



Lompoc: City of eye candy and rockets

The history of a city or area is often measured in hundreds and sometimes thousands of years. The city of Lompoc, which most often is associated with rocket launches and space technology, has however, the distinction of tracing some of its history and current industry back 15 millions years, to the Cenozoic era. Few cities can make such a claim.

Known as the City of Murals and the City of Flowers, Lompoc is a fine place to spend a day walking through the downtown area to see the numerous murals that have made the city popular with visitors from around the world.



The Day Tripper

Tony Galván

The early days

Before the arrival of Europeans, the Lompoc Valley was home to the Chumash. Settlements and villages dotted the area, especially along the coast, where access to the ocean was easy. Because the climate was not severe and food and game were plentiful, Chumash settlements were numerous throughout the area.

The arrival of Europeans in the 16th century brought changes to the valley and the Chumash. With the founding of mission La Purisima Concepcion de Maria Santisima in 1878, the Chumash way of life changed forever. This mission is often referred to as California's lost mission, destroyed twice by earthquakes and off the beaten path.

La Purisima, which sits on 900 acres,

is one of the best restored missions in California. It was established along El Camino Real, or the Royal Highway, by Padre Fermin Francisco de Lasuen. The camino eventually connected the 21 missions from Baja California north to what is today Sonoma County. A portion of this road, or camino, which has not been paved or modernized in any manner, exists on the mission grounds. When you visit, take a hike through history as you tour the park and walk on the road.

The Lompoc Valley today

Today's Lompoc is very different from the Lompoc of 100 years ago. North of the city is Vandenberg Air Force Base. Initially an army camp during the Second World War, it was transferred to the Air Force in 1957. In 1958 a Thor rocket was the first ballistic missile launched from the base, putting Discover 1 into a polar orbit. Vandenberg is the only facility in the U.S. that launches unmanned government and commercial satellites into polar orbit.

Perhaps one of the most unusual and pleasing attractions that Lompoc offers is a collection of more than 25 murals throughout the downtown area and surrounding neighborhoods. Many of them grace the entire length of buildings; some depict historical events unique to the city, others show the roots of the city and valley, with scenes from Chumash history. A few are whimsical in nature, urban eye-candy, so to speak.

You'll find some of the murals on Ocean Boulevard, the main downtown street. Others can be found in alleys and adjacent to vacant lots. The artists who have graced these walls with colors and stories come from around the world.

As you tour downtown, be sure to stop at the Lompoc Museum on South H Street. The classic 1910 building, constructed

in the Greek Temple style, began life as a Carnegie Library. Today it is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The museum has displays and galleries that provide information about Lompoc's ancient past to modern times.

On the main floor you will see the collection of Clarence Ruth, a local archaeologist who left the museum a sizable collection of archaeological and ethnographical pieces. Ask a docent to show you the arrowhead collection. Many of these arrowheads are made of obsidian, or volcanic glass, and have been traced to as far south as Mexico, an indication that trade was a major Chumash activity.

Downstairs you will find the Lompoc Valley Historical Society Gallery, which contains artifacts and displays from the Mission period to the present. One of the most dramatic exhibits is of the Honda Tragedy of 1923, when seven U.S. Navy destroyers ran aground in dense fog just west of Lompoc. Considered the worst peacetime disaster in U.S. Naval history, the event is documented with photos, maps and diaries of sailors who survived.

In the hills south of downtown Lompoc is the world's largest diatomaceous mine! What the heck is diatomaceous earth? Diatomaceous earth is fossilized remains of diatoms or single-cell plants that existed millions of years ago. This white, chalk-like material is used to make filters for beer and wine production, among other things.

So, what's there to do and see in Lompoc? Plenty! Check out its Chamber of Commerce website for festivals and events throughout the year. Variety is the name of game, from the Flower Festival to July's Piper Cub fly-in. If it's arts and crafts, visit the Cypress Gallery across the street from the Lompoc Museum.

Take a break and smell the flowers in Lompoc.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY TONY GALVÁN

The Lompoc Museum, built in 1910, was originally a Carnegie Library.

If you go

Getting there: Take Highway 101 north to the Cabrillo Highway (California 1) exit. The road intersects Ocean Boulevard. Turn left to go towards downtown Lompoc.

Lompoc Valley Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Center: 111 South I St.; 736-4567; www.lompoc.com

La Purisima Mission State Historic Park: 2295 Purisima Road. La Purisima is open for self-guided tours from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., seven days a week, except Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day; www.lapurisimamission.org/.

Lompoc Museum: 200 S. H St. The museum is open from 1-5 p.m., Tuesdays through Fridays and 1-4 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays. It is closed Mondays. Admission is \$1 per person. Visit www.lompochistory.org/LompocMuseum.html

Lompoc Mural Society: you can get a walking tour map at the Lompoc Museum. Visit www.lompocmurals.com/.