

# Malibu 90265

## Introduction

by Taylor Coffman

FROM THE SANTA MONICA PIER, it's a six-mile drive up Pacific Coast Highway to Tuna Canyon Road. Not far along this northwest-to-westerly route lies the site of the Beach House, as William Randolph Hearst and Marion Davies called their grand mansion of the 1920s and '30s, once the film colony's most palatial home. Past that, in Pacific Palisades, lies the Bel-Air Bay Club; and then PCH reaches Sunset Boulevard, the world's only street so-named. On the ocean side is the fish restaurant known as Gladstone's Malibu.

But it's a false start: the border of that famous town lies almost a mile ahead still. Thelma Todd's house and the section of Pacific Palisades called Castellammare are next; tucked away nearby, invisible from the main road, is the Getty Villa (J. Paul Getty greatly admired Hearst). Then comes the more working-class enclave of Sunset Mesa, or Parker Mesa. Right past it is the last part of what, overall, amounts to outlying Los Angeles and its coveted Westside, namely, the place where Topanga Canyon Boulevard reaches Topanga State Beach, once a Bohemian seaside haunt but now a bittersweet memory.

Go another half mile, past the City of Malibu sign, and watch for a larger sign next to Tuna Canyon Road. It announces "Malibu 27 Miles of Scenic Beauty." Years ago, in this same spirit of local pride, the old Malibu Township was often said to extend for twenty-six miles. In reality, twenty-*nine* miles (and even closer to thirty) is more like it in embracing the total Malibu coastline, the long shorefront of what I like to call greater Malibu, the storied land of postal ZIP code 90265.

Tuna Canyon is the first ravine past the better-known Topanga Canyon. It lies just “up” the coast yet in a westerly direction, east-west rather than north-south being the prevailing alignment past Santa Monica and Pacific Palisades. The same goes for the Santa Barbara-Montecito area, two counties ahead. The California Riviera, or the Pacific Riviera, as the Santa Barbara area has been called, are names to which Malibu has equally good claim, its weather being just as benign, its scenery every bit as compelling. In any case: true north, or rather west, and other compass readings aside, greater Malibu’s beach frontage extends well past the City of Malibu’s limits (by themselves a good twenty miles long, all within Los Angeles County) and also past the limits of Rancho Malibu of olden times. A twenty-ninth mile won’t appear on your odometer until you drive as far past Topanga Canyon and Tuna Canyon as Point Mugu, beyond the western boundary of the City of Malibu and, by then, well within Ventura County.

That thinly populated stretch past the county line, which bisects that outer area, is a no-man’s land municipally. Nonetheless, its terrain and history make it part of greater Malibu, part of the western Santa Monica Mountains province that, for our purposes, lies between Pacific Palisades and the Oxnard Plain. “Malibu” is therefore more than just an elongated town, despite its incorporation, more than a single point or even a cluster of points on the map.

What that place-name denotes is, in fact, a small region or district all its own, varied and diverse enough to form a mosaic of many pieces—a palette of many Malibus. Big Sur, up in Monterey County near Carmel, provides a good comparison. A hamlet named Big Sur surely exists. But the entire coast for several miles above it and especially below it also constitutes the place (where a single ZIP code of 93920 widely applies). And thus terms like “Big Sur country” or simply “the Sur coast” are often heard, referring to dozens of square miles or even more.

Another comparison regards the coastal frontage near Point Conception in Santa Barbara County, historically Bixby and Hollister cattle property. Gaviota, at the east end of The Ranch, as it's often called, goes by 93117. But at Jalama Beach, twenty miles to the northwest, the number shifts to an unrelated ZIP—93436—stemming from the town of Lompoc, some twenty miles away near Vandenberg Air Force Base. The unity inherent in Malibu's 90265 is in no sense repeated here.

Unlike plain-jane Lompoc (lampooned by W. C. Fields in his 1940 movie *The Bank Dick*), the place called Malibu has always been enticing, always charismatic and alluring. More like Big Sur in its extensive sweep, Malibu takes in at least a hundred square miles, closer to two hundred if its boundaries are flexibly drawn, the northern or interior one being the most imprecise, the most contestable. No matter the cartography, though, almost all of greater Malibu as defined here falls within the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, established in 1978. Years earlier, the western part of this corridor was often called the Malibu Mountains, a name in danger nowadays of being forgotten.

For these chapters in *Malibu 90265*, the southern, wave-washed boundary of this prime coastal region can be assigned the full twenty-nine miles starting at Topanga Canyon Boulevard and Pacific Coast Highway. Topanga Canyon itself poses a tempting eastern boundary. However, Sunset Mesa, just down PCH from that key intersection and seemingly part of Pacific Palisades, bears the Malibu ZIP code of 90265 yet falls outside the Malibu city limits drawn in 1991. For its part, the adjoining Getty Villa regards itself as "Malibu" (though it's not part of the City of Malibu either). But the detailed Jones & Duncan map of 1953 equates the Malibu Township's southeastern corner of that period with today's PCH and Coastline Drive, making the Getty's case more defensible than many might realize. The Jones & Duncan map also

adds most of a thirtieth mile (fronting Sunset Mesa) to the twenty-nine miles of greater Malibu coastline I've been describing.

As to the town of Topanga and its neighboring Fernwood, each a few miles inland (their ZIP is 90290), the edges of those rustic, hill-clinging communities command the summit of the Santa Monica Mountains near Saddle Peak, with views down into Malibu's southeastern reaches, dominated by Las Flores and Tuna canyons.

