



Pam Ellis and Peggy Edwards



Briefcase Excursions are quick explorations of out-of-the-ordinary areas near cities you might travel to for business. Designed to cover the highlights, they present interesting activities and provide lodging and dining suggestions that are worthy of note.

Central Coast's Cambria seems to be the antithesis of contemporary California's "big-box-store" world. In the slow-paced village set along the rugged coast between the Pacific and the Santa Lucia Mountains, the only "chains" you will find will be silver and gold in the local boutiques. There are no large stores and no cookie-cutter restaurants or clothing stores. And, until very recently, mobile phone users had to leave town to make calls.

If you are looking for a charming seaside location, with fine restaurants, unique galleries and shops, and a variety of things to do, Cambria may just fill the bill. Located midway between San Francisco and Los Angeles, the village can be your base for exploring the wine country along Highway 46 between the coast and Paso Robles, enjoying the enchanting Hearst Castle, hiking the trails in San Simeon State Park, or hanging out with



the always entertaining elephant seals at their colony at Piedras Blancas Refuge. The climate is moderate with little variation through the year, and locals call the typical mixture of fog and sunshine “sibling rivalry.”

ACTIVITIES FILE

The heart of Cambria is Main Street. Running east and west, it is divided into two villages. Entering West Village from Highway 1, the first place you notice is a car wash. This car wash features flower beds and hanging baskets of blossoms and provides your first hint that this town is a little different. Most of the shops and restaurants are located along Main Street, although you'll find more establishments to explore for a couple of blocks along Burton Drive in the East Village. Many of the buildings are Victorian era, with gardens poking out from side yards and back patios. The forests, which give the town its marketing tag line of “Where

the Pines Meet the Sea,” are visible on the hills above both sides of Main Street.

It isn't often that we recommend visiting the town cemetery. But, then again, we've never seen one quite like this. It is old by California standards, established in 1870, and family plots document the lives of many generations. But what is so very interesting about this cemetery is that there seem to be few, if any, restrictions on how the lives of those buried there are memorialized. The result is a collection of tasteful monuments alongside gravesites with plastic and marble statues, random stones outlining plots, windsocks adhered to poles, seashells, fountains, and even pink plastic flamingos. Reach it on Bridge Street in the East Village.

Highway 46 intersects Highway 1 east of Cambria and leads up to the 180 wineries with 138 tasting rooms in the Paso Robles appellation. The *Los Angeles Times*



Cambria Cemetery

noted that this section of Highway 46 is “about as fine a drive as can be, cutting for forty miles across mounded hills. In spring, there are wildflowers and just about every turn leads to a pocket of wineries.” It is just as lovely in the fall when the vines turn shades of orange and red. Paso Robles is the third largest and fastest growing wine region in California and is known for its splendid red wines. If you like your red wine, we suggest you find a full or half day tour that offers your favorite varietals and leave the driving to them.

No trip to this area would be complete without a visit to Hearst Castle. Even if you have been there many times before, you may be interested in the new “Gardens and Vistas” tour, available in the late afternoons, depending on the time of year. Visitors can stroll through the gardens and enjoy the sunset just as William Randolph Hearst’s guests would have done in the heyday of this magnificent estate. The gardens were designed by Hearst and architect Julia Morgan to enhance the beauty of the buildings on “The Enchanted Hill,” as

Hearst Castle was known. As you approach the turnoff to the visitor’s center, keep your eyes open for the zebras that graze alongside the cattle, sometimes right at the edge of the road.

In complete contrast to Hearst Castle, Nit Wit Ridge is perched on the side of a steep hill in Cambria above the West Village. Built by the town’s garbage collector, Arthur Harold Beal, from the 1920s to the 1970s, it is constructed entirely from junk he collected (along with the beer cans he emptied). While Hearst and Beal created very different masterpieces, they shared an obsession for creating living spaces reflecting their individual and unique visions and materials at hand.

For walking or hiking, stay in town and follow two wooden boardwalks along the bluffs above the shore or head a couple miles north to San Simeon State Park. Along Moonstone Beach, a wooden boardwalk follows the shore just across the street from the hotels and restaurants that line Moonstone Beach Drive. You might spot sea otters and seals along the rocks at the north end just before you reach the picnic area with barbeques and terrific views at Leffingwell Landing State Park. Another boardwalk with connecting trails is south in the Fiscalini Ranch Reserve.



Nit Wit Ridge



Moonstone Beach at sunset

San Simeon State Park is one of the oldest parts of the California park system and also contains some of the most recently acquired land. Situated along the coast, a 3.3-mile trail includes scenic overlooks and interpretive panels with information about the wildlife and habitat.

Piedras Blancas, seven miles north of San Simeon, is home to a colony of about 15,000 elephant seals. Although each animal spends eight to ten months in the open ocean and migrates thousands of miles each year, there is always something happening on this rocky beach. While the alpha males are a sight to behold at up to sixteen feet long and 6,000 pounds, it is the pups that capture your hearts. Born December through February, the pups are left alone by March to teach themselves to swim and survive until September when they return to rest.

LODGING AND RESTAURANT FILE

As always, we recommend using [Tripadvisor.com](https://www.tripadvisor.com) as a source in planning your visit. The top two hotels listed on this website are the luxurious Blue Dolphin

Inn and the equally beautiful Sand Pebbles Inn. Situated on Moonstone Beach Drive overlooking the shore, the Blue Dolphin caters to adults, and the Sand Pebbles to families. Both include breakfast, with the Blue Dolphin providing a unique “to go” hot breakfast that can be enjoyed in your room or, even better, along the beach or at the picnic tables at the north end of the boardwalk. A variety of other hotels line the coast in Cambria, most on Moonstone Beach.

“Variety” is also a good word to describe the available dining options. For a town of only 7,000 residents, Cambria offers a large number of excellent restaurants. Ranging from international, California, and seafood cuisine (Sow’s Ear and Robin’s in the East Village, Madeline’s in the West Village, and the Sea Chest Oyster Bar on Moonstone Beach Drive) to the casual (Sandy’s Deli, Main Street Grill, and Redwood Café), there is a selection for every taste and every budget.

The Hamlet Restaurant at Moonstone Gardens offers a spectacular ocean view from the second-story dining room and bar. They also prepare some of the finest fried

calamari we've ever tasted. It ranks at least in our top four, and we'll have to justify a return trip to determine whether it deserves the first spot!

Plan at least two days in this lovely area. You'll feel deprived if you just pass through and don't stop to smell the fresh ocean breezes mixed with the lovely scent of the pines.

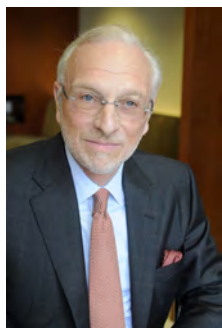
Business partners Pam Ellis and Peggy Edwards developed Briefcase Excursions after too many airport to hotel to conference center to hotel to airport trips. They decided to break the cycle and add a day or two of exploring for their mental and physical well being.

Photos by Pam Ellis and Peggy Edwards



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