Romance, like Santa Cruz itself, is both a play of the soul and a play of the senses. Santa Cruz can seem as much a mood as a place, a feeling where the very light and air conspire to lift spirits, to imply possibility, to whisper of intrigue. Of course, that airy sense does have its counterbalance in the county’s physical presence: the strong slopes of its mountain shoulders, the soaring spine of its redwoods, the crashing carpet of its coastal swells.

As with its place, so with its people: Romance for Santa Cruz residents intertwines the metaphysical with the physical, a dance of intangible promise and bedrock beauty. But Santa Cruz pursuits that might be soul-stirring for some couples might be cold treacle for another. In that vein, we asked five Santa Cruz couples to use our fair county as a lens through which to peek at their relationships, to describe what lights their romantic fires, and what might fuel the fires for others.

Romance is just a beach walk away
Karen and Darrell Darling

For Karen and Darrell Darling, longtime local innkeepers and political activists, Santa Cruz was a match for their temperaments and their sentiments. Darrell explains its appeal: “This is the most amicable, caring, receptive community. The politics, the weather, the topography, the commitments of the community—it was obvious within the first two years that this was the place for us.” However, two years isn’t that much in the scheme of things, since the Darlings have been sweethearts since they were 12; they just celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary.

Karen doesn’t find it difficult to search for romantic venues in Santa Cruz; she can just settle into one of the rooms at the Darling House, the stately Spanish-style estate where she and Darrell have been proprietors for 25 years. “Our home is the most romantic place in Santa Cruz. We work at creating romance for people, but for us, in the quiet winter, we have a fire in the fireplace, music, candlelight and each other,” she says. But the Darlings do like to share the home’s advantages: At sunset, the view to the wharf takes on a magical appeal, magic that’s intensified all the more when a full moon casts its beguiling beams on the shimmering water, a scene sure to set hot hearts a-flutter.

But Darrell says romance can’t quite be pinned down to a specific spot. “Sure, Natural Bridges, the lighthouse, seeing the lights of the city from the campus, they are all romantic, but romance comes spontaneously. The people that come to Santa Cruz are receptive, appreciative and open to experience. If the couple enjoys being together, they will see each other in the light of that unrepeatable moment, no matter the place.”

Karen explained with a laugh that the both of them lived in a number of places that they loved, but that Santa Cruz was special, and that its appeal spanned generations: “Your children will always come visit when you live in a beautiful place.”

At the end of our interview, the Darlings said that there was a fair chance that the Darling House would be sold, and that they would retire from their innkeeper’s post. That would mean relocating from the place that has housed their lives—and their love—for more than a quarter of a century. But as Darrell Darling put it, “It doesn’t matter if we’re in a 20-bedroom house or a two bedroom house; love will remain.” Indeed.
Karen and Kennan Ward

Explorers, naturalists and photographers Karen and Kennan Ward have seen many far-off, exotic and magnificent places in their 25-year collaboration as best friends and business partners, but being home in Santa Cruz is still a thrill. “We have the Mediterranean climate, the organic foods, the freedom to be outside. It’s no big decision to go outdoors, to bike,” says Karen. Kennan chimes in on the same chorus: “Growing up in the cold Midwest, I love the blue sky here, the sun—it just makes you happier.”

Some couples find that romance is a series of renewals, and for the Wards certain Santa Cruz spots still stimulate a 22-year marriage. Kennan lets us in on one of their places that never fails to deliver: “There’s something about Seabright Beach that’s romantic. It’s still our favorite make-out spot. We listen to music in the car and then go to the beach. I still remember listening to Phil Collins singing ‘In the Air Tonight’ and then walking on Seabright Beach.”

Kennan effortlessly rhapsodizes on the beach’s electric effect. “For me, the beach is like romance because everything changes: the birds, the driftwood, the sand, the tides—it’s energy flow, just like romance is also energy flow.” The Wards are energized by those beach escapades; Karen said they can easily spend hours on the beach, walking, talking and looking at wildlife.

Both Kennan and Karen agree that there’s no need for Santa Cruz couples to spend a lot of money or effort in seeking the sweet rewards of romance. Karen says it’s the simple things that satisfy: “Do something physical. Don’t stuff your face with food; go out together and bond. A physical buzz is a mental buzz, and it builds your bond in so many ways. Have a balance, but do things together.”

Kennan doesn’t stray far from that mantra, revealing that, “The best things are free: a walk in the redwoods, a walk along the beach, a bike ride together. Just enjoying the same things together is big.”
Rogelio and June Ponce

For Rogelio and June Ponce, it’s the southern side of the county that sweeps them off their feet. They should have a feeling about the county by now, since they’ve lived here all of their lives, eight of those as a married couple. Rogelio, who runs Cal-Pacific Berries (and who has also worked for many years for Sun Valley Berries, his father’s company), explains his affinity this way: “We have a positive outlook for the county, particularly South County, with the goal of bettering the community, a deep commitment to community and to each other.”

