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TRAVEL & OUTDOORS

By Ray Nevis, Journal Contributor

The term Golf Trail has become popular in recent years and has helped to bring focus to little known golf gems. Our own Central Coast now has a trail with several excellent layouts. The Central Coast Golf Trail is comprised of the following courses: Avila Beach; Blacklake; Chalk Mountain; Cypress Ridge; Hunter Ranch; Dairy Creek; La Purisima; Monarch Dunes; Morro Bay; and Sea Pines. **The Carlton Hotel in Atascadero would be a great spot to stay if you wanted to take in a couple over a weekend.**

Nipomo has become a golfing mecca and is home to three "Trail" courses. Monarch Dunes is the most recent creation, and it is quite a challenge. The greens area is in excellent shape, and there are many challenging holes. The Dunes are never more in play than on the 13th hole. This 423-yard par-4 plays downhill and doglegs to the left. The fairway is guarded by dunes down the left as well as left and right on the approach.

Cypress Ridge is a slightly more mature layout, having been open for 10 years. My favorite hole is number 16. This 418-yard par-4 plays uphill and doglegs to the left. The fairway is framed by towering eucalyptus trees, and the approach is well guarded by bunkers.

Blacklake is the oldest of the three and has 27 holes. More forgiving for the average player, it is usually in excellent shape.

Avila Beach Golf Resort is just a bit farther up the road and offers some spectacular vistas, especially near the end of the course. The entire back-9 traverses a tidal estuary with dramatic carries on Numbers 10 and 18.

These courses all could be played on the way up to The Carlton in Atascadero. The Carlton is owned and operated by the Martin Weyrich Winery. It was opened in the 1920s and completely renovated for its re-opening in 2005. The hotel has a lot of history — many of the original guests were on their way to stay at Hearst Castle. It is a small luxury property with 52 rooms. All of the rooms are tastefully decorated and fitted with the best linens, furniture and high-tech equipment. Each room is stocked with some of Martin Weyrich's best wine selections.

The Carlton Hotel has a wonderful restaurant on the first floor which looks out to the main streets. The restaurant and grill features an exhibition kitchen as well as a sushi bar. The food was expertly prepared and my sea bass entrée was very good.

The restaurant also features a wine bar and a large lounge. It is a perfect meeting spot for golfers after a challenging day on the links. (For more information visit www.the-carlton.com.) After a comfortable night at The Carlton, you can choose from Chalk Mountain right in Atascadero or make your way 15 minutes up the road to Hunter Ranch. Chalk Mountain is a fine public layout with sharp doglegs and much undulation. I found the greens to be in very good shape.

Hunter Ranch is one of my favorite layouts in all of California. The 15th hole may be the best par-5 I have ever played. This double dogleg to the right plays downhill off the tee and then over a large lake to the green. At 518 yards, it is very reachable in two for many players. Large oak trees frame the tee shot and define the fairway.

Another option from The Carlton may be to head to Morro Bay, which is surprisingly close. Hwy. 41 takes you west from Atascadero, and you could be on the Morro Bay Golf Course in 30 minutes. Morro Bay Golf Course is a traditional layout and offers sweeping views of Morro Bay and the Pacific. The course is slightly hilly and defined by tree lined fairways.

From Morro Bay you will pass by the Dairy Creek Course on your way back to San Luis Obispo. Dairy Creek was designed by John Harbottle, who is well known in the Pacific Northwest. Another challenging layout, it is again quite hilly and offers great views of the mountains surrounding San Luis Obispo. Whether for an overnight trip or several day trips, you can't go wrong playing "The Trail." (For more information, visit www.centralcoastgolftail.com.)