

# Travel



## California's Cowboy Coast

Grapevines may have replaced many of the cattle ranches that used to dominate this part of Central California, but the imposing Hearst Ranch retains its Western heritage. *By Karen Catchpole*



Drive north from Cayucos along California's iconic Highway 1, hugging the coves, beaches, and cliffs of the Pacific Ocean coastline, and something remarkable happens. Slowly but surely, the sea and surf vibe peels way. Beaters with surfboards strapped to the top start to become outnumbered by Silverados and F250s. Suntans concede to farmers' tans. You are now in Hearst Ranch territory.

What started off as 50,000 acres purchased by George Hearst (an American businessman and father of newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst) in 1865 eventually grew to 250,000 acres—nearly 400 square miles. In 2005, a long-standing development project slated for the property was ultimately scrapped in favor of creating the Hearst Ranch Conservation Project, which gifted 13 miles of Hearst-owned coastline

to the state of California, creating a conservation easement that is currently overseen by the California Rangeland Trust.

Suddenly, tourists and locals had access to 30 beaches and 949 acres of parkland that were previously off limits. The donation also added 18 miles to the California Coastal Trail Project, furthering its goal to create a continuous network of public access trails along the California coastline, covering 1,200 miles from Oregon to Mexico.

Even minus the area of that land donation, the Hearst Ranch remains one of the largest cattle operations on the California coast. It boasts 82,000 acres, divided between the coastal San Simeon rangeland and the Jack Ranch, further inland.

“The Hearst Ranch and the Jack Ranch



MOVING CATTLE BELOW THE HISTORIC HEARST CASTLE, ON THE 82,000-ACRE HEARST RANCH.

are totally different in landscape and biology,” explains ranch manager Cliff Garrison. “San Simeon has a Mediterranean climate, with coastal influences. It ranges in elevation from sea-level to over 3,600 feet where it crosses over the Santa Lucia Mountains. With so many canyons and valleys and hills, it’s harder to find cattle here. The Jack Ranch is mostly flat.”

So which range does he prefer to ride?

“Cowboying is challenging in any circumstances, be it weather or terrain,” he says, “so I have cowboys that are good in both environments. But the San Simeon portion is more challenging.”

In 1999, the entire Hearst Ranch operation went back to its roots by adopting a 100-percent grass-fed policy, and it’s now the largest single-source grass-fed and grass-finished beef supplier in the United States, with about 2,200 head, primarily Angus, between the two ranches.

However, you’re more likely to see zebras than cattle on the rangeland imme-

diately abutting Highway 1. These are beloved refugees from the private zoo created by William Randolph Hearst as part of his La Cuesta Encantada (Enchanted Hill) mansion estate, known as Hearst Castle. It has operated as the Hearst San Simeon State Historical Monument since 1957, when 120 acres of land, the structures, and all their contents (including a nearly priceless collection of art) were donated to the state of California.

The zoo is long gone but the castle remains in all its opulent glory. Visitors—more than 45 million so far—are treated to tantalizing glimpses of the private screening room, lavish bedrooms, epic indoor and outdoor swimming pools, and much more during daily guided tours.

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Since Hearst Castle staff frown on overnight guests, make your base in the postcard-perfect town of Cambria, which straddles Highway 1 less than 10

minutes south of Hearst Castle. Though Cambria was founded in the mid-1800s and residents did well in lumber, whaling, and agriculture, it wasn’t until Hearst began construction of his mansion that the town’s fortunes changed. As part of the Hearst project, Highway 1 connecting Carmel and Cambria was built, and Cambria was an isolated village no more.

Standouts among the many hotel options in Cambria include The Olallieberry Inn, which was built in 1873 and is one of the oldest buildings in town. It now offers antique-filled guest rooms and farmhouse hospitality including nightly wine and hors d’oeuvres get-togethers for guests. And you can’t miss the rustic log construction of the J. Patrick House, where every room has a fireplace but none have a TV. The newest hotel in Cambria is the eco-minded and smoke-free El Colibri Boutique Hotel and Spa. It’s also the largest and most full-service with 34 rooms, a spa, and a stylish wine bar.

Robin’s, opened in 2012 in a Spanish-style home built in Cambria in 1930, offers

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“handcrafted global cuisine” using local ingredients whenever possible. The owner’s Singaporean roots show in the Asian influences on the extensive menu. For a more classic take on beef (from Harris Ranch), try

the Cambria Pub and Steak House. Happy hour specials (weekdays from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m.) are some of the most generous in the area, including \$1 pints of draft beer.

If beer’s really your thing, head for the Cambria Beer Company. Opened in 2012, this hometown brewery crafts a rotating selection of beers on tap. There’s homemade root beer for the kids and designated drivers too.

Drive another 10 miles south and you’ll find the beachfront town of Cayucos, home of the Old Cayucos Tavern and Cardroom, where things are pretty much the way they’ve been since the place

opened in the 1800s, including the back-room cardroom, billiards tables, and even a money changing cage. The building is original as well—and that includes the carved wood bar! There's a jukebox and live music some nights.

Cayucos also has a host of shops jam-packed with antiques and ranching memorabilia, including Remember When, Remember When Too, and American Pie Antiques. Be prepared to sacrifice a whole day if you really want to explore their wares.

