

Three Capes Escape

By Jim Moore

It was the quintessential day at the beach on the Oregon Coast. My 3-year-old son and I raced the waves while my wife wandered the beach with her camera. Our two friends tried their hands (and feet) at surfing. Dogs chased Frisbees. Kites soared briefly and then plunged earthward. Children built sand castles and then destroyed them with glee.

But something was vaguely missing. The coastal vibe I grew up with in Oregon was somehow absent. I pondered a moment... and then I realized: There wasn't a T-shirt shop in sight. My only-at-the-beach craving for saltwater taffy wasn't flaring up. I wasn't fighting the temptation to buy a cute creature crafted of tiny seashells for my knick-knack shelf back home.

Was this heaven? Nope, Oceanside.

Growing up middle-class near Portland, a trip to the beach pretty much meant Seaside. Go-karts and sticky-sweet treats and three-dollar souvenir shirts. The Pig 'n Pancake. Three thousand people sharing our beach. Such are the things that make memories – and long-term impressions.

But a few years ago I rode my bike the length of the Oregon coast, following the designated bike route. And when the map took me off Highway 101 at Tillamook, I discovered the Three Capes Scenic Drive. My relationship with the Oregon Coast was forever altered – and immeasurably improved.

This area is not a secret – but it's enough off the path to make all the difference. Here you'll find all the things that make the coast a treasure, and few of the things that make it tacky.

There are, of course, three capes. And, really, only three towns.

Oceanside (pop. 326) is the northernmost, and my favorite. There's little in the way of a retail strip beyond the justifiably renowned Roseanna's restaurant, a couple small hotels and the Brewin' in the Wind coffee house. There's a small parking lot and a big beach. There's even a tunnel carved straight through a rock outcropping, connecting the main beach and another one to the north.

Netarts (population 744) is an unassuming little town set on a lovely bay, a haven for clamming and crabbing. It also has a "treasures" shop that could be tacky, but any place named "Lex's Cool Stuff" recognizes irony, and therefore manages to stay on the funky side of that line.

Pacific City (pop. 1,027) is the commercial center of the Three Capes route. You'll find a much larger collection of retail establishments, some timeshare condos – always a warning sign – and even the occasional small traffic jam. But it somehow maintains the quaint air of authenticity required to remain charming. It also has some awesome food choices, among them the Riverhouse fine-dining restaurant, the Grateful Bread bakery and the Pelican Pub.

But then, this peaceful stretch of rugged bliss isn't named for the towns. Let's talk about the capes.

Cape Meares, at the northern end of the route, features a classic lighthouse, the undeniably fascinating Octopus Tree (a massive Sitka spruce with six trunks) and a coastal seabird nesting area.

And just south of this cape a treasure-seeker can suss out the path down to Short Beach, a secluded inlet that until recently attracted only those nimble or foolhardy enough to skid down its steep dirt trail. But thanks to the efforts of a local volunteer, now there's an eccentric staircase down to the beach, making the trip safer if less exciting. The beach itself sits beneath a large waterfall that, even though it spills over a man-made causeway, still lends a Blue Lagoon-style ambience to the scene.

Cape Lookout, halfway down the route, juts a mile and a half out into the ocean, offering hiking trails through deep coastal forest that feels more remote than it is. A five-mile round-trip will get you to either the upper tip of the cape for stupendous and solitary views, or down to the beach via a gradually sloping trail.

Cape Kiwanda, standing sentinel over Pacific City, offers the utterly irresistible dune climb. I dare you to stand at the bottom of this sheer wall of sand, several hundred feet tall, and not go full-on conqueror. Those who make it are afforded majestic views, and the chance to roll, run or even glissade back down. But you can also scale the smaller hill next to the water and still get a nice look around. There are wonderful rocks and tide pools to explore on the south side of the cape, with easy beach access, and you might even get a chance to watch as one of the famous dory fleet gets launched from (or lands on) the sand.

You'll find plenty of activity on the beach at Pacific City; between the adjacent brewpub, the car-accessible beach, the dune and the surfing, it can get mighty, um, utilized here. So, for a nice counterpoint, make sure to include a stop north of Oceanside at the site of Bayocean.

Bayocean, built on a spit south of Tillamook Bay, was a developer's dream that turned into a nightmare. The vision of Thomas B. Potter, this planned community opened in 1912 and eventually had 4,000 lots and a town proper, including hotels, a school, advanced phone and water systems, and a massive indoor saltwater swimming pool. But storms and erosion gradually destroyed the town; by 1956 the few buildings that hadn't

been swept into the sea were bulldozed. These days, it's fun to walk out on the spit and spend some imagination time with the ghosts.

It's not that my childhood memories of going to the beach are bad. And I do have a youngster, so it's probably inevitable that someday soon I'll find myself dodging sunburned tourists, melting ice cream cones in their hands, on crowded sidewalks running in front of souvenir shops. Because somehow, some day, he will discover what I once experienced. And once your kid's been to the Pig 'n Pancake, how are you going to keep him down on the capes?

But if your destination is still your choice, head for those capes. For a weekend or a week – there's enough to do here to keep you busy that long – the Three Capes Scenic Route delivers the best the Oregon Coast has to offer. It's my (adult) version of beach paradise.