

SANTA MARIA VALLEY *California*

CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND
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DO THE DUNES! HOLLYWOOD HISTORY, EXOTIC ECOLOGY AND BREATHTAKING SIGHTS CONVERGE AT GUADALUPE DUNES

Largest, Most Biodiverse Coastal Dune-Lagoon Ecosystem on Earth Spans 18 Miles and 1,400 Species

Nature Walks, Full-Moon Hikes, Wildlife Spotting and More Available to Visitors

SANTA MARIA, CA—Here in the heart of Santa Maria Valley and the Central Coast, one of California's "hidden" treasures is also one of its largest, spanning 18 miles of shoreline, 1,400 individual species of flora and fauna, and numerous lagoons and lakes—not to mention towering sand dunes that famed director Cecil B. DeMille used as a breathtaking backdrop for his 1923 silent epic "The Ten Commandments." Indeed, given the scope, beauty and visitor friendliness of this natural wonder, the Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes Complex remains largely undiscovered compared to other popular eco-tourism destinations such as Big Sur or Channel Islands National Park.

Better yet, the dunes occupy the western perimeter of the Santa Maria Valley, which offers visitors a host of additional exciting experiences, from fine wine tasting and miles of strawberries to world-class theater, championship golf courses to renowned barbecue.

Visitors to the Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes Complex are encouraged to begin their journey at the Dunes Center in the small town of Guadalupe along scenic Highway 1 in northern Santa Barbara County. Exhibits at the Dunes Center include a short film on the history of the "Dunites"—an "eclectic group of alternative thinkers, artists, poets and mystics" who inhabited the dunes from the early 1900s to 1973—and recovered artifacts from DeMille's City of the Pharaoh, including a lion's face that decorated the Throne of Ramses. DeMille's ambitious set also featured 21 five-ton Sphinxes that still remain buried beneath the sand.

Here, amid the cozy setting of a beautifully restored Craftsman house, Dunes Center Executive Director Gillian Andrews and her dedicated staff also coordinate an array of dunes-related visitor activities, from full moon hikes to photography walks, wildlife spotting to wildflower viewing.

"You can just pop in for a map or you can spend hours learning about the dunes and their history," Andrews said. "But ultimately we're just the hors d'oeuvre. Once you're out there, we really don't have to say anything—the majesty of the dunes speaks for itself."

The three most popular dunes destinations are all easily accessible from the Dunes Center. Visitors wishing to drive straight to the oceanfront can take Main Street west into the heart of the Guadalupe Dunes Preserve. Nearby Oso Flaco Lake Road leads to a convenient parking area, from where visitors can take a 30-minute stroll along a boardwalk through the dunes and to the beach. And those feeling even more adventurous can hike across the dunes into the heart of the Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes National Wildlife Refuge. Along the way, they will conquer the highest sand dunes on the West Coast, experience an extraordinary palette of unique wildflowers and encounter a diverse population of birds and wild animals.

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With such a display of rare beauty and natural serenity, it is no surprise that this ecosystem would appeal to the idealistic free thinkers known as the Dunites, who, according to one source, “chose to reject societal ways and embrace a closeness to nature experienced through everyday living in the dune environment.” The heyday of the Dunites was in the 1930s, when Chester Alan Arthur III, the grandson of 21st President of the United States Chester Alan Arthur, came to the dunes with the intent of establishing a utopian community. Living in humble wood cabins and subsisting largely on fresh clams and small gardens, the Dunites envisioned “a new society that embraced brotherhood and tolerance leading the world into the Aquarian Age.”

But it was the Biblical Age that first swept the dunes when DeMille embarked on building the City of the Pharaoh for his blockbuster *The Ten Commandments* in 1923—a 720-foot-wide, 120-foot-tall set that required 1,500 workers, 500 tons of statuary, a half million feet of lumber and 75 miles of reinforcing cable. In May and June of that year, 2,500 actors and 3,000 animals were used in the film, which was one of Hollywood’s last silent works yet one of its first to be made in “Technicolor.”

Over time, DeMille’s Egyptian masterpiece became known as the “Lost City,” buried by the shifting sands and forgotten by nearly everyone—except for the residents of Guadalupe who worked as extras on the film and knew all along that it had not been dismantled. To locals, it was simply “the dune that never moved.”

However, interest in the set was rekindled when DeMille, via his posthumously published 1983 autobiography, uttered the following cryptic clue: “If a thousand years from now, archeologists happen to dig beneath the sands of Guadalupe, I hope they won’t rush into print with the amazing news that Egyptian civilization ... extended all the way to the Pacific Coast.”

Documentary producer Peter Brosnan and local archaeologist John Parker have since initiated plans for excavation and preservation of the film set, most of which still remains buried beneath the lone dune.

Visitors interested in exploring the dunes are encouraged to first contact or visit the Dunes Center, whose “Calendar of Guided Walks and Events” is always filled with a vast selection of activities. For example, activities for June include coast hikes, birding walks, an exploration of “dunes secrets,” a strolling “ethnobotany” lecture on how the Chumash and local settlers used dunes plants, and a “plover promenade” featuring insights into the endangered snowy plover and other shore birds.

The Dunes Center also features programs and activities for children, seniors and individuals with disabilities. For more information on the Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes Complex and the Dunes Center, visit www.dunescenter.org on the web or call (805) 343-2455. The Dunes Center is located at 1055 Guadalupe Street (Highway 1), Guadalupe, CA. Hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday.

Serving the greater Santa Maria Valley in the heart of California’s Central Coast, the Santa Maria Valley Visitor & Convention Bureau is a nonprofit association that facilitates local tourism and provides information on the region’s many attractions and visitor services. Famed for its fine wines, natural wonders, agricultural heritage and flavorful barbecue, the Santa Maria Valley offers a broad range of cultural, sporting and historical experiences. For information on lodging, dining, tours, group events and calendar items, please contact the Santa Maria Valley Visitor & Convention Bureau at 800-331-3779, or visit www.santamaria.com

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