Follow your nose to the Brown Butter Cookie Company, where free samples and a mind-boggling array of freshly baked gourmet cookies (including chocolate chunk, coconut lime, espresso and, my favorite, peanut butter, await). Every cookie is hand rolled and topped with a flavor-enhancing sprinkle of pure sea salt. Opened by Christa and Tracie Hozie in 2009, this place is already a Cayucos institution, and the sisters opened a new retail



**THIS ROGUE ZEBRA IS A LEFTOVER FROM THE PRIVATE ZOO OF WILLIAM RANDOLPH HEARST.**

store in nearby Paso Robles this year.

Ruddell's Smokehouse, owned by Jim Ruddell, is famous for its smoked fish, pork, and chicken. There's no indoor seating so take your meal to one of the tables outside or head for the Cayucos pier for a picnic over the water.

If you're tempted to linger in Cayucos, check in to the Shoreline Inn. While rooms are more or less motel style, the

oceanfront location can't be beat and all rooms have sea views and private patios.

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While visiting Hearst Castle is easy, exploring Hearst Ranch is trickier. Invitation-only rides through the ranch are sometimes offered, but the best way for visitors to experience the area's unique convergence of ranchland and sea is at

PHOTO BY STEVE E. MILLER

San Simeon State Park. The park, which was established on land donated by the Hearsts in 1932 and one of the oldest parks in the California state system, can be accessed directly across from the Hearst Castle State Park entrance on the other side of Highway 1.

Here you can stroll along William Randolph Hearst Memorial Beach in a protected cove that's frequented by endlessly entertaining sea otters. A warm freshwater creek flows into the ocean here and it's a favorite splashing spot for families. Climb a short trail up a ridge off the beach and you'll reach San Simeon Point, a dramatic bit of land that juts toward the ocean and offers unfettered coastal views north and south.

Though it's technically still part of the private Hearst Ranch and not the state park, respectful visitors are tolerated on San Simeon Point. Locals know this is one of the best spots on the coast to see dolphins and humpback whales, which congregate here from May through October, and grey whales, which migrate through the area from December through April. Be sure to turn around and look inland too for a fairy tale-like view of Hearst Castle shimmering on its lofty ridge in the distance.

The park also has a three-mile trail that takes you through a seasonal wetland area. The often shaded trail includes vista points over the ocean, benches, and interpretive signs with information about the area's flora and fauna. A portion of the trail is wheelchair accessible. For a closer look at the relationship between land and sea, visit the park's Coastal Discovery Center. Operated in a partnership between the Monterey

Bay National Marine Sanctuary and California State Parks, the family-friendly center offers free hands-on tours (reservations required) including beach walks, tide-pooling, and plankton collection and analysis lead by marine biologists.

Less than ¼ mile from the San Simeon State Park parking lot is the tiny hamlet of San Simeon, not much more than a cluster of simple but elegant Spanish-style homes, warehouses built to store William Randolph Hearst's art collection (they're now empty), and a one-room schoolhouse.

You'll also find Sebastian's Store in San Simeon. Built in 1852 on San Simeon Point to provision whalers, the building was towed into town when it was no longer needed on the point. Sebastian's has been family-owned since 1914 and now functions as the local post office, a general store, and a gourmet lunch joint. Be prepared to wait at least 30 minutes to place your order (longer on weekends), but that gives you time to make your selection from the extensive sandwich, burger, and salad menu. Once your meal is ready, claim a spot on the wrap-around wooden deck or on a nearby picnic table.

Sebastian's Store is also home to the tasting room for the Hearst Ranch Winery, which started a few years ago after local wine maker Jim Saunders made the winning bid on a lavish evening with William Randolph Hearst's great-grandson and ranch manager, Steve Hearst, during an annual cancer research fund raiser.

"To thank Steve for a wonderful time I made several special bottles of wine with the ranch's 'H' brand hand-etched and hand-painted onto the

bottles,” says Saunders.

Hearst immediately expressed interest in partnering to create Hearst Ranch Wines, and six months later, in early 2010, Hearst and Saunders had bottled the first Hearst Ranch Winery wines.

They’ve since won numerous awards, including, most recently, Best of Show Red Wines for their 2009 Three Sisters Cuvée, at the 2012 California State Fair; Gold for their 2010 Tempranillo “Chilcano” at the 2012 San Francisco International Wine Competition; and Double Gold for their 2010 Cabernet Sauvignon, “Bunkhouse” wine at the 2013 San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition.

Though the winery has traditionally purchased grapes from trusted growers in the region, Saunders has just planted a small block of Malbec on the knoll directly in front of Hearst Castle. He notes that this is the first crop planted on the hilltop since William Randolph Hearst’s days, more than 60 years ago. Balsamic vinegar



**HEARST RANCH COWBOYS AND THEIR HORSES GATHER AROUND THE WATER TROUGH.**

and flavored olive oils are also made at the Hearst Ranch Winery, and the wine making facility in nearby Paso Robles can be toured by appointment.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, the Hearst family is gearing up to celebrate the ranch’s 150th anniversary in 2015. An early salvo is *Hearst Ranch: Family, Land and Legacy* by Victoria Kastner, the official historian of Hearst Castle. The 240-page book (\$55, amazon.com) went on

sale in November and includes 300 never-before-seen pictures of ranch buildings and back country.

“Seven generations of the Hearst family have stood on this dirt and have been privileged to do so,” says Steve Hearst. “It’s a privately owned ranch, but in its own way, it is a true asset for California as well, because it perpetuates this natural history and this way of life for future generations.” 🍷

PHOTO BY RICHARD FIELD LEVINE