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PRETTY PIT STOP
Cambria Beach Lodge seeks
to elevate the roadside hotel

PHOTOGRAPH BY ERICA MENDER

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WEEKENDER

Cambria

IDEALLY SITUATED FOR EXPLORING THE CENTRAL COAST, THE TOWN HAS MORE TO IT THAN CHARM ALONE



CAMBRIA IS WHERE the beach turns into the coast. The dunes and ranchlands to the south give way to hills covered by rare native Monterey pine forests, while the rocky shoreline is a preamble to the cliffs of Big Sur farther up Highway 1. The last sizable stop on the road to Hearst Castle, the village might look Tudor-cute, but take some time and you'll find fading hints of Cambria's bohemian heyday in Main Street's craft shops and galleries, with nary a fast-food franchise in sight. No surf town, Cambria is a hamlet by the sea, belonging to neither California's north nor south but to that great middle kingdom, the Central Coast. > MATT JAFFE

MORNING

» If you want to stay by the ocean, you'll have to cross Highway 1, which divides the village from the Pacific, to **Moonstone Beach**. While most of the hotels across from the water can't hide their motel bones, the newly redone **Cambria Beach Lodge** (\$119-\$249) opts for a stylishly weathered seaside cottage feel in rooms with log nightstands

and ocean hues. From here, walk the boardwalk to see otters at **Leffingwell Landing**. Or pedal one of the lodge's Linus bikes to Main Street for a pesto-cheese twist or spinach-feta croissant from the **French Corner Bakery**. The shop is in the East Village, the older, more soulful section of town, which has 19th-century buildings dat-

SEA BREEZY

Moonstone Beach and its boardwalk (above); Cambria Beach Lodge's complimentary fleet (opposite)

ing to Cambria's mining and whaling past. Across the street, **Linn's Restaurant** is all about olallieberry, whether in the syrup on French toast made with thick-cut baguette slices or in a celebrated pie (best enjoyed five miles out in the country at

FROM LEFT: ISTOCK.COM/ROSSING 10/14M; ERICA REBENDER



Linn's Fruit Bin Farmstore). Post-breakfast, drive north to the Piedras Blancas elephant seal rookery. By this month you won't see SUV-size alpha males banging chests, but you'll still get incomparable

views of hundreds of bellowing seals lounging in the sun and lolling in the surf. Up coast, that castlelike tower is part of the 1875 Piedras Blancas Light Station, which is open for two-hour tours.



AFTERNOON

» About midway between the light-house and Cambria is the turnoff for Hearst Castle, but stay strong: Offering seasonal evening tours, the real-life Xanadu is even more spectacular at night. Instead try William Randolph Hearst Memorial Beach and walk above San Simeon Cove's waves on the 850-foot pier, the successor to wharves where whale oil was shipped out in the 19th century and castle-bound artwork and antiques began arriving in the 1920s. Hike through stands of Monterey pines draped with Spanish moss to San Simeon Point, or paddle the bay with Sea for Yourself Kayak Outfitters.

Then it's time for a juicy burger made with Hearst Ranch grass-fed beef at Sebastian's, located in a former general store from 1873 that also houses a Hearst Ranch Winery tasting room. Back in Cambria, Robin's rambles through a historic adobe onto a serene trellised patio. The menu roams, too, from lamb curry burritos to falafel wraps to a salmon bisque that's been a favorite since the restaurant's 1985 opening. Catch the sunset from a driftwood bench at the remarkable 437-acre Fiscalini Ranch Preserve. Ocean-side trails cross the marine terrace, climbing into the forest and connecting with a path that follows Santa Rosa



Side Trip

» Drive over the rolling hills along State Highway 46 for wine tasting near Paso Robles. Home to more than 200 wineries in 11 American Viticultural Areas, the wine country is a single region of many parts. Some top wineries are along back roads west of town. Out in the Adelaida District, Halter Ranch opened its tasting room last year and offers three-hour excursions that explore the property's nearly 300 acres of vineyards.

Creek to the village. The trail is around the corner from El Colibri Hotel & Spa (\$115-\$350), a boutique Mediterranean inn where a wine bar pours Paso Robles Rhône varietals and modern wood-plank furnishings decorate rooms warmed by stacked-tile gas fireplaces.

EVENING

» There's no such thing as been there, done that at Hearst Castle. But seasonal evening tours that visit the main houses and let you see the gardens and Neptune Pool aglow at twilight offer a singular experience. For dinner, don't be shy about topping the pan-seared filet mignon with a crab cake at Madeline's Restaurant and Tasting Room. The Black Cat Bistro, an intimate warren of rooms in a onetime residence, serves up locally sourced dishes, including an appetizer made with farm-raised red abalone and an ancho-coffee-glazed stuffed pork chop. Though nightlife isn't one of Cambria's high points, the Pewter Plough Playhouse features live music by the likes of the Central Coast Jazz Institute. Or grab a beer at Mozzi's Saloon. It's in a 1922 building on Main Street complete with latter-day pinup-style murals of cowgirls. ●



GETTING THERE: Cambria is about 220 miles from L.A. The more scenic route is Highway 1 through Santa Barbara County, of course; to shave off half an hour or so, join Highway 1 from the 101 at San Luis Obispo, then continue north past Morro Bay and Cayucos. Or take State Highway 46 west from the 101 at Paso Robles. **PEAK TIME:** With travelers flocking to Hearst Castle, summer is the busiest time, but spring is the most beautiful season, especially with California poppies and other wildflowers blooming in the verdant hills. **WEATHER REPORT:** Pretty much ideal year-round, thanks to the moderating ocean influence, which means that average temperatures range from the mid-60s to low 70s. April is near the end of the rainy season, with 1.4 inches of rain.