

OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

San Luis Obispo

California-based reporter **Sarah McBride** on what to do and where to eat and stay in this tranquil California spot.

■ **What to do:** This small town nestled among hills along California's Central Coast makes a low-key alternative to Santa Barbara or Carmel. The walkable center, complete with an 18th-century mission church, is attractive without being too cute. Many businesses, including a few cafes and pubs, back onto a tree-lined creek that flows through downtown. But the nearby countryside, with several vineyards within a 20-minute drive, is the biggest draw. Most vineyards charge a tasting fee of \$5, which they typically deduct from the price of any wine subsequently purchased. If toting a packed lunch, skip the forlorn patio furniture the tasting rooms sometimes provide on the edge of their parking lots and instead get directions to the closest local park. Towering sycamores shade the picnic tables and playgrounds in Bidle Regional Park off Lopez Drive in Arroyo Grande, convenient to the vineyards south of town. Closer to the center, climb Bishop Peak for gorgeous views over San Luis Obispo and the surrounding area; park on Highland Drive and hike up through oak groves and then on an exposed hill (more shade in the afternoon than the morning) to the top. Watch out for poison oak. For ocean views, head to nearby Los Osos Oaks State

Reserve and either walk along wooded trails on slopes above the sea or stroll along the beach. Heading north will provide a sweeping vista over Morro Bay and the curve of the coast beyond.

■ **Where to eat:** The Park Restaurant offers delicious and creative food, such as melt-in-the-mouth scallops with pork belly, a twist on the classic French soup pistou, and desserts with unexpected flavors like sea salt, although the menu changes regularly. Try to get a table in the small but pretty garden. Dinner for two with wine comes to about \$130 (1819 Osos St., Tel. 805-545-0000). **Big Sky Cafe is bustling and fun and specializes in produce from local farms.** Dinner for two runs about \$95, including wine (1121 Broad St., Tel. 805-545-5401). For a snack, get a glass of milk and a cookie for \$2 at Cowboy Cookie 'n Grub (1035 Chorro St., Tel. 805-788-0212).

■ **Where to stay:** Le Petit Soleil is a Provence-themed bed-and-breakfast within walking distance of downtown, with rooms from \$159 to \$299. Locals flock to the cafe next door (1473 Monterey St., Tel. 805-549-0321). For motel prices without a chain vibe, try the Peach Tree Inn. It offers homey touches like a variety of newspapers at breakfast and an Internet-enabled computer for guest use. Some of the rooms at the far end of the property have private patios overlooking a creek (rooms from \$79 to \$170, 2001 Monterey St., Tel. 805-543-3170).

