

# Camp like a Local: Your Guide to California Coastal Camping

One of the most underrated Californian vacation experiences is camping along the California coast. To fall asleep to the congenial rhythm of the waves and awake to their welcoming tone is quite the contrast to staying in a resort or a four-star hotel (probably a two-star hotel for that matter). But before you pack gear into your car or go rent that RV, there are some things you need to know before starting your coastal beach camping adventure.



Cruise through the redwoods on the way to the coast.

“Research different campgrounds to find the beach setting you want. Make your reservations way in advance, and stay away from Holiday weekends. Weeknights are often cheaper than weekends. Load up at Costco for your supplies since many of the necessities are more expensive near the beach.” [@Passenger1C](#) Southwest Rapid Rewards Member

## Can You Camp Anywhere On The Beach In California?

As someone who's interested in beach camping along the coasts of California, you need to be mindful of the rules and restrictions of beaches. There are numerous campgrounds adjacent to many beaches in northern and southern California. There are state parks and private campgrounds, which usually allow for a camping stay of up to a week, but be keenly conscious of each area's rules and regulations. Each beach is going to come with different rules, so be careful. Most California beaches will have visible signs of what is allowed.

There are several general rules to be aware of, one being that most beaches in California you don't allow individuals to drive up and pitch a tent. It sounds spontaneous, and for some it even echoes

the charms of a romantic idea, but if everyone was allowed to do it without regulations, beaches would most likely cease to be beautiful. California is notorious for having strict environmental rules and the same logic applies to beaches and beach camping. Wanting to be lulled to sleep by the calming ocean waves is an enticing thought, but before you rush to this relaxation mecca, it's important to be aware of what you can and can't do.

You need to know a few things before camping along California's coast: What are the fees? What are the regulations? When is the best time? Am I planning for the weather? What's the best equipment? Are pets allowed? Are the recreational activities I want to do allowed or recommended? Another need-to-know item is to understand there are multiple campgrounds and State Parks surrounding beach areas. Needless to say, plan ahead and do your research.

### What Are The Best Beaches To Camp In Northern California?

For some, the idea of coastal California camping on a northern California beach doesn't seem alluring. But if you time it right and do a little planning ahead, beach camping in the northern part of the golden state is memorable, fun, and loaded with adventure. Camping in this region is definitely a different experience than camping on the southern beaches of California. There are similarities, but one of the biggest differences is the scenic views. They are stunning and provide campers (from those who pitch tents to those who prefer the RV) that outdoor euphoric high many seek after. A word of warning though, plan accordingly because hitting up one of these spots during the winter may not be the best idea unless you love cold temps, lots of wind, and rain.

#### Sonoma Coast State Park

Only an hour and a half north of San Francisco (about 67 miles), Sonoma is one of the best northern California beach areas for RVs and camping. This state park is loaded with beach camping activities and plenty of places to find what you are looking for. Between Wright's Beach, Bodega Dunes, and Environmental Campgrounds, there are over 100 different campgrounds to enjoy. Some of the attractions you can expect are hiking, fishing, boating, picnicking, bird-watching, tide pools, and many more. For information on reservations, those interested can check out the ReserveCalifornia [site](#) and search for Sonoma.



### Sonoma Coast State Park Santa Cruz Beach Area

Slightly more than an hour south of San Francisco (about 70 miles), Santa Cruz beach is another must-visit area for beach campers in northern California. There are loads of camping areas for those wanting to pitch a tent and there are some campgrounds that are RV-friendly. This area is known for beaches, redwoods, and rolling mountains and gives camp-goers an array of things to do such as biking, hiking, kayaking, and fishing are just a handful of some of the things you can enjoy. Some of the top spots for camping include: New Brighton State Beach, Butano State Park, Portola Redwoods State Park, Natural Bridges State Park, and Big Basin Redwoods State Park.

### Point Reyes National Seashore (backpacking campgrounds)

In terms of proximity to a major city (only 26 miles from San Francisco) combined with the optimal beach camping experience, Point Reyes National Seashore area should be at the top of everyone's list for best beaches to camp in California. To clarify, this is a backpacking campground. Point Reyes National Seashore only offers boat-in and backcountry hike-in camping. To reserve one of the multiple camp areas, visit the [NPS site](#) for Point Reyes. Don't let that deter you from going here though! Keep in mind, there are RV and camping accommodations in a number nearby campgrounds. Point Reyes offers many activities such as bird-watching, hiking, horse rides, whale-watching, biking, and more.



