

Davenport

Community offers a sea-blown charm to visitors

Sea-blown Davenport. Gray and wind-swept in a summer sun that warms its pale structures that once were bright.

A seeming ghost town at first glance as cars whip past at 60 and 70 miles an hour, stretching to reach Santa Cruz that's getting closer, or San Francisco, a ways up the coast.

Davenport is a pocket-sized village of small businesses and homes sitting back on the bluffs, 11 miles north of Santa Cruz. A town peopled by a hardy group willing to tough it out in the wind, fog and rain to live along their beloved coast.

The town has about 90 older homes and a few new ones that look like wealthy relatives come to call.

The newer, large frame houses with faces of glass that look out to sea are being built in Davenport because Proposition 20 and the Coastal Act have closed most of the coast to new development. Davenport was described by a foreign visitor this season as "something out of southern Europe . . . Italy, perhaps."

Even its "old country look" is brighter today, since the town has been rinsed of the cement dust that covered it a decade ago.

Some time ago, the Davenport Cement Plant entered the age of environmentalism and provided filters to its stacks and today, the town is assuming its truer colors.

Davenport has a new and busy restaurant where ceramics and you-were-here T-shirts are sold along with excellent home cooking. It has two small service stations with grand driveways off Route 1 and there's an old deli still intact alongside the town's diminutive post office.

Of singular note to old-timers, is that the Whaler restaurant and bar is still serving thirsty travelers.

Behind the front row of commercial buildings are the town's homes, small frame buildings that have housed the town's cement workers for many years.

Some of them now house small cottage industrialists and a few commuters who love the north coast.

The housing stock ranges from the new to the decrepit with junked car yards and debris-collector porches.

If a visitor is willing to drive the short loop road through Davenport, at the final bend before it meanders back on Highway 1 is a lovely "find" that shouldn't be missed.

The "find" is a 1916 Catholic Church that seems to have been poured from a bottle of Spanish-American history. A small, poor church that catches wonderful shadows in the early afternoon.

Davenport is a quick trip from Santa Cruz and one of the more beautiful free-wheeling drives in Northern California.

The trip begins with the commonplace: a drive in traffic out along the strip commercial zoning that lines Mission Street. It takes patient waiting at traffic lights, then cruising carefully past fast food places, markets and some older shopping centers that offer nothing to the annals of architecture.

Past Rotten Robbins and a motel or two until there's just one real estate sign between the traveler and the open coastal countryside. Have they listed Tierra del Fuego yet?

As the strip commercial slips away, so does the low-profiled industrial center where Wrigley's gum and Lipton's soup provide the nation with its some of its teas and soups and gums.

Suddenly, the highway opens into the golden hills of California, the sweep eastward into the Santa Cruz Mountains and drop off seaward into sprouts fields that end at sheer cliffs that buffer the pounding Pacific.

The hills are shaggily-coated in dull clumps of green. Groomed fields lined with Brussels sprouts wait for harvest, or lie brown raked, waiting for a second-season's seeding.

The fields drop off in sheer cliffs that

meet the deep blue of the Pacific. At its horizon is a grayer blue of fog, that like a belt separates the deeper blue of the sea and the cobalt sky.

Here and there are dun-gray farm houses, huge and slumped upon the hillside. Down below are corrals made of the same dead-gray wood.

The drive is exhilarating and if you don't blink when you get there, you will see Davenport.

The town was named after whaling Capt. John Davenport, out of Tiverton, R.I.

It seems the captain had developed a system of "shore whaling" while at Moss Landing in 1862 by using small boats to go out and harpoon the beasts in their annual migrations close to the California coastline. He processed 1,700 barrels of

whale oil that year.

He move the operation to the north coast in 1868 and continued pulling the great mammals to shore where their oil was rendered in huge black kettles.

Capt. Davenport built a wharf where he was whaling a little northward of today's town and soon the ships began picking up tan bark, dairy products and produce from the farms.

A cement plant, relying on the riches from inland hills that lie nearby began about 1905 and a tent city was the beginning of the town of Davenport.

Today, the cement plant continues its operation, the north coast farms are providing most of the nation's Brussels sprouts, and the great gray whales have become tourist attractions twice a year.