

explore

San Luis Obispo County

DISCOVERING THE POWER
OF SLOWING DOWN ON
CALIFORNIA'S CENTRAL COAST

The sprawling natural beauty of SLO CAL first caught my eye from the plane – and I was sitting in the aisle. The larger-than-life landscapes looked more like the Cape regions of South Africa than California’s Central Coast. Once on the ground, the scenic drives up Highway 1 and the 101 became more about the journey than the destination (though those were gorgeous, too).

I lived in California for nearly a decade and no one ever really talked about San Luis Obispo County. I mistakenly assumed it was because there was nothing to talk about. Now that we’ve been properly introduced, I am flabbergasted how a place so magical could be overlooked by so many. Simply put, the region is striking.

Don’t mistake SLO CAL’s slow vibe for boring. Once you witness the region’s geologic features, wildlife, friendly locals, good eats, vineyards, and unique experiences, it only makes sense to slow down and soak it all in. Trust me, when you’re here, you won’t want to miss a single drop.



GETTING THERE & AROUND

Planes, trains, and automobiles – these are all great ways you can get to the magic of SLO CAL. Those who want to fly into SBP, the regional airport, can catch direct flights (and easy connections) via Los Angeles, San Francisco, Las Vegas, Denver, Phoenix, Seattle, San Diego, and (starting in June 2020) Portland, Oregon. If you’ve got the time, take the scenic route up from Los Angeles, tracing the coast along the famed Pacific Coast Highway in a car (3 hours) or on-board Amtrak’s Pacific Surfliner (6 hours).

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Cerro, Downtown San Luis Obispo

Hotel Cerro opened in December 2019 as San Luis Obispo’s first full-service luxury hotel – and she’s a beaut. Rooms and suites are contemporary and have a sophisticated country-industrial look with distressed hardwood floors, polished concrete, knitted fabrics, leather desks, open-plan layouts, and exposed brick. Guests can embrace the SLO CAL lifestyle with free bike rentals, strolls through the edible garden, free morning yoga classes, and by sipping a glass of local wine with a view at the rooftop pool. The hotel has a handful of restaurant and bar options (though I’m not sure of their celiac safety status) and a prime location right smack in downtown SLO. Even if you don’t stay here, a visit to the 4,000-square-foot spa is a must. Treatments, like the hot salt stone massage, focus on local ingredients and restorative, rejuvenating properties.

Allegretto Vineyard Resort, Paso Robles

Located in SLO CAL’s wine country, this upscale hotel has the uncanny ability to make you feel like you’re in Tuscany. Tall Italian Cypress trees dot the landscape, rows of house vineyards stretch out from the back, and classic Mediterranean details run throughout the property. Rooms and suites have exquisite attention to detail, featuring luxe amenities like minibars, personal terraces, and big, comfy beds. An on-site tasting room, small but thoughtful spa, vineyard-facing pool area, gorgeous chapel, and hallways that double as an art gallery make the Allegretto feel like a destination in its own right. The hotel’s **Cello Restaurant** focuses on tasty Mediterranean cuisine, though their understanding and communication around celiac safety could use improvement.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

In downtown SLO, start your mornings by grabbing some caffeine from **Scout Coffee** before watching the folks at **SEEDS** prepare your custom smoothie bowl across the street. Lunch and dinner belong to **The Creamery Marketplace**, home to some of the area's most beloved eateries. Dedicated sushi lovers will be surprised by **Goshi Japanese's** fish selection and quality, though the menu also caters to sushi novices. Celiacs will want to stick to sashimi or nigiri to stay safe, and don't be shy about asking for the gluten-free soy sauce. Over at hotspot **Mistura**, the GF-marked menu celebrates the diversity of Peruvian cuisine, and features must-tries like the causa (cold, whipped potatoes), cebiche (lime-marinated seafood), grilled octopus, and chupe (a Peruvian Bouillabaisse). Cider lovers will want to check out the taps at **SLO Cider Bar**. Sip ciders from around the world as well as funky, experimental house ciders crafted through natural fermentation.

Every Thursday night, the SLO farmers market takes over a few downtown blocks and is a great place to soak in some energy and check out local eats and fresh produce. I found out too late that SLO is known for its barbecue, but if you want a taste, **Old San Luis Barbeue Company** boasts swimming reviews from both gluten-free and non-gluten-free folks. This small company has cooked up a big fan base with their traditional Santa Maria-style barbecue that grills hand-trimmed meat atop red oak coals.

