MONTARA
Looking like the Cote d’Or but one touch of the water brings a cold, harsh reality. South of Devil’s Slide, the first major beach break is Montara Beach, which is less than a mile of open beach that faces directly into the Gulf of Alaska and takes a constant hammering from swell, wind, tide, fog and everything else the Pacific Ocean can throw. The good news is the south winds that accompany fog and/or rain in this region blow straight offshore at Montara, so on those summer days when San Francisco’s beachbreaks are gray, blown-out and infinitely uninviting, Montara can be smooth and sweet, albeit a bit chilly. During the winter, Montara is constantly shape-shifting and the bottom always in a state of flux from the swell and tide. Montara on a big swell can be as spectacular as closed-out Pipeline and just as deadly. When the ocean mellow a bit, Montara ranges from deadly to excellent, depending on the bottom contour and swell direction. Many times whales can be seen, often in the proverbial impact zone, perhaps enjoying nature’s jacuzzi. On larger swells the beach can be closed out except for the southern-most point, known affectionately as “the corner”. Once you pass the six foot shore-break, strong currents pull you out as you glide tens of feet from treacherous rocks. But don’t wait too long before leaving the train, as missing the set can cause a surfer to paddle endlessly back to the take-off point or, fatigued, end up in ‘dead man’s land’ of giant close-outs. But catching the lefts are sheer joy. Only one shark attack in 1990 and one unfortunate drowning in 1994. But in the immortal words of the Who, many surfers have left “shaking all over”.

FLAT ROCK
About a mile south of ghostly Moss Beach Distillery and another half mile out lies a reef break known as Flat Rock, which lies on the edge of a steep underwater ravine that plays home to the proverbial Man in the Grey Suit. Getting to this spot takes more energy than climbing Montara Mountain - first there’s the treacherous near free-falling drop down 100 foot sandstone cliffs, then the long reef-hopping hike through sea urchins and past large, ornery pedipeds (prey for the lurking predators), a short but vigorous paddle in shifting currents to a large, cumbersome rock that is both intimidating and refuge. Only the southern portion is truly surfable, which works best on west swells. The swells wrap around the rock creating a right that is both hollow and steep. You rarely see other surfers at this spot, as most feel the presence of Sir Davy Jones, denizen of the deep. It is a badge to even make it this far! However keep plenty of energy stored in your system, as the hike back to your car can be much worse on the body.
ROSS’ COVE (pictured in header)
Mecca for you goofy footers. Located at the northern base of Pillar Point (the western most tracking station of the United States Air Force), Ross’ cove offers unprecedented surfing on all but the largest of swells. On smaller days on a high tide, the left breaks along the point and moves outside as the swell increases in size. Maverick’s is clearly visible from the outside lineup, and must have been seen by hundreds of surfers, which makes you wonder how Maverick’s managed to stay so empty until 1990. Even on big days, you can experience a dry-hair paddle out, as a deep channel cuts through the middle of the cove. Once in the lineup, the atomic bomb-like currents can take you in either of three directions, none of which are good. Volkswagen-sized boulders underwater create mushroom eddy’s that identify take-off points; they also are a reminder of the downside of getting caught inside, as your leash can easily trip over one of these rocks and leave you helpless during a set. In 1996, Joel Roberts and a friend motored up to Ross’ Cove in his boat The Deeper Blue. As his buddy paddled in, Roberts anchored the boat outside in the kelp. By the time he got to the lineup, his buddy and three other guys were gone. “I wondered where everyone had gone, and then I could barely hear people on the beach screaming, ‘Come in!’ I paddled in and those guys were all freaked out. My buddy has seen almost as many sharks as me, and he said he was buzzed by a legitimate 20-footer. Just a huge white shark. We hitchhiked back to the harbor and got another boat to pick up my boat in the kelp.”

MAVERICKS
Mind blowing. Explosive. Pants crapping. Bodacious. These are some of the adjectives used to describe the most famous big wave break on the continental United States. Mavericks offers an e-ticket ride for those who can put their balls inside a 5-4 wetsuit and paddle the half-mile out to an ethereal reef spot just off Pillar Point. Discovered by famed surfer Jeff Clark and ridden solo over the ensuing decade, Mavericks is a fickle spot that really only works when the swell comes from the northwest, with a long periodicity and large swell height, at high tide, and with no or offshore winds. The wave needs caressing by nature, and can go from good to bad in less than an hour. In 2007 one of the largest waves purportedly reached 100 feet, although it mostly breaks anywhere from 15 to 45 feet. Surfers need the largest of equipment to hunt big game, known colloquially as "guns". This is not a wave to tease but to simply ride straight and hard to safety, as it took the life of pro surfer Mark Foo in 1994, the same year famed Grateful Dead guitarist Gerry Garcia died. Most take the right, which has three separate bowls that collapse on the surfer but which ultimately exits to safety; the steeper lefts lead into a pile of exposed boulders that make the IRS look like a saint. There have been several shark encounters in the area, most recently in early 2009 when an alleged 14 footer left one of his molars in the thigh of a surfer, who later pulled it out in the parking lot.

THE JETTY
Ah, the Jetty. Well protected by northwest winds, a collector for south swells, and mostly even-tempered throughout the year. You can always find a wave at the Jetty, which has a characteristic "reverb" wave that gets its height and

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shape from classical physics – constructive wave interference resulting from a combination of a man-made jetty that is roughly at a right angle to the beach, forcing two waves to come together and create an explosion both incredibly steep and often times hollow. It is an easy paddle out and well viewed from the peanut gallery off Highway 1. Longboarders, short-boarder, paddle boarders and the bootylicious all surf this spot, which sometimes has a take-off section that is about the size of a modest sized family room. Most of the locals are friendly, although if there’s been no surf for weeks expect to hear some gripes should you be in the right spot at the wrong time. No Kelly Slater’s, although many of the locals express themselves with acrobatic aerials, lip-sprays, knarly cutbacks, or other feats. Late take-offs are normal due to the immense energy created by the confluence of two waves, resembling a surfable Sandy Beach or even the Wedge. Safe, sane, secure – park your honey at the beach and enjoy the surf.

DUNES

Dunes beach is at the apex of the inner harbor that creates the bucolic Half Moon Bay. On big days it is closed out and unsurfable. On smaller days you can have the beach to yourself. Dunes is actually part of a continuum of beaches stretching from The Jetty south to Kelly Beach, covering several miles with a sandy bottom, and all one needs to do is walk until they find the right shape for their surfing style. Both lefts and right exists, although occasionally currents can be challenging with water moving several knots and making it difficult to stay in the take-off zone. But if you enjoy catching average waves with no crowds, then Dunes Beach is for you. Often times the marine life outweighs everything else – thousands of jellies have been seen, schools or porpoises, or a multitude of pelicans. The beach relaxes the mind, and should the surfing be unappealing, then soak the rays with your honey in the seclusion of nearby beach-grass knolls where the heat makes one feel as though they might be anywhere else but chilly northern California.