### Tomales Point Trail, Point Reyes National Seashore

## What Are The Best Beaches To Camp In Southern California?

There are dozens and dozens of amazing locations to RV, car-camp, or pitch a tent along southern California's beautiful coastline, almost too many to count. What is listed below only scratches the surface of what the golden state offers for camping the California coast. You're going to get a slightly different experience in southern California than you would in northern California. In the north where you're more likely to be enthralled with the scenic views, rolling hills, trees, and wildlife,

in the south you're going to get that beachy vibe experience with more people and more recreational activities to do.

## Pismo State Beach

With a little more than an hour's travel outside of Santa Barbara, Pismo State Beach with its pleasant year-round weather is one of the top southern California coastal camping destinations. Ideal for outdoor activities and recreation, Pismo offers just about everything that makes California unique: camping, surfing, fishing, kayaking, hiking, trails, swimming, and everything in between. Aside from the recreational potential of Pismo, this state beach is loaded with history. You can catch a glimpse of that rich history of Pismo by visiting one of the visitor's centers, taking part in a campfire program, or becoming a Jr. Ranger (for the kids).

Because of its popularity, you must visit the ReserveCalifornia [site](#) to reserve a campground spot, especially during the holidays and the peak season. The two campgrounds available at Pismo State Beach are North Beach Campground and Oceano Campground. Each campground provides restrooms, showers, picnic tables, and campfire rings. Oceano is the only one that offers RV hookups.

## Doheny State Beach

Only a shade more than an hour from Los Angeles (under 60 miles), Doheny State Beach is one of the best places in southern California to get real close to the ocean with a campsite. There are over 100 campsites which include 30+ premium ocean-front sites, 16 designated for RV and trailer only, and hiking/biking sites. Campsites at Doheny are at beach-level, which means in very high tides sometimes the premium sites with the ocean views can get flooded with the waves. There are showers and restrooms (Doheny is known for the cleanest) but it'll cost you some quarters so plan accordingly. If you are unable to get a spot reserved there are very close campgrounds nearby: Crystal Cove, San Clemente, and San Onofre State Beaches are popular beach camping spots in this area as well.

Doheny is located in Dana Point and is probably the most popular state beach in all of California. It's estimated that over 1 million people visit each year. There are a ton of activities to engage in

while visiting Doheny: stand-paddle boarding, kayaking, volleyball, hiking, biking, field trips, interpretive programs, and tide pools are just a handful. Oh...there are also several aquariums at the visitor center near the south end of the beach. Doheny is most known for surfing. You will find a few places to rent equipment for just about any activity you can think of.

## Leo Carrillo State Park

About an hour from Los Angeles just past Santa Monica and Malibu, you'll hit Leo Carrillo State Park. This southern California gem spans over two miles along California's coast and is spotted with rugged rock structures in the smooth sand. The main campground at Leo Carrillo is Canyon Campground and you'll want to reserve ahead of time to make sure you get a spot. Leo Carrillo can be very busy during the peak season. There are 130 campsites designed for tents and RVs up to 31' in length. There are showers (token operated) and restrooms available as well as fire rings, picnic tables, and a camp store.

This park is also packed with fun and captivating activities: kite-surfing, surf fishing, tide pools, swimming, surfing, long-boarding, hiking (from easy to hard trails with breath-taking views), volleyball, kite-boarding, bird-watching, wildlife, and diving are just a sample of the endless things you can do on your beach camping trip. Another fun adventure is to explore the exposed reef and the variety of sea life. Don't be surprised if you see octopuses, leopard sharks, lobsters, and sea bat rays. For the kids, you can expect Jr. Ranger programs, campfire programs, and other field trip activities.

## A Few Last Tips For Camping Along The California Coast

One of the worst things you could do is be unprepared for a beach camping adventure. It is unlike any camping you've ever experienced. Aside from the normal camping basics (like bug repellants, matches, tents, etc), here are a couple of quick tips to help you prepare before you embark on your California beach camping trip: bring an extra cushion layer if sleeping in a tent (the sand can act as hard as cement), broom and dustpan, sand stakes, extra rope to tie tent to surrounding rock structures for increased stabilization, sun protection (polarized glasses, a canopy, or big umbrella), chapstick, tent cover, water (more than normal), and somewhere to pack your trash (California is especially environmentally-friendly).

Even though it can seem like a lot of preparation, braving the California coast with camping in mind is an extraordinary adventure that will leave you with impactful memories of this beautiful state. Doesn't matter if it's northern or southern California beach camping, every single region is going to provide you with a perspective unique enough, yet fun enough to call itself California.

Want to get the best deals on your trip out to the coast? Check out the [Southwest's Low Fare Calendar](#), which can help determine when you can get a great price on your airfare so you can save money on your camping getaway.

Do you have any tips for camping on the coast? Tell us in the comments below!

Want to keep daydreaming about all the vacations you should be taking? Visit the [Travel Inspiration](#) section on our Discussion Forum to keep filling your 'to visit' list with all sorts of great destinations.

