



Spectacular sunsets and ocean views are among the highlights of Little River Inn, a great find for families near the village of Mendocino. PHOTOS: CURT WOODHALL

FAMILY TRAVEL

FINDING THE MAGIC IN MENDOCINO

County north of San Francisco brimming with beauty, adventure and family fun

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MENDOCINO, CALIF. “There’s something in the water,” my daughter Brooklyn shrieks while dramatically flapping a pointed finger in the direction of her discovery. “Right there, look you can see the shiny bald head.”

My husband and I strain our eyes searching for the mysterious creature, but the sun’s reflection is blinding.

Not daring to question her perfect, seven-year-old vision (I’ve learned that lesson before), I praised Brooklyn’s exceptional observation skills and continued paddling.

Moments later a ripple rushes past our Outrigger and a wide-eyed, ridiculously adorable, whiskered face pops out of the water.

While my husband scrambles for his camera, the curious creature quickly appraises our trio, then ducks beneath the surface without granting us a pose. Perhaps our delighted squeals caused the hasty retreat, or maybe we just weren’t that interesting. Either way, the moment was lost. Or, at least, that’s what we thought.

Harbour seals, it turns out, are commonplace in Mendocino’s Big River Estuary. The tour company Catch a Canoe and Bicycles Too touts the state marine conservation area’s abundance of wildlife on its website, but as we gingerly settled into our redwood canoe my inner critic was doubtful. At just shy of 13 kilometres, Big River’s ribbon of canals,

mudflats, marshlands and forest make up northern California’s longest undeveloped estuary, and you don’t need to venture far to experience its unspoiled beauty. During our one-hour, self-guided paddle, we were gifted with many harbour seal visits, as well as two great blue heron sightings. Unfortunately, the otters that hunt and play in the protected inlet evaded our less-than-stealthy tracking skills.

The wild expanse of Mendocino County is a tapestry of towering old-growth forests, quaint coastal villages built atop windswept cliffs and rolling farmland dotted with orchards, vineyards and family-run wineries. Comprised of two primary regions — coastal and inland — the county’s varied landscape brims with adventure and offers a broad spectrum of activities for families. We stayed oceanside, at the Little River Inn near the village of Mendocino, about three hours north of San Francisco. The property, which has been owned and managed by the same family for five generations, boasts jaw-dropping ocean views from most of its guest rooms.

Every morning we ordered breakfast to our large veranda and ate house-made scones and olallieberry cobbler while watching the waves crash against the rocky shoreline. The sunsets drew us back each evening. Dinner can also be delivered to the room; however, we preferred the classic-style dining room, which provided Brooklyn with a stack of colouring and activity sheets.



Little River Inn overlooks Van Damme State Beach, which has a shallow cove and fantastic tide pools.

Clam chowder, pork osso bucco and the saffron-infused bouillabaisse were our favourite dishes. As many of the accommodation options found along the coast are bed and breakfasts, or boutique inns that cater to couples, Little River Inn is a great find for families wanting a quintessential Mendocino experience.

From Little River we could easily access the county’s popular beaches. Van Damme State Beach, a short walk from the inn, has a shallow cove and fantastic tide pools. Drive 10 minutes north and you’ll find Caspar Beach, which is larger and great for running to burn off energy. Another fun family-friendly spot to explore is Portuguese Beach, accessed by a wooden staircase in the village of Mendocino. After beach combing, we popped by Village Toy Store and Out of This World — an interplanetary specialty shop featuring robotics, games and gadgets. Then Frankie’s, for a scoop of locally made Cowlick’s ice cream. Mendocino’s signature flavour, candy cap mushroom, didn’t appeal, but the pumpkin pie was delicious.

Fort Bragg, about 15 minutes further north, is another worthwhile destination. We visited for the Skunk Train, which travels through ancient redwoods alongside the Pudding Creek Estuary; and to see the multicoloured sea



Every goat has a name at Pennyroyal Farm in Anderson Valley.

glass at Glass Beach.

On the way back to San Francisco to catch our flight home, we visited Pennyroyal Farm, a small family-owned winery and creamery in Anderson Valley. It’s a charming, idyllic place where every animal has a name, the grapevines are weeded by babydoll sheep and a llama guards the milking herd. We took a guided walking tour to learn about Pennyroyal’s sustainable farming practices and meet the goats and

sheep in the solar-powered barn. At the end of the experience we were rewarded with an al fresco cheese and estate wine pairing (cold-pressed grape juice for Brooklyn) on the patio. Another area highlight is the self-service farm stand at Philo Apple Farm, which sells fresh fruit, juice, cider vinegar, hard cider, chutneys and jams. Bring cash as payment is by honour system. To follow Mhairri’s family travel adventures, visit arrivalstravel.com



The unspoiled beauty of Mendocino’s Big River Estuary is home to harbour seals, otters and great blue heron.