Portola Finally Finds Monterey Bay

On October 17, 1769, almost exactly 251 years ago, Portolá’s sick and tired party reached the San Lorenzo River, named and crossed it, and then camped in what is today downtown Santa Cruz. It had been three months since the expedition left San Diego and they had just walked around the edge of the Monterey Bay they were searching for.

The next day they headed west-northwest along the coast, still looking for the elusive Monterey Bay. It was relatively easy going after some of their earlier topographic obstacles, and they camped for the night at what is now Majors Creek, which forms the western border of Wilder Ranch State Park. They continued northwest along the coast, camping at Scott Creek, and the next several nights at Waddell Creek, where they looked ahead at the steep bluffs plunging to the sea that made passage along the coast difficult.

Scouts were sent ahead and the decision was made that they could cross below the cliffs along the beach at low tide. This was the same approach taken by later travelers moving on horseback, by stagecoach and even Stanley Steamer until the late 1940s, when Highway One was finally completed below the bluffs.

Although the flat level marine terraces of northern Santa Cruz County and much of San Mateo County made for easy going compared to other portions of the coast that forced them inland (the Santa Monica Mountains and Big Sur, for example), Portolá and his crew still had to work their way across each of the coastal stream canyons that cut across the terraces. Today we zip north towards Half Moon Bay at 60 miles an hour along a level highway, but they had mules and horses loaded with supplies and the sides of each of those stream canyons are rocky and steep making the descent and ascent challenging.

The journals kept by Crespi indicate they likely camped the next night near Gazos Creek, then onto San Gregorio Creek, where they rested from October 24-26. Two days later they had nearly reached a creek crossing the terrace near where the town of Half Moon Bay sits today. Heavy rain and illness (scurvy no doubt) demanded two days of rest. They typically camped along creeks where there was fresh water for the animals and men, and San Vicente Creek near Moss Beach was their campsite on the 20th of October.

More obstacles were in their way, however, Montara Mountain and San Pedro Mountain (Devil’s Slide today) forced them to climb inland away from the coast. From the top of the ridge they were able to see what had been called the Bay of San Francisco by Cabrera Bueno, the writer of the guide book they were using. Cabrera Bueno was a native of the Canary Islands, had a successful naval career, became an admiral, and had crossed the Pacific numerous times sailing between Manila and Acapulco in the early 1700s.
navigation treatise covered sea routes and described the voyage between Cape Mendocino and Acapulco along the coast.

Portolá had a copy of the book and it was frequently referenced in the expedition’s diaries. While the latitude of Monterey Bay was listed incorrectly by Cabrera Bueno, this actually led to Portolá’s scouting team finding San Francisco Bay. From the original Crespi diary: “Several of the soldiers requested permission to go hunting, as many deer had been seen. Some of them went quite a long way from the camp and reached the top of the hills so that they did not return until after nightfall. They said that to the north of the bay they had seen an immense arm of the sea or estuary, which extended inland as far as they could see, to the southeast…”.

They also noticed that the entrance to the bay (the Golden Gate) blocked further travel to the north. While they explored the margins of San Francisco Bay, one of the greatest natural harbors on the planet, they evidently weren’t that impressed, as it didn’t have the properties or apparent latitude of Monterey Bay that they had been sent to find. After an officer’s council on November 11, 1769, the men all agreed that they had passed Monterey Bay, that it was time to retrace their steps and return to San Diego as winter was coming on, and no one would be left behind waiting for the hoped for supply ship. The expedition turned around, and between November 27 and December 10, they scouted around the Monterey peninsula again, but still were unsure where Monterey Bay actually was. Reaching the Carmel Bay area, the expedition’s animals found lots to forage on, but the explorers themselves were reduced to eating seagulls and pelicans. Local Indians may have saved them by bringing them ground corn and seeds.

On January 24, 1770 they arrived back in San Diego, taking about six weeks to make the return trip. The ship that the expedition had been looking for to provide supplies had been forced to return to port in Mexico for repairs shortly after departing. It never reached Monterey Bay, and in fact, was never heard from again.

Portolá was a very determined soldier, however, and he returned in the spring of 1770, and this time he recognized Vizcaíno’s Monterey Bay, although it was never really “sheltered from all winds”.