In Paso Robles, **Bless Your Heart Baking** whips up goodies like doughnuts, loaves of bread, and desserts that are 100 percent gluten-free and sometimes vegan and/or low-glycemic. Their limited cafe menu serves salads and sandwiches (including a simple bacon, egg, and waffle sandwich that's great to grab-and-go). For a marked menu and some seriously delicious California-inspired cuisine, make your way to **Thomas Hill Organics** where they focus on grass-fed meats, organic produce, and a seasonal menu. For drinks, head over to **Tin City**, a hip industrial complex, where you can taste your way through ciders at **Tin City Cider** and wines from nearly 20 wineries like **ONX Winery**, **Nicora**, **Turtle Rock Vineyards**, **Monochrome Wines**, and **Powell Mountain Cellars**.

Other options around SLO CAL include seafood at **Cracked Crab** or sunset dining at **Marisol at the Cliffs** in Pismo Beach, **In-N-Out Burger** (order protein style!) in Atascadero, and **Fig at Courtney's House** in Templeton, a casual, socially conscious cafe that employs adults with intellectual or developmental disabilities.

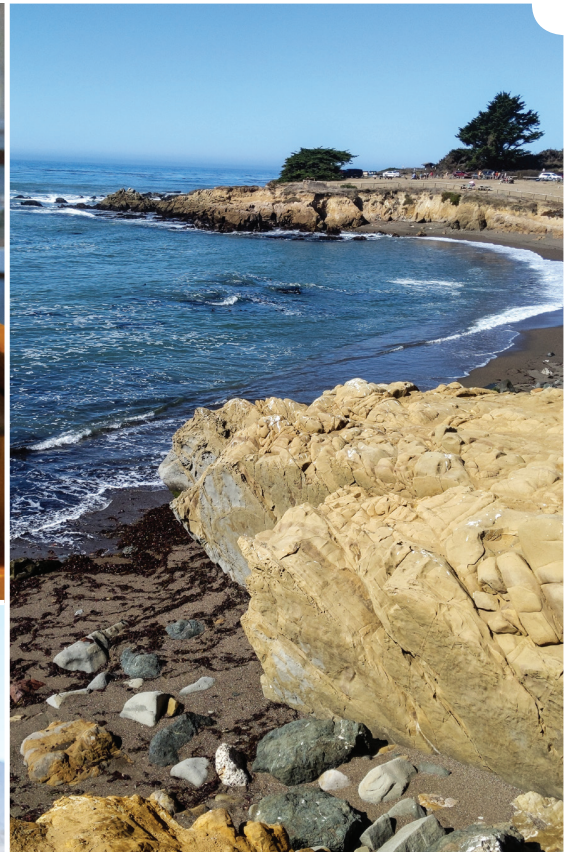
WHAT TO DO

Downtown SLO's boutiques, galleries, and sights are best explored on foot, on your own time. **The Secret Garden Organic Herb Shop** offers over 200 loose-leaf tea blends that tackle everything from insomnia and anxiety to constipation and chronic pain – and you can work with the owner to make custom blends for your specific needs. For a piece of history, join one of the docent-led tours of the **Mission San Luis Obispo de Tolosa**, which was founded in 1772, still holds regular masses today, and is unique to




other California Missions. Leave your mark on SLO in **Bubblegum Alley** where an impressive (and kind of disgusting) tradition finds colorful wads of gum squished into the cement walls.

Get a different perspective of SLO CAL's wine country by exploring Paso Robles on bike with **Paso Bike Tours**. Their all-day wine tour is a challenge, but you'll be rewarded with wine tastings and a picnic lunch. However, don't sell yourself short by only tasting the wine. **Kiler Ridge Olive Farm** welcomes visitors to taste their artisan olive oil and learn a



little more about the process, while **Central Coast Distillery** in Atascadero take tasting to the next level with their foraging tours. You'll hit the road with the owners, scouring for whatever seasonal edibles you find along the way and return to the tasting room to incorporate them into unforgettable elixir cocktails.

Over in Morro Bay, join a **Central Coast Outdoors** kayaking excursion around the **Morro Bay National Estuary**, where you can paddle out to a working oyster barge and float past sea lions, seals, otters, and tons of birds. This estuary is one of the cleanest in the country and it attracts unique wildlife and sports gorgeous views in all directions. 



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Katherine Alex Beaven is a travel and food writer and photographer. Whether on assignment or on vacation, Alex can usually be found at the nearest food cart or restaurant sniffing out the local gluten-free goodies. Her photography site, **katherinealex.com**, features some of the wildlife, landscapes, and portraits she's photographed along the way.