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Tall tales in Lompoc: Where history meets the sea

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*LOMPOC, CALIF.*

I thought I'd seen everything.

Then I discovered a remarkable collection of the world's oldest pictorial art hiding out in Lompoc, a modest hamlet perched on the wave-dashed coast of California, north of Santa Barbara.

Murals are what I mean, 36 huge paintings on the walls in the Old Town district, an art whose origins reach back 35,000 years – or more – to figures drawn on cave walls in Europe and elsewhere.

The who and why of cave art remains a mystery. But not in Lompoc, where the now-famous mural project was launched with a purpose, to revitalize the historic center and attract more

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tourists.

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According to Vicki Andersen, administrator of the Lompoc Mural Society and a painter in her own right, Lompoc needed a boost after 1989, when Vandenberg Air Force Base, the community's biggest employer and customer, shut down the shuttle launch program.

Murals were suggested. But the residents wanted more than a disjointed array of big pictures. Instead, they chose a single theme: the story of Lompoc, from its earliest inhabitants – the Chumash Indians – to the present.

Naysayers wondered if a town of 43,400 people, straddling a rocky shore on a lonely corner of the coastline, had much to tell. But Lompoc surprised them. Taken together – think of them as a contemporary "book of hours" – the murals are as fascinating as any medieval manuscript.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

The solution was obvious. A weekend in town, where I met Ken Ostini, 6-foot-6 and rangy, and president of the Lompoc Tourism Council. A tireless local historian, he volunteered to

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show me around.

"I'm pretty good with a self-guided map, as long as it has street names and numbers," I assured him when we met in the hotel parking lot. "I can navigate this by myself."

"No worries, no worries," he replied, pumping my hand. "I always learn something from touring people around. Lompoc is home, so showing it off keeps me up to date."

He pointed east, toward the valley. "I was born on a farm right out there, next to that hill, so I know most of the folks here. Ask all the questions you want." He paused, the soul of honesty. "And if there's something I can't answer, I know who to call."

I could picture his parents' farm. I'd come that way, northwest from Santa Barbara on U.S. Highway 101. Turning off on State Route 1 was the first surprise; no urban sprawl, the bane of Southern California. The highway, crossing the valley, wound between open meadows, flowering hedges, stands of white oaks, white farmhouses, neatly hoed vegetable plots, vineyards planted in geometric rows, and all of it framed by the gold-and-green Santa Rita Hills.

Twenty-odd miles later, approaching the town, a rainbow appeared overhead. Glittering through a misty veil, it shed a glow on the empty lots and dinky repair shops that clutter the outskirts of almost every small town.

And there was Ostini, in the Hilton Garden Inn's parking lot, proposing that we start at the South Side Coffee Co., a funky Old Town hangout at the corner of Ocean Avenue and South H Street. Finding a booth, we sat over a latte and studied the mural map, then walked south to the center of Old Town.

Since wall space becomes available at different times, the murals aren't painted in sequence. The "Flower industry," for instance, by artist Art Mortimer, celebrating the 1960s and '70s, when Lompoc's flower seed business was the nation's largest, is on one corner, while the mural "Chumash Indians," where the history actually starts, is on another.

The La Purisima Mission ("purisima" is one of several Chumash languages), is depicted twice, and the name of the town, founded in 1884, as a temperance community, also remembers its origins: "lom-poc" is a Chumash word for "lagoon," or "still water."

Other murals illustrate pioneer families, the first mayor, first fire chief and first family to open a general store. Disasters are equally storied. In 1909, a wooden barge sank on the rocks at Surf Beach, with two dead, and in 1923, seven U.S. Navy destroyers ran up on submerged rocks at Honda Point, sinking and drowning 23, the Navy's worst peacetime accident.

Other murals honor Lompoc with vibrant flowers, farms, the American flag, the one-room schoolhouse, civic clubs, the men and women who died in WWII, ethnic diversity, migrating monarch butterflies, the last Titan rocket tests, and the emergence of the wine industry, in 2005.

"When a new mural is planned, we request bids and choose a painter through a jurying process," said Andersen, who manages each stage of the project along with a team of volunteers.

"It's wonderful, but it's hard work, preparing the site, carrying ladders and scaffolds, cleaning and restoring older murals, helping the painters and raising money," she said. "It's expensive, and with everyone so busy nowadays, volunteers are hard to find."

Ending the day at Sissy's Uptown Cafe, (don't miss this place, the town's top-rated restaurant), notable for Painter John Pugh's trompe l'oeil ship, which seems to be crashing through the

wall, we talked about other tourist attractions. I'd noticed that Lompoc has two golf courses.

The biggest draw, said Ostini, are the vineyards, which offer wine tours and tasting rooms. Known for outstanding pinot noirs and chardonnays, the Rita Hill vineyards have earned their own AVA wine appellation.

The next most popular is the partially restored and wonderfully ancient La Purisima Mission, which I visited the next morning, joining a tour with guide Parker Grand, through the workshops and the garden. Since the 2,000-acre state historic park next door has 25 miles of hiking trails, the place is always busy.

I loved the back-to-grandma memories on the Fabing-McKay-Spanne house tour, a restored Victorian property and blacksmith shop, but missed the Lompoc Museum, now located in the former Carnegie Library, a 1910 colonial revival gem. Next time, I hope.

Though the ocean is right there, submerged rocks and fierce currents make swimming dangerous. Ocean Park Beach adjoins the shallow, meandering Santa Inez River estuary, and Surf Beach is one of the nation's most dangerous shark sites. Read the warning signs. Go there to get your feet wet, make sand castles and walk along the shore.

To swim, try Jalama Beach County Park, a sandy beach 19 miles from Lompoc, off Route 1. I checked out the campsites and noticed people surfing, sunning and beach-combing. The water can be rough but lifeguards are posted in summer.

If I'd planned ahead I could have toured Vandenberg, on 100,000 rough and rugged coastal acres. The West Coast's answer to Cape Canaveral, Vandenberg is the launch pad for SpaceX's Falcon 9 and several other commercial rockets.

Hot stuff for space wonks, they arrive hours early and line up for a parking space in the "Hawk's Nest," a public parking-and-viewing area with bathrooms, five miles directly across from the launch site.

"You wouldn't think five miles is close enough, but these rockets are so huge and loud that the ground rumbles for miles around," said Ostini. "The launch last January almost knocked me off my feet. Some people here watch them from town. It's a good way to end a weekend, I promise."

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Find more at these sites:

Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Bureau (805-736-4567): ExploreLompoc.com

The Mural tour map: lompocmurals.com

Fabing-McKay-Spanne home and museum: lompochistory.org

Hilton Garden Inn: hiltongardeninn.com

Budget Inn: budgetinn.com

Jalama Beach County Park: www.sbparks.org

La Purisimi Mission State Historic Park: Lapurisimamission.org

Vandenberg Airforce Base: vandenberg.mil/

Wild Horse Sanctuary: returntofreedom.org

Golf: lapurisimagolf.com and missionclubgolf.com

Ocean fog keeps Lompoc grey and cool during April, May and June, but is replaced by increasingly sunny days and blue skies from July through February. The combination of cool damp days followed by hot sunny days makes for excellent wines, including award-winning Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

Lompoc is on State Route. 1, on the coast north of Santa Barbara and Point Conception, 19 miles from the intersection of State Route 1 and U.S. 101 north.

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