In the way that a couple’s ideas can blend and reinforce, June also has passion for where they are, and what they do, and how that reflects back to their relationship. “We strive to make the community better, for our son, and for the children of the families we meet and work with, and that’s a big part of our relationship,” says June, who works at Action Pajaro Valley, the community nonprofit.

And just to show you that romance blossoms in some unlikely places, June cites the UC Santa Cruz library as one of the havens for their early trysting. “I was studying at UCSC library, and Rogelio used to come and be my study partner, and I thought that was so romantic that he’d actually come to the library to be with me.”

Romantic to the core, before Rogelio proposed to her out on West Cliff Drive, he asked June’s dad for her hand in marriage. Then, after the proposal, he drove June to Star Bene, where he’d arranged for both sets of families to meet as a surprise for June. That impressed his wife-to-be—in her words, “This guy’s amazing!”

Moving bodies in the great outdoors is the Ponce’s romantic recommendation: June suggests driving up to Mount Madonna Road to the park, sharing cheese and crackers and the beautiful views. Rogelio thinks biking on the back roads through the agricultural fields would be the ticket, stopping at Gizdich Ranch for a pie. Mmmm...
Reverend Deborah Johnson and Valerie Joi Fiddmont

Nature’s allure in Santa Cruz also speaks to and for the Rev. Deborah Johnson (right in photo) and Valerie Joi Fiddmont’s relationship, which counts more than 11 years of togetherness, including the last few months as a married couple. For Valerie, there’s something about the sea that expresses their relationship as defined in a Santa Cruz light. “It’s the beaches, because we commune there together. Each beach’s personality is different, reflective of the variety in our relationship.” Deborah’s view captures those beaches and beyond: “It’s nature, period. We live in the redwoods in the Aptos hills, and the pure majesty, the enduringness of the redwoods, with their exposed roots intricately intertwined, is reflective of our multifaceted lives.”

Deborah, founder of Inner Light Ministries, acknowledged that the couple’s marriage ceremony was probably the most romantic thing they’d done in Santa Cruz. “Our marriage at a secret spot on the beach was magical and mystical: waves were crashing, pelicans were in formation. It felt like we were on a holodeck in ‘Star Trek.’ We felt connected to our ancestors.” Valerie, who is the music director at Inner Light and an instructor for the gospel choir at UC Santa Cruz echoed that assessment, saying, “It was a clear, beautiful day that set a foundation of beauty for our relationship, a pure sense of intimacy, where time stood still.”

Deborah has been in Santa Cruz for 18 years, and Valerie for 12, so they’ve had a chance to consider what to recommend as a romantic interlude for Santa Cruz couples, and their thoughts literally bring it all back home. Valerie says, “Wherever you are, express gratitude and appreciation. Take in a concert at Kuumbwa, a sunset dinner on the wharf,” and laughing, “It’s romantic even at the piano in our home.”

Deborah steers it home too, with, “We have so many beautiful spots, the forests, the parks, the beaches—but you take the romance with you. If you’re in the right heart-space, even playing in the arcade in the Boardwalk is romantic. But we like to just be in our backyard, with its phenomenal view. Just be with your partner, not needing to be entertained.” Amen.
Sarah Day and Daniel Bear Davis

It’s difficult to separate the personal from the professional for Sarah Day and Daniel Bear Davis, and it seems like they wouldn’t have it any other way. The two are dance performers and co-directors of Shah and Blah Productions, and in their five years as a couple, they’ve worked together almost that long.

“We feel we’ve created a model for how relationships work in partnerships: In finding an audience, and getting funding, we are finding each other,” says Daniel. The two described a performance project at Dead Cow Gallery as expressive of their relationship. In that work, they performed a different creative piece for 24 days.

As part of the project, they physically transformed the gallery, even down to the wiring. “We changed the piece every day, and how we used the site every day, and that reflects our relationship: We take a space, change its structures and its dynamics, and it supports many different roles, as does our relationship,” says Daniel.

Sarah agreed that the gallery work spoke to their relationship as well. “It was a less conventional approach to partnership and creating. In our work, we strive toward experiment and innovation, as well as in our relationship. Santa Cruz is a place that was open to our initiative, a place we can do this. If you want a scene, take the initiative and make one.”

“Our most satisfying times are tied to nature. Walking the coastline, hiking the redwoods, finding a fairy ring and lying in it staring at the trees above. Traveling brings out conversation: the roads go to the horizon line, and it parallels our open communication,” says Daniel.

Sarah and Daniel might be a bit prejudiced about what they recommend as a romantic pursuit for other couples, but their passion is well-placed. Daniel says, “See a performance of some kind, and then perhaps a nice dinner and then a good soak in a tub together. Performances are spaces that are time-cushions: they take you into places of deep relaxation, a place that awakens the inner landscape.”

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