

CountryLiving

There Is a Magical Little Town In California Where the Homes Look Like Storybook Cottages

"It's like a small European hamlet, away from the hustle and bustle."

with

BY JILL GLEESON DEC 7, 2016



Getty Images

Sitting cozy on the coast of northern California, Carmel-by-the-Sea is a town as sweet and idyllic as its name. Located about 120 miles south of San Francisco and nearly within shouting distance of the famed Pebble Beach golf courses, Carmel is tiny (just one square mile!) and home to less than 4,000 residents, although year-round visitors inflate that number.

Part of the town's appeal is its pristine condition: Thanks to wise zoning laws, there are no fast-food restaurants, t-shirt shops, or even a boardwalk to mar its old-world appeal. Instead, Carmel features more than 20 homes and businesses that look as if they materialized wholesale from a fantastical children's story. The setting is even more magical at Christmastime, when the adorable shops, restaurants, and inns roll out the red carpets or an influx of merry revelers.

"It's very quaint and fairy-like," says Stockton, California, resident Debi Leonardini, who has been spending the holidays in Carmel with her husband, Jim, for 16 years. "There are cute buildings and unique shopping, plus there's good food and wine. Carmel is really like a small European hamlet, away from the hustle and bustle — you don't feel rushed there."



The Tuck Box and The Garden Shop

Linda Hartong + TalesFromCarmel.com

Fanciful and mischievous, graced with details like undulating rooflines, flared eaves, and hand-hewn trim, Carmel's Tudor-style structures are largely the creation of Hugh Comstock, who built Carmel's first "fairytale" cottage in 1924 as a gift for his wife, Mayotta. The home was designed to shelter the growing assortment of hand-made dolls she crafted and sold. Utterly beguiled by "Hansel," as the original cottage came to be known, Carmel's townsfolk asked Comstock to design homes for them, too.



Hugh Comstock's Hansel house

Linda Hartong + TalesFromCarmel.com



Courtesy of CarmelCalifornia.com

It wasn't long before the downtown was dotted with fairytale architecture, like the pleasantly plump [Tuck Box](#), built in 1927 as a restaurant, which today houses an English tearoom renowned for its fresh-baked scones and homemade Olallieberry jam.

While Tuck Box owner Jeff LeTowt says he doesn't decorate much for the holidays, noting with a smile that "the place looks like a Christmas card all year long," many businesses in Carmel are deck the halls with more than holly come December.



Cottage of Sweets

Courtesy of CarmelCalifornia.com

[Happy Landing Inn](#), for instance, is already delightful thanks to half-timbered construction and rounded doors but shines during Yuletide with a 9-foot tree, stockings, wreaths, and twinkle lights galore. The pet-friendly [Carmel Country Inn](#) ornaments trees inside and out and brings in Santa Claus on Christmas morning to deliver treat-stuffed stockings to guests' canine family members. And the owners of [Hofsas House](#) also dress their inn to the nines during the holidays, plus they serve cookies and hot apple-cider brewed from a special recipe each evening throughout the season.



Carmel Country Inn

Courtesy of CarmelCalifornia.com



Happy Landing Inn

Linda Hartong + TalesFromCarmel.com



Happy Landing Inn's main house great room at Christmas

Linda Hartong + TalesFromCarmel.com

There's no shortage of December festivities in Carmel-by-the-Sea, either. There's the annual tree lighting at Devendorf Park and the Carmel Heritage Society's [Inns of Distinction tour](#) on the first weekend of the month, and patrons of the performing arts make a point to see [Dance Kids of Monterey County](#)'s production of *The Nutcracker*, a yearly staple since 1995. (This year, the group will premiere a new version of the beloved holiday ballet incorporating the peninsula's history.) But whether visitors choose to partake in Carmel's every holiday event or none, this endearing, enchanting little village remains one of the country's best spots to spend Christmas.