For an eastern boundary to be convincing, though, the immediate Topanga-Fernwood area has to be excluded. Visualize instead a sharply slanted line, lying seaward of Topanga and Fernwood and drawn northwesterly for five miles, starting at Coastline Drive and the Getty Villa. After crossing lower Topanga Canyon, the line takes dead aim at the 2,500-foot junction of Schueren and Saddle Peak roads. From that vista point another line extends two miles, northwestward again but not quite as slanted. This one runs down the back side of the Santa Monicas to the intersection of Stunt Road and Mulholland Highway, near Cold Creek and Calabasas Peak. We can call this elbow of two lines, comprising seven miles total, the eastern-northeastern boundary of greater Malibu.

From there Mulholland Highway forms a workable northern, inland boundary as it twists and turns for nearly twenty miles. Heading mostly westward past unincorporated, outlying areas of Calabasas like Monte Nido, Tapia County Park, and on past the southern reaches of Agoura—among the few places close by where 90265 doesn't pertain, some of Saddle Peak itself being another—Mulholland Highway crosses Malibu Canyon Road near the King Gillette Ranch, its Spanish Colonial mansion a tribute to the high-flying 1920s. Farther west, Mulholland crosses Kanan Road. A workable solution to the boundary question, yes, though scarcely a perfect one.

Paramount Ranch falls outside this arbitrary line. The remains of Lake Enchanto fall inside, as does the Peter Strauss Ranch; so, too, does Malibu Lake (*Malibou* Lake locally), likewise bordering on the old-time district of Cornell—the land of “Three Magical Miles,” as the historian Brian Rooney likes to say. In contrast, a little ways back on Mulholland, the Liberty Canyon portion of Malibu Creek State Park lies too far north, too far inland. Beyond Cornell the wildly popular bikers’ mecca called The Rock Store gets included, but the adjacent site of Seminole Hot Springs does not. Rocky Oaks Park, straight up from Point Dume between Castro Crest and Zuma Canyon, also occupies the outer non-Malibu side of Mulholland Highway (and yet it’s part of 90265). So much for lineal logic.

Before Mulholland veers down to the coast along Arroyo Sequit through Leo Carrillo State Park, this plausible northern boundary follows Little Sycamore Canyon Road, which then becomes Yerba Buena Road and leads to Triunfo Pass, clear out toward Westlake Village, Lake Sherwood, and Hidden Valley. Bold, craggy Boney Mountain (or Boney *Ridge*, as nearby dwellers say) sprawls diagonally across this high ground, entirely in Ventura County. The imposing ramparts of “Old Boney,” as some used to call it, are an unmistakable barrier, one whose Conejo Volcanics (by geological name) wall off this distant part of Malibu’s backcountry from Newbury Park and points beyond. Much of Boney Ridge itself bears no ZIP code. Aloof and remote, it’s been a State Wilderness Area since 1981, six thousand acres strong. But the canyons and gulches immediately south and southeast of that rugged, ancient formation—reached from PCH by Deer Creek Road and, farther uphill, by Cotharin Road—are all areas where the vaunted 90265 ZIP code rules.

Old Boney looms uniquely in another way. Both the Malibu and the Big Sycamore creek systems, the main watercourses in the western Santa Monicas, originate in that volcanic outcrop. The Malibu system

starts as the little-known Carlisle Creek and, jointly, as Potrero Valley Creek in Hidden Valley. Both tributaries are upstream from Lake Sherwood and close to the squiggly 90265 line at its highest extent; their waters later become Triunfo Creek by name and finally the more familiar Malibu Creek. Overall, the greater Malibu system comprises almost twenty-five miles in flowing east-southeast to the Pacific. That's more than twice the length of Big Sycamore's ten curving miles and three times longer than the Topanga Canyon watershed. The pronounced extent of the Carlisle-Potrero-Triunfo-Malibu system lends a geographic unity to a remarkably large area, one partly drained by Las Virgenes Creek as well.

In bringing these geographic borders of greater Malibu full circle, a line can be drawn: from Boney Ridge's Sandstone Peak—its 3,111 feet, in fact basaltic, being the highest point in the district—southwestward toward La Jolla Peak and Laguna Peak before hooking south to the ocean itself, fully eight miles away. There the coast highway splits Point Mugu in half. Even that far outward from more familiar parts of the Malibu mosaic, Point Mugu State Park bears its own 90265 status.

The trip homeward on PCH past the Great Sand Dune, Big Sycamore Cove, Neptune's Net, Leo Carrillo, and Broad Beach to Zuma and Point Dume—the geographic center of Malibu's seaward side—is a jaunt covering the entire coastal frontage I mentioned earlier. Beyond Paradise Cove and Latigo and Pepperdine University lies Malibu proper, "Malibu, Malibu" I like to call it, on par with saying New York, New York: the home of the Colony, the lagoon, the famous surf spot, the pier—an area three fourths of the way eastward to Tuna Canyon and Topanga Canyon, with Carbon Beach and Malibu La Costa, Las Flores and then Big Rock, marking the last few miles back to the sign proclaiming "27 Miles."

Malibu is indeed diverse. This elliptical tour around its numerous parts is proof positive, a trip following a scenic perimeter dozens of

miles long. Included in that elongated area, from east to west, are landmarks ranging from Tuna Canyon Park, Big Rock Mesa, Serra Retreat, and Malibu Canyon Tunnel (the latter falls within Calabasas 91302, as does Rindge Dam) to southside residential enclaves like El Nido and Malibu Bowl. More to the west are the Malibu Country Club and the Charmlee Natural Area. And still closer to the setting sun, in far-removed Point Mugu State Park but counting as one of many Malibus just the same, is La Jolla Valley, pristine and isolated.

The list of such places, from suburban to rural, is richly varied. It makes for a grand montage, this land of 90265, surely one of the finest localities anywhere in California. And surely one of the best preserved, providentially so, never mind the modern world surrounding it.