

The Coastal Chronicle

25 January 2025

San Mateo County, California

A day at the beach



Alone

San Gregorio State Beach



Under repair
Pigeon Point Lighthouse

A day at the beach

SOURCES: Underlined words link to them.

For most of the world, the face of San Mateo (St Matthew) County consists of clustered enclaves of tech-financed wealth strung along the western shore of San Francisco Bay. If you fly to San Francisco, the city that completely fills the next county north, the airport where you land is in San Mateo.

The headquarters of two of the world's largest video game producers, Sony Interactive Entertainment (City of San Mateo) and Electronic Arts (Redwood City); YouTube (San Bruno), the world's second most-visited website after Google Search; bio-medical giants Genentech (South San Francisco) and Gilead Sciences (Foster City); and GoPro video cameras (City of San Mateo) are in San Mateo. Only three of the United States' 3,000-plus counties had a higher median household income in the 2020 U.S. Census.

But take one of the twisting roads that climb west over the spine of the Peninsula — the redwood forest-encrusted Santa Cruz Mountains — to San Mateo's Pacific Coast and the face is bereft of people, tech and wealth. It's full of sand, salt and surf.

Not all the county's 58 miles / 93 kilometers of coastline is beach. In places, the mountains leave no room for that, especially at high tide. But there are long and short stretches of state beaches totaling 40 miles / 64 kilometers protected from development within the California State Parks system along California Highway 1.

Highway 1 is called the Cabrillo Highway in many places, including in San Mateo County, for Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, who was either a Portuguese (João Rodrigues Cabrilho) or Spanish sea captain whose exploratory voyage north from Mexico along the California coast nearly 500 years ago was financed by Spain and was the first by a European. Cabrillo is now remembered as the first of a string of California coastal explorers — including England's Sir Francis Drake — who sailed this coast over the course of two centuries without spotting the Golden Gate, entrance to San Francisco Bay.

I photographed the scenes in this newsletter during a three-hour Saturday afternoon loop drive from my house in San Jose. The one exception is the evening shot on the back page, which I shot three years ago for an earlier issue of The Coastal Chronicle.



Ice plant

Pescadero State Beach



Overhead
San Gregorio State Beach



Overhang
San Gregorio State Beach



Lagoon
San Gregorio State Beach



Driftwood

San Gregorio State Beach

Notes on photos

SOURCES: Underlined words link to them.

ALONE — You'll notice that most of these photos are from one beach, San Gregorio (St Gregory) State Beach. It is full of the features like tidal creeks, lagoons, cliffs and driftwood typical of Pacific beaches from Baja California, Mexico, to British Columbia, Canada. That also includes an absence of people.

UNDER REPAIR — I've shot this 154-year-old lighthouse many times from different angles (page 7 [here](#), page 2 [here](#)). It's 115 feet / 35 meters tall, tying it with the lighthouse on Point Arena as the West Coast's tallest. It's halfway through a two-year \$16 million reconstruction that, among other things, will see its Fresnel lens re-installed ([see it dismantled in this 13-year-old video](#)) and its light shining again.

ICE PLANT — What kudzu is to the American South — a tough invasive plant species — ice plant is to California. Kudzu came from East Asia, and its name is Japanese; California's ice plant came from a region of similar climate, South Africa, where it's called "Hottentot fig ice plant." When you break open one of its long, triangular cross-section leaves, you'll find it full of cool water like a cactus. Its ability to survive drought prompted California railroads to plant it along their rights of way in the mid-1800s as a way to stabilize dry soil. Later, the state highway department planted it for the same purpose. Today it's found all along the coast (it's the bright green ground cover in the pictures **UNDER REPAIR**, **OVERHEAD** and **OVERHANG**), where it has conquered native ground cover species.

OVERHEAD and **OVERHANG** — To shoot the beach in **OVERHEAD**, I stood at the top of the cliff in **OVERHANG**. Together, the pictures illustrate the beauty and hazard of these fragile cliffs, which can be eroded and undercut by wave action leading to their collapse. Farther south, in Big Sur ("big south," Monterey County), collapses that take out sections of Highway 1 are almost an annual event.

LAGOON — Many West Coast beaches like San Gregorio are sandbars, which block the mouths of inland streams during dry months, creating lagoons, and flow freely into the ocean during the winter rainy season. This also creates a safe environment for two related fish, steelhead or coastal rainbow trout, and coho salmon. Both fish hatch from eggs laid in freshwater mountain streams like San Gregorio Creek and spend their early lives in the lagoon. When the rain-swollen creek bursts through the sandbar in winter, young fish swim into the North Pacific, where they live and grow for one to four years. At sexual maturity, they return to the stream where they were born to spawn a new generation. In the case of these species, adults die after spawning. Atlantic salmon can spawn more than once.

DRIFTWOOD — Winter storms and seasonal forest wildfires combine to restock California beaches with driftwood.

RADOME — The Pillar Point Air Force Station at Half Moon Bay overlooks Mavericks (video [here](#)), site of the (usually) annual big wave surfing competition. But the base's current purpose and the reason for the radome is to track ballistic missiles and satellites launched into polar orbits from farther south on the coast at Vandenberg Space Force Base in Santa Barbara County for the military and NASA.



Radome

Pillar Point Air Force Station