

exploring

Beaches of Santa Cruz County Santa Cruz Beach and Boardwalk Neil Wiley

If you are like me, one reason you moved here was to be near ocean beaches. We dreamed about warm yellow sun, blue-green ocean waves, and golden sand. It was a romantic conception, slowly undone by work, children, and all the other activities of a busy life. Over the years the trips to the beach were fewer and fewer. Perhaps it's time to rediscover our beaches.

We can choose from more than twenty beaches in Santa Cruz County alone. Although not everyone's choice, the most popular, busiest, loudest, with "the most things to do" beach is the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk.

With more than forty rides and attractions, there is something for every age and interest. On a warm summer day, it's a very happy place. In winter, however, when the weather is cold and the rides are closed, it is a bit sad.

Riding the famous 1924 Giant Dipper roller coaster is fun, and it's less dangerous than Highway 17, if you don't stand up. (In the Dipper's long history, only four riders lost their lives.) The beautiful 1911 Loeffl Carousel is even safer, but sometimes it's hard to get the little riders off. You can enjoy other thrillers and kiddie rides, food on sticks and in cups, gift shops, games, indoor arcades, and miniature golf. Beach volleyball courts are sometimes available, but may be in use for tournaments.

The Boardwalk offers a range of ticket plans, including unlimited ride passes, individual-ride tickets, and season passes. Discounts and coupons are available online. Ticket prices are the same for all ages.

At the time of printing, all concessions at the Boardwalk, including Neptune's Kingdom mini-golf, arcade, pool, and food, Casino Arcades, Laser Tag, and the Boardwalk Bowl, were closed due to the shelter-in-place order in Santa Cruz County. Check opening dates at <https://beachboardwalk.com>.

Walk a short distance to the wharf if you want nicer seafood restaurants. For fresh, local, organic food, try the Picnic Basket Restaurant just west of the Boardwalk.

Although sometimes crowded, the free-admission beach is deep and wide, staffed with lifeguards, and blessed with a milder





bay surf. The water is the warmest in September (57 to 83 degrees F) and semi-bearable in April (50 to 57 degrees F), but the surf is better at other coastal beaches.

A short walk up West Cliff Drive takes you by several popular surfing locations. For a more natural environment, continue up West Cliff Drive to Natural Bridges State Park to see a small beach, dramatic rocks, and a nature museum.

In spite of large crowds, Santa Cruz Beach sand is kept relatively clean by paid caretakers. However, the water off Santa Cruz and Cowell beaches has been reported to be the dirtiest on the West Coast.

Bring money. While the beach is free, you will need to pay for parking, amusement-park rides, games, and snacks.

You can usually find parking in the large lots across the street from the Boardwalk, but availability and cost varies, especially during summer events. I've seen prices as high as \$25 a day. Parking on the nearby wharf is one dollar an hour.

A few rules. Pets are not allowed on the beach. You can't build a bonfire, but gas and charcoal grills are okay. Coals should be carried to the dumping station at the Third Street entrance of the Boardwalk.

Use sunscreen. Layer up on cold days. Have a good time.

