

Beat the Rush to Beautiful Point Arena

John Flinn

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Five extremely rare Grevy's zebras are among the exotic African animals you can visit at the B Bryan Preserve in Point Arena. Photo: John Flinn, Special To The Chronicle

The strangest, coolest and most obscure national monument in California just got less strange and a whole lot cooler. And it's about to become considerably less obscure.

Even among outdoor enthusiasts, few had ever heard of the [California Coastal National Monument](#). Made up of more than 20,000 offshore rocks, exposed reefs and sea stacks from Oregon to Mexico, its visitors consisted almost exclusively of humpback whales, sea lions, cormorants and the occasional tufted puffin.

But when President Obama expanded the monument recently by adding the onshore tract known as the [Stornetta Lands](#), it opened 1,664 acres of dramatic, wind-swept sea cliffs, wildflowers and tide pools to landlubbing humans.

It's bound to focus more attention on Point Arena, one of the more unjustly obscure hamlets along the Mendocino Coast. With some of the most dazzling - and easy - hiking on the North Coast, the coast's most imposing lighthouse and the opportunity to cavort with giraffes and zebras, it's well worth the tortuously gorgeous drive along Highway 1.

Why now? For transforming a sleepy destination into a tourism honey pot, there's nothing like declaring it a national monument. The [New York Times](#) has already ranked Point Arena number 3 on its "52 Places to Go in 2014." "Our incredible lost coast just got found, big time," said a jubilant [Scott Schneider](#), head of tourism for Mendocino County. Go soon to beat the rush.

The backstory: Like a lot of other towns along this coast, Point Arena got its start as a tiny "doghole" port for the timber that built San Francisco. Until recently, its chief claim to fame was that it was the mainland's closest point to Hawaii; the islands' high-speed Internet cable comes ashore here. Now Point Arena becomes the gateway to the new Stornetta Lands section of the national monument, a 12-mile stretch of coastline previously used for cattle grazing.

Checking in: For a seaside village with only 449 official residents, Point Arena offers a delightful choice of unusual lodging options. You can bed down in the former home of the lighthouse keeper or harbormaster, or in a luxe cottage surrounded by giraffes and zebras.

We opted to stay a few minutes south of town at Mar Vista Cottages, a complex of fishing cabins renovated into a style I'd call "Coastal Living rustic." Just-laid eggs are delivered to your door each morning, courtesy of the chickens roaming the grounds, and you're free to help yourself to anything growing in the organic gardens and orchards.

Dining: Robert and [Jill Hunter](#), the couple behind the Mendocino Coast's much-missed Pangaea, have resurfaced as proprietors of Uneda Eat, a small, quirky "occasional café." Housed in an old butcher shop in downtown Point Arena, it offers an eclectic and ever-changing menu of locally sourced and organic meats and produce.

For more elegant dining and a menu featuring game, from venison to wild boar, head 20 minutes south to St. Orres in Gualala. Look for the big onion dome on your left.

Spend your day: Start with the 9:30 a.m. feeding tour at B Bryan Preserve, where you can mingle with rare and exotic African animals, including five of the world's only 670 Rothschild's giraffes and three species each of zebras and antelopes. Then climb 144 steps to the top of the Point Arena Lighthouse, the West Coast's tallest, for sweeping vistas up and down the coast - and, often, for spectacular whale-watching. Leave your afternoon free for hiking in the Stornetta Lands. Strolling through pastureland atop 70-foot-high coastal bluffs above the crashing surf, you pass blowholes, tide pools, sea stacks and even a seasonal waterfall.

Don't miss: Sneak a peek inside the lovingly restored [Arena Theater](#), a onetime vaudeville playhouse that now stages everything from first-run and classic films to live music.

Don't bother: Trying to hunt the secretive Point Arena mountain beaver, which lives on the Stornetta Lands. It's on the federal endangered species list.

Guide Bill Clement keeps an eye on the local marine life with his spotting scope from the top of the Point Arena Lighthouse. Photo: John Flinn, Special To The Chronicle



If you go **Getting there**

Point Arena is a 3 1/2-hour drive from San Francisco, either via Petaluma and Two-Rock Valley to Bodega Bay, or Highway 116 along the Russian River to Jenner; and then north on Highway 1. Or via Highway 128 through the Anderson Valley and then south on Highway 1.

Where to stay

Mar Vista Cottages: 35101 S. Highway 1, Gualala; (877) 855-3522 or (707) 884-3522; www.marvistamendocino.com. Cottages, which include full kitchens, start at \$185. Visitors get fresh eggs and free rein in the garden; other groceries are bring-your-own. Dogs 3 and older

permitted; there's a one-time cleaning fee of \$65. Has an EV2 electric car charging station.

B Bryan Preserve: 130 Riverside Drive, Point Arena, (707) 882-2297; www.bbryanpreserve.com. Walking distance from downtown Point Arena. Three cottages are within earshot of braying zebras and curious giraffes. Rates start at \$135 on weeknights, \$185 on weekends. Dogs 3 and older are permitted in the [Carriage House Cottage](#) only. Pet fee \$25 a night.

Point Arena Lighthouse: 45500 Lighthouse Road, Point Arena; (877) 725-4448 or (707) 882-2809; www.pointarenalighthouse.com. Stay in various lighthouse keepers' quarters, from a single room to a three-bedroom house. \$135-\$285 a night. Two-night minimum on weekends. Pets allowed in some units; \$50 cleaning fee.

Coast Guard House Historic Inn and Cottages: 695 Arena Cove, Point Arena; (707) 882-2442; www.coastguardhouse.com. Perched on bluff overlooking Point Arena cove, this restored, 1901 Cape Cod bed-and-breakfast features rooms with fireplaces and stand-alone cottages with whirlpool spas. Rooms start at \$165, cottages at \$230, breakfast included. Dogs allowed on case-by-case basis; no fee.

Where to eat

Uneda Eat: 206 Main St., Point Arena, (707) 882-3800; www.unedaeat.com. Open Wednesday through Saturday, "5-ish to 8-ish." Entrees \$16-\$28. Cash only.

St. Orres: 36601 Highway 1, Gualala; (707) 884-3333; www.saintorres.com. Open nightly for dinner and on weekends for brunch. Three-course dinners are \$45 to \$50.

More information

Visit Mendocino: www.visitmendocino.com

California Coastal National Monument: www.conservationlands.org/conservationlands/california-coastal-national-monument

What to do

At the **B Bryan Preserve** (see "Where to stay" for address and contact information), 90-minute feeding tours are offered at 9:30 a.m. and 4 p.m. (3:30 p.m. in winter) \$30. Reservations required.

Point Arena Lighthouse, (see "Where to stay" for address and contact information). Open 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. (3:30 p.m. in winter). \$7.50, adults; \$1 children under 12.

Walking on the **Stornetta Lands** (the national monument addition) is easy and spectacular, although officially designated trails, signage, etc., have yet to go in. One good trailhead is along the road to the lighthouse. Park where it makes a big bend to the right; look for a bulletin board and portable toilet. Walk south along the tops of sea cliffs as far as the Point Arena pier. Another trailhead is at City Hall. Head through the trees straight toward the ocean. Currently off-leash dogs are permitted, but this is expected to change soon. Online: www.blm.gov/ca/st/en/fo/ukiah/stornetta.html

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<http://www.sfgate.com/travel/article/Beat-the-rush-to-beautiful-Point-Arena-5336477.php#page-2>