MARVELOUS MENDOCINO

On land and on sea, adventure abounds in this California county

By Matt Villano

Locals call it “The Cathedral,” and to me the sea cave just south of the village of Mendocino on the Northern California coast certainly is a spiritual spot. Two-story rock walls stretch to the ceiling, arcing slightly as they meet the top. Even whispers echo, echo, echo. If you look closely, you might find harbor seals rocking with the waves.

I recently made the leisurely 10-minute paddle to this special place from Van Damme State Park. My guide, Craig Comen, owner of Kayak Mendocino, gave me a brief safety talk and then led the way on our kayak excursion.

Mendocino and the county that bears the same name in the scenic land west and north of Sonoma County has been the setting of some of my most memorable hikes, epic off-road adventures, unique beachcombing and more. The county, stretching north of the coastal community of Rockport, south to Gualala and east to the Mendocino National Forest, is wild, sparsely populated and still a relative secret.

When I think about outdoor adventure in the extended Bay Area, I think of Mendocino County first. And considering that most “Mendo” destinations are less than two hours by car from the Charles M. Schulz Sonoma County Airport in Santa Rosa, the county is a great area to spend a vacation recharging in nature.

Picturesque Paddle

My two-hour trip with Kayak Mendocino (kayakmendocino.com) launched on a beach just outside Little River, which is a small community about 3 miles south of the village of Mendocino. As we made the short paddle out, Comen—who, whether as a professional surfer or a kayak guide has made his living in the ocean for 40 years—told me about gray whales swimming close to shore from December into April. It’s a portion of their
annual roundtrip migration between Alaska and Mexico that totals as much as 12,000 miles.

He also told me about curious harbor seals that enjoy Mendocino’s secluded shores, as well as the shrimp, mollusks and herring that populate the waters. Comen then explained more about the cave itself—the ancient caves on the Mendocino County coast are continually reshaped by erosion from crashing waves, meaning they’re quite literally carved into the hillside. From the outside looking in, the caves appear dark. Inside, however, they are bright, glowing green with staffs of sunlight, and are almost hopeful shelters from the constant churn of the ocean.

After exploring The Cathedral, we paddled around a point into a cove, where we marveled at the blue-green color of the water and the white froth where the ocean met the beach. Comen scanned the surf for seals.

“They’re usually around here sunning themselves on a rock,” he said, explaining, though, “It’s not a zoo,” and that sightings are not guaranteed. “Even when we don’t see them, it’s good to remember that seals and whales and all sorts of creatures are out here, just beyond the beach.”

We paddled toward shore, stopping about 20 feet from the beach to linger in silence, listening to the breaking waves and the Western gulls calling from above.

**A Walking Tour**

Another way to experience Mendocino County is a guided hike through the Point Arena-Stornetta Unit of the California Coastal National Monument with Margaret Lindgren, owner of Unbeaten Path Tours (unbeatenpathtours.com). Lindgren’s excursion in the southern end of the county starts at a trailhead near the Point Arena Lighthouse and heads south along the bluff tops toward Point Arena. Sea stacks, sea caves and seals abound.

The more than 1,660-acre parcel was formerly privately owned and is now part of the California Coastal National Monument. Lindgren explained how the entire Northern California coast sits on top of an elaborate system of fault lines, and that the coast is forever changing due to seismic activity.

“That constant movement means there’s always something new,” she said.

Playing off this idea of the constantly changing land, Lindgren structured the majority of the hike as an exercise in shifting forms. We gazed out upon a sea stack that had separated completely from the mainland and now sits like a chunk of layer cake in the Pacific. We peered over the edge of the bluffs to witness a tremendous sea arch—which could create a sea stack if its roof collapsed. We hiked past a sinkhole, a large depression on the surface formed as the surrounding rock collapsed into a subsurface void. Finally, we saw a blowhole, where sea water was forced to the surface, sometimes creating a geyser by wave action.

**LODGING**

**From intimate inns to luxury hotels, here are a few favorite Mendocino County lodging options.**

- **Brewery Gulch Inn:** Views of the surf and pines in a structure made from eco-salvaged redwood (brewerygulchinn.com).
- **Little River Inn:** Charming Victorian architecture on the Mendocino coastline. Watch the sunset from your private deck (littleriverinn.com).
- **North Cliff Hotel:** A breathtaking oceanfront getaway with spa rooms and private balconies (northcliffhotel.net). —M.V.
There were other notable sights, including a giant island that serves as a breeding ground for birds such as pelagic cormorants, and a cluster of shore pines covered in the beard-like California lace lichen.

We stopped at a freshwater creek that terminated into a crevice, creating what Lindgren dubbed “nature’s greatest infinity pool” in which gulls feed and bathe. We also passed an old Loran (a kind of radio navigation) station that was established during World War II and now serves as a field station for a local college.

We saw all of this in a less than 4-mile hike that took just two hours. “That’s what I love about this part of the California coast,” Lindgren said. “There’s just so much, and it’s incredibly fulfilling.”

Ranch Ride
To see even more of the county’s beauty in less time, consider exploring via all-terrain vehicle. Guests at the Inn at Newport Ranch can take a guided two-hour, 10-mile ATV tour of the 2,000-acre property. It’s near Fort Bragg, which is about 10 miles north of the village of Mendocino.
My tour started in front of the main inn, which sits like a manor overlooking the Pacific. Groundskeeper Peter Arnold greeted me with a cooler full of bottled water, then ushered me to a six-seat Polaris Ranger 4x4.

**STOP AT A STATE PARK**

- **Mendocino Headlands State Park:** Hiking and history combine at this Mendocino park featuring coastline looking out onto sea arches and caves. The visitor center is the Historic Ford House, which Jerome B. Ford—the superintendent of the first sawmill in Mendocino—built for his bride, Martha, in 1854 (parks.ca.gov/?page_id=442).

- **Russian Gulch State Park:** Just north of the town of Mendocino, 15 miles of hiking trails wind along a forested canyon, windswept cliffs and gorgeous beaches. Waves break against a collapsed sea cave known as Devil’s Punchbowl (parks.ca.gov/?page_id=432).

- **Schooner Gulch State Beach:** Home to “Bowling Ball Beach,” which is named for the round rocks that line the shore and are visible at low tide, this park near Point Arena is a perfect place for stunning sunsets and sunny afternoons (parks.ca.gov/?page_id=446).
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Arnold then drove the ATV nearly 800 feet up to a ridge, where we stopped at an overlook to watch hawks floating on thermals and the ocean twinkling in the sunlight. From that vantage, the entire coastline of Mendocino County came into view—a mélange of beaches, bluffs, forest and rivers that spread out like a natural playground brimming with adventure.

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Matt Villano is a freelance writer based in Healdsburg, California.

Alaska Airlines (alaskaair.com) offers daily service to Santa Rosa, the gateway to Mendocino County. For more on recreation in the area, go to visitmendocino.com.
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