

FINDING GOLD IN CALIFORNIA

2 natural treasures just across the bridge from San Francisco

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SAN FRANCISCO — Go ahead and leave your heart in San Francisco the next time you're there; just make sure you keep your hiking boots. You'll need them for a day trip to nearby Marin County, where you can walk among ancient redwoods, roam with a herd of elk, and maybe even feel the earth move.

It's hard to imagine such an astonishing, natural wonderland existing so close to a metropolis but here, just on the other side of the Golden Gate Bridge, are two national treasures, Muir Woods National Monument — which celebrates its centennial this year — and Point Reyes National Seashore.

Begin by leaving the crazy streets of San Francisco behind. You won't miss them since the wild, winding roads leading around Marin County are just as fun. Follow them to skyscrapers of a different sort at Muir Woods, tucked into a canyon 12 miles north of the city.



Towering redwoods fill Muir Woods National Monument in California. (RYAN E. SMITH)

It was about this place, among the last untouched bastions of coast redwood trees, that conservationist John Muir said, "This is the best tree-lover's monument that could possibly be found in all the forests of the world."

Don't believe him? Just look up. Towering redwoods — the tallest trees in the world — seem to stretch up forever as their thick veins of reddish bark reach relentlessly toward the sky.

Shafts of light make their way to the hiking paths below, where nearly 1 million people annually walk along a boardwalk with their heads craned back to get a better view.

They stand in awe at the sight of something as simple as a tree, which here can top out at more than 250 feet high. (Imagine what it must be like to confront the tallest in the world, which was measured at nearly 380 feet in Redwood National Park.)

AUDIO SLIDESHOW

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Despite all the visitors meandering around — and there are many who flock here on tour buses — Muir Woods remains a peaceful place. The thick trees, some of them more than 1,000 years old, stand like time's sentinels. One display presenting the cross-section of a dead tree shows, by examination of its many rings, how it kept watch all the way back to before 1100.

Today, the area resembles something out of prehistoric times, or at least Return of the Jedi. It is populated by ferns and oversized trees that grow up to 14 feet wide. There was a time millions of years ago when redwood-like giants covered most of the Northern Hemisphere, but now climate change has driven redwoods back to a few strips along the coast of California and Oregon where rainfall and fog still provide the moisture they require.

Of course, preservation is the whole point here, and this year the monument happily celebrates 100 years of doing just that. The land was bought by William Kent in 1905 to protect it from logging, and he turned it over to the federal government three years later, requesting that it be named for Muir, the naturalist.

Because of the crowds these natural skyscrapers attract, guidebooks suggest visiting midweek in the early morning or late afternoon, when it's less crowded. An equally effective way of leaving the crowd behind is to take one of the hiking trails that branch off from the main paths along the cool canyon floor.

While there are 1.5 miles of paved or boardwalked trails at the bottom of the park that are mostly flat, these longer, rougher routes lead up and out of the canyon. They provide a more strenuous walk that tries — and slowly, achingly succeeds — at lifting you above the treetops.

The view from the summit is worth it, and it provides you with a hint of what is to come if you continue on your adventure through Marin County: steep, twisting mountain roads that lead past lush greenery and suicidal cyclists.

If you try one of these hikes, though, be sure to plan your route in advance or take a map. Some loop back to Muir Woods while others lead to different parks, and you don't want to end up like my brother and me — lost. It may be hard to imagine not being able to find your way back to 250-foot trees, but it happens.

Once you're finished with Muir Woods, don't head back to the Bay Area just yet. Follow the legendary Highway 1 a little further north along the coast, past some quaint beaches and more great hiking trails, and you'll find another hidden gem: Point Reyes National Seashore.

Situated on a peninsula 30 miles north of San Francisco, this park is out of this world, or at least it seems like it. The park is actually on a different tectonic plate from the neighboring land, resulting in completely different — and redwood-free — terrain.

A short paved walk that leads from the main visitors center will take you along the infamous San Andreas Fault Zone, where the Pacific plate grinds into the slower-moving North American plate. A reconstructed fence there with an 18-foot gap in it gives visitors a concrete way of understanding just what happened when the peninsula jumped to the northwest during the 1906 earthquake.

Geology doesn't entirely account for the mystery of this place, though. The weather helps too. Here, the wind pushes at you without remorse, more than any other place on the Pacific Coast. Buildings and trees appear strange through fog that can wisp around like quicksilver spirits.

And then, just when you think you've gotten used to this unusual landscape and know what to expect, you stumble across a herd of elk.

Aside from being home to innumerable beef and dairy cattle, Point Reyes boasts a herd of nearly 400 tule elk, which once had been hunted to the brink of extinction. We found some lazily munching at the landscape just off the side of the road, where they seemed to materialize out of the mists. Their heads perked up for pictures, but they otherwise ignored us.

Point Reyes promises numerous other zoological treats, too, assuming you can see them through the fog. (The peninsula is the second foggiest spot on the continent.) Between January and April, gray whales often can be spotted off the coast, and we saw sea lions and elephant seals loafing on the sandy beaches.

There are beaches for people to enjoy, too, and miles and miles of trails for hiking and mountain biking, but it couldn't feel more different from the old-growth forest down the road at Muir Woods. While there are some fir and pine forests here, this landscape we explored along the eastern part of the park was barren and harsh, windswept, exposed to the elements.

There's something very invigorating about that. It makes you eager to make the long walk to the top of a ridge, lured by the promise of a fading sun. It teases you into walking down 300 steps to an 1870 lighthouse built to protect mariners from the dangerous conditions.

It even calls you to the very edge of the cliffs here, steep, majestic walls of rock that call to mind their more celebrated British siblings in Dover along the English Channel. It's not hard to imagine how comforting they must have been to the famous Englishman Sir Francis Drake, who stopped here in 1579 prior to crossing the Pacific Ocean on his way around the globe.

Eventually, like Drake, you'll have to leave this beautiful place too. But don't worry. As you leave Point Reyes and the setting sun highlights the road ahead of you — snaking back and forth, in and out of deep crevasses in the earth — you'll smile and know: The fun's not over yet.

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