



One Day In Monterey

L.A. Parent's Calendar Editor, Michael Berick, is extremely savvy when it comes to the kids' music and theater scene (and grownup stuff, too) and always seems one step ahead when it comes to finding cool things for kids and parents to do in the L.A. area. He traveled a little farther afield to bring us this guest post on a trip he took recently with his wife and 8-year-old daughter Julia to the scenic seaside town of Monterey. It made me want to make the trip!

On a recent trip back from visiting family in Northern California, we were able to carve out a day in **Monterey**. I had never been to the scenic coastal city before, and my main impression of it came from watching the music documentary *Monterey Pop* many moons ago. The city, as it turns out, holds a lovely mix of modern and historic California (who knew, for instance, that the California's first theater was started in an old Monterey tavern?).



The Portola Hotel and Spa hosted our stay in Monterey. Situated downtown within shouting distance of Fisherman's Wharf, it is also convenient to the prime tourist destination, Cannery Row. The spacious hotel welcomes guests in a very special, and extremely delicious, way – with a complimentary chocolate chip cookie. A truly tasty way to start our stay!

The hotel recently has started a new program for its young guests. The Portola Pirates program offers kids a chance to explore a bit of the hotel, learn a little history and get some treats. At check-in, children received a small treasure box stocked with pirate-themed goodies, including a "treasure map."

My wife and I accompanied our 8-year-old daughter (the map really needs an adult's supervision) as she hunted around the hotel's lobby, restaurants and ground to answer the map's short set of questions to lead us to a "treasure chest" in one of the restaurants (Peter B's). While the box had been somewhat plundered of prizes when we got to it, my daughter didn't seem to mind having enjoyed the investigative adventure and the treats she got in her small box (a rubber duck, pirate bandana, etc).

Not only did our comfy room come with a nice view, but there was also a "complimentary" seagull on our balcony greeting us. When the gull realized that we weren't going to share our cookies, it flew off.

After settling in, we flew off, too, for our main tourist first destination – the fabled Monterey Bay Aquarium. We were able to get two-day pass tickets from the front desk so we didn't have to wait in line. The hotel staff, overall, was extremely helpful and informative, giving us directions that greatly improved upon our Web-generated mapping.



The aquarium lived up to its billing. It is an impressive facility, with something that captivated all three of us. My wife found the jellyfish tanks truly spectacular. With simple backgrounds and effective lighting, the environment made these creatures luminescent. Similarly, I enjoyed the Sea

Horse exhibit. Our daughter was drawn to the touch tanks and sea otters. There was more than enough to see in our initial 90-minute-plus visit, so it was good that we got two-day tickets.

Returning to the hotel, we dined at the main restaurant, Jacks. Although an upscale, white-tablecloth restaurant, it was very accommodating for children. As part of the Portola Pirates' program, they have a new kids' menu offering eight different entrees (all with clever Buccaneer-themed names) for \$4.99. My daughter, in an adventurous spirit, went off that menu and chose the special corn chowder with a calamari appetizer. My wife went with a trio of small plates, and I had a halibut. It was all quite tasty, and the pea soup that my wife and I both got was especially delicious (fresh made and not cream-based)

On Monday, we took advantage of having a little extra time and strolled down to the aquarium along the coastal Monterey Recreational Trail. It's a pretty walk, and we got a great look at the harbor seals in the bay. In fact, it was a little too close-up as we got a good whiff of the fragrant mammals.

Monterey also has a convenient and free trolley that we took to Fisherman's Wharf. The Wharf is mainly a place for tourists and is populated mainly with gift shops, restaurants and sight-seeing boats. While we didn't have time for a water excursion, we did do a taste-trek of the various clam chowder samples hawked along the wharf. My wife joked that you could make a meal just from the samples but we chose to dine at our daughter's favorite, Gilbert's, to indulge in big bread bowls of chowder and more normal size shrimp cocktail.

We left Monterey with full bellies, good memories and more spots to check out next time. One day definitely was not long enough a visit. We didn't even get to check out the hotel's spa facilities. Families with young kids will probably want to investigate the Monterey Youth Museum, or go on a glass-bottom boat ride, while the literary-minded might want to venture over to Salinas for the Steinbeck Center.

The details: Monterey is about 300 miles northwest of Los Angeles. Find more information about lodging, attractions and events through the Monterey County Convention and Visitor Bureau.