exit, then head west on E Grand Ave. This turns into W. Grand Ave. and eventually ends at the park entrance and ramp to the beach. To reach Pier Ave. and its beach access closer to the dunes, from W. Grande Ave., take CA-1 south 1.1 miles, turn right on Pier Ave. and it will lead to the park entrance and ramp at the beach in 0.4 miles.



Oceano Dunes offers five miles of ocean view camping

There are several ways to reach the approximately 1.5 miles of untouched photogenic dunes that are south of Arroyo Grande Creek and north of the dunes that are open to off-highway vehicles:

- If you have an appropriate 4WD vehicle, you can drive down the beach to the first entry point allowing off-highway vehicles onto the dunes and view the untouched dunes lying to the north from there.
- If you have an appropriate 4WD vehicle, you can find walk-in gates on the way to the first entry point allowing off-highway vehicles.
- The dunes can be accessed from the east side in the vicinity of the Pacific Dunes Ranch RV Resort, located at 1205 Silver Spur Place in Oceano. This resort also offers horseback rides on the dunes. To reach the resort, start at Pier Ave. and CA-1, as if you were going to drive out on the beach. But instead of turning onto Pier Ave., continue another 1.1 miles south on CA-1. Turn right onto 22nd St. and go 0.3 miles. Turn right onto Silver Spur Place and look for the resort on your left, in 0.4 miles.

Time required: Driving or walking on sand tends to be slow and time-consuming, so allocate 2-3 hours or more.

Rancho Guadalupe Dunes County Park

Occupying 1.8 miles of beach at the southern end of the Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes Complex, is 2,350-acre Rancho Guadalupe Dunes County Park. There is a closure of much of the dunes at the park from March 1 - October 1, due to the nesting season for the snowy plover. Park open hours are 7 am to sunset.

Photo advice: Your best light will tend to be golden hour and as the sun sets.

Getting there: From US-101 in the town of Santa Maria, take CA-166/E. Main St. 13.2 miles west to the park. If you're travelling on CA-1, at its intersection with CA-166 in Guadalupe, travel west on CA-166 4.3 miles to the park.

Figueroa Mountain Rec. Area, Los Padres National Forest

Home to an annual wildflower bloom each spring, Figueroa Mountain provides a variety of species at various elevations, diversifying your opportunities and extending the wildflower season. The U.S. Forest Service often provides updates on the timing and progress of the wildflowers as they emerge in the February through April timeframe. If you have the opportunity, check their web site for current conditions.



California poppies in early April

Photo advice: A selection of lenses will help you capture a variety of perspectives on the flowers. California poppies are one of the most common species of wildflower here. But they don't open until they have warmed up in the sun, so no need to rush here for sunrise.

Getting there: From US-101, go east 3 miles on CA-154/San Marcos Pass

Road. Turn left on Figueroa Mountain Road.

This is a narrow mountain road and your drive may take you 15 miles or more with an elevation rise of 3,000 feet. It is not recommended for large vehicles or vehicles pulling trailers.

Time required: You'll probably need 2 - 3 hours or more to navigate the road and have some time for photography.

Nearby location: Also in the spring, the oak-laden hills and pastures in the first mile or two of Figueroa Mountain Road may offer wildflowers like wild mustard.

Santa Rita Hills Wine District

Although technically not natural landmarks, the many wine regions of California can provide attractive pastoral views. The Santa Rita Hills wine district is an excellent example, with vineyards on smaller hills surrounded by much taller slopes, towering 1,000 feet higher in the background.

Photo advice: Spring can be an excellent time to see the vineyards with an attractive undergrowth of green grass or yellow mustard.

Getting there: One example is a vineyard owned by Sanford Winery, at 5010 Santa Rosa Road in Lompoc. From US-101, take the Santa Rosa Road exit and follow Santa Rosa Road 4.8 miles east through the vineyards to Sanford Winery.

Nearby location: For the wine itself, consider stopping to taste at Gainey, Melville and Beckman Vineyards in the area.

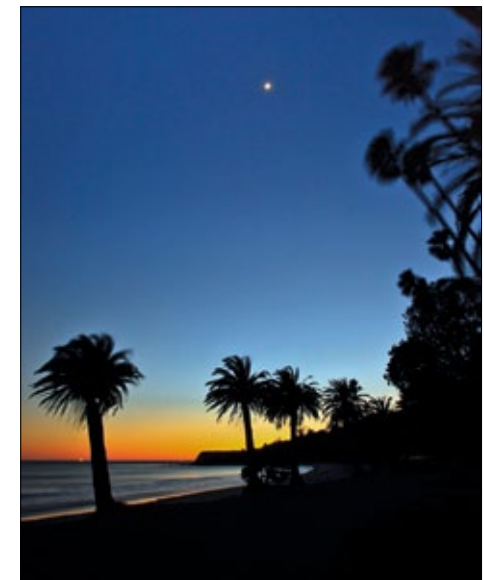
Refugio State Beach

Are you looking for the stereotypical Southern California beach with palm trees near the ocean? You are in luck. You will find some alongside the campground at Refugio State Beach.

I was staying in this campground on the night of March 10, 2011. The next morning I was woken at dawn by the campground host. He informed me that there had been a 9.0 earthquake off the coast of Japan, which could possibly cause a tsunami wave to arrive in about an hour. I immediately took my camera to the shore to catch photos of the wave if one did arrive. The ground in the campground is only a few feet above sea level, so I was prepared to run up a nearby hill if the water of the adjacent bay started to recede to form an incoming surge. Fortunately, the California coast was spared on that day.

Photo advice: Unfortunately, there's a road right next to the palm trees. So if that's going to be an issue in your composition, twilight shots where you can silhouette the trees and let the foreground fall into shadow, may be your best bet.

A modest population of up to 2,500 monarch butterflies may be present in palm and eucalyptus trees during cold weather. Ask rangers or the campground host if they're present during your visit.



'Blue' hour at Refugio State Beach

Getting there: Refugio State Beach is 13.9 miles west of Goleta on US-101, at the Refugio Road exit.

Nearby location: The palm trees are even more dense along the shoreline to the west, by the day use parking area.

Chumash Painted Cave State Historic Park



*Pictographs at Chumash
Painted Cave S.H.P.*

Chumash Painted Cave contains some of the best surviving examples of rock art created by the Chumash tribe of Native Americans. Sadly, the cave must remain closed to entry to prevent vandalism.

Photo advice: You must shoot through a heavy iron grill door installed across the entrance, so bring a mid-range zoom up the short path on the steep hill to the cave entrance.

Getting there: Take CA-154 from US-101 near Santa Barbara, 5.5 miles towards San Marcos Pass. Turn right on the steep, winding and very narrow Painted Cave Road. 1.9 miles up the road there is room for parking of 2 or 3 cars at the trailhead.

This road should not be attempted by RVs or vehicles pulling trailers.

Carpinteria State Beach

While the beach itself here is a fairly nondescript sand beach, just south of the campground, the adjacent Carpinteria Creek provides opportunities for cloud, sunrise and sunset reflections.

Photo advice: Morning hours will offer the least wind, while winter and spring seasons provide a break from the fog of summer and early fall.

Getting there: Take the Linden Ave. exit from US-101 in Carpinteria and head west. Take the first left onto Carpinteria Ave, go 0.2 miles and turn right onto Palm Ave. In 0.4 miles, turn right into the park.

