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Aptos, Rio del Mar areas hailed as paradise by many

APTOS — Where once the flamboyant Spanish dons dominated the countryside, the Aptos and Rio del Mar areas have evolved into what many consider to be paradise.

Redwood-shrouded homes and quiet, comfortable lifestyles are the norm now, in contrast to the area's earlier place in history. There are plenty of leisure and recreational opportunities year-round for locals and tourists alike, and it's all available in the most beautiful of nature's playgrounds.

Golfers of all abilities — hackers to pros — enjoy the lush greenery and challenges presented by Aptos Seascape's 18-hole, par-72 championship golf course in Rio del Mar. The course is open daily throughout the year. Men's and women's groups are available for residents wishing an organized playing calendar, and still more people play whenever they want on a recreational basis. The course's golf pros sell the latest equipment and offer a complete range of lessons for both beginners and advanced players — features also offered at other golf links in the county.

Upscale shopping is another of

the area's attractions year-round at both Deer Park and quaint Aptos Village.

Residents and visitors alike can enjoy the largest state park around — 10,000-acre Nisene Marks, which is also located in Aptos. The area's curiosity piece, the cement ship "Palo Alto," sits off Seacliff State Beach.

Aptos and Rio del Mar — both unincorporated — are located in the middle of Santa Cruz County, between the two largest cities: Santa Cruz and Watsonville. Aptos generally is defined as being north of Highway 1, leading into the foothills; Rio del Mar on the other side of the freeway, ending at the ocean.

According to a 1980 community profile by the Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments, Rio del Mar had a population of 7,067 and Aptos checked in at 7,039. The average household income was \$38,394 in Rio del Mar and \$28,588 in Aptos.

Both communities were born as part of a 6,680-acre grant from the king of Spain in 1832. The parcel, called Aptos Rancho, was deeded to Mexican officer Rafael Castro.

In some of the early recordings,

Aptos was also written "Avtos" and "Abtos." The modern spelling is phonetic Spanish to reproduce the Indian pronunciation.

The common meaning of the Indian word is "where the waters come together." And, in fact, the Indians' Rancheria was situated above the meeting of Aptos and Valencia creeks.

Castro took advantage of the heavily wooded countryside to export lumber. He built a wharf in the early 1850s just north of where Aptos Creek cuts through Rio del Mar Beach to transport the lumber. A mill operated in Aptos.

In 1872, Castro sold the part of his ranch east of Aptos Creek to Claus Spreckels, the sugar millionaire. Spreckels built a lavish resort, which included a hotel and casino. It wasn't until Spreckels' death in 1908 that his holdings were sold off, opening the area to residential development as we know it today.

Development along Beach Drive in Rio del Mar — where million-dollar houses are common today — didn't begin until 1935. Plans

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Aptos area pleasant, popular

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to develop the area were impaired by the Depression. The golf course, however, was built in the late 1920s.

Beach homes sprang up around 1937 when Rio del Mar began to grow as a recreational center for San Jose-area residents. The old Aptos Beach Inn — long the only major structure along the mid-county beach — was destroyed by fire in 1963. The Shore del Mar condominium apartments are in its place today.

A landmark today, as well as more than a century ago, is the Hotel Bay View in Aptos Village. It was built by Aptos' first postmaster, Jose Arano, and has housed the likes of Lillian Russell and King Kalakaua.

The three-story, 11,000-square-foot hotel looks much the same as it always did. The Victorian architecture blends well with the rest of the village — even the newer shopping centers of Aptos Station.

Just around the corner from the Hotel Bay View is the 10,000-acre Forest of Nisene Marks. This state park is a hiker's paradise. The majority of the park remains unspoiled wilderness.

For the most part, the park is a well-kept secret. Only about 35,000 tourists visit the forest yearly.

Lack of visitors is not a problem for Seacliff State Beach at the coast. Some 600,000 beachgoers use the facilities there annually. Besides excellent camping facilities, Seacliff is known most for its cement ship.

The "Palo Alto," a ship that never went to sea, was built to be used in World War I, but the war ended before it was completed. The Palo Alto was moved to Seacliff in 1930 where, during its heyday, it housed a ballroom for dancing. Today, it functions as a fishing pier.

The Rio del Mar Beach and Esplanade is another popular beachfront area. Like Seacliff, it has been devastated by winter storms in recent years. A new seawall and sidewalks now grace Beach Drive, drawing more visitors than ever.

Developments continue to pop up in the area. Besides small professional office complexes seemingly everywhere, one of the newest developments under construction is the 140-room Seacliff Inn of Aptos. It opened recently, becoming the largest complex serving visitors in the mid-county area. It is located adjacent to Highway 1 at State Park Drive.

The most controversial proposed development in recent years remains Wingspread Beach. The proposal on a 67-acre parcel across the freeway from Cabrillo College calls for a 295-unit condominium and theater arts project. It has not yet been approved.