

WEEKEND ESCAPE | PINNACLES NATIONAL PARK, CALIF.



Photographs by TOM BENTLEY

THE BALCONIES Cliffs Trail in Pinnacles National Park, east of the Salinas Valley, twists among dramatic rock formations.

High drama, pure wonder

By TOM BENTLEY >>> Designated a national park just a year ago, Pinnacles (www.nps.gov/pinn/index.htm) can overwhelm with the sheer number of adjectives that leap to mind. “Mind-bending,” “extraordinary,” “wondrous” — all fall flat when you try to describe this surreal landscape of cloven cliffs, jagged spires and imposing boulders southeast of Salinas off the 101 Freeway. My sweetheart and I took a 10-mile trek through creek bed and cliff top there, earning our sighs of relief in the whirlpool tub that soon followed. The charge for our sweat equity? We spent about \$600, which included \$500 for two nights at the Inn at the Pinnacles, a polished and welcoming B&B a condor’s wing flap from the park’s doors.

The bed

The Inn at the Pinnacles [32025 Stonewall Canyon Road, Soledad; (831) 678-2400, www.innatthepinnacles.com] rises out of the surrounding vineyards like a sweet mirage. Our hosts, Jan and Jon Brosseau, poured the pressed goodness from Brosseau Vineyard’s grapes at their complimentary 5 p.m. wine and cheese hour. They also serve delightful, decadent breakfasts to power Pinnacles hiking (or maybe poolside lounging). Among their six select suites, our Manzanita Room was a relaxing respite with its comfy bed, vineyard views and big soaking tub. Take advantage of the suite’s gas grill to cue up dinner under the huge starry sky.

The meal

Small-town Soledad is a 20-minute drive through the hills from the inn, so don’t toss back too many *cervezas* at its many Mexican restaurants. La Fuente (101 Oak St., Soledad; (831) 678-3130; no Web address but many Yelp reviews; entrees \$7–\$20) doesn’t put on any airs in its simple dining room, but it puts tasty fare on its tables. The grilled shrimp in my tacos were expertly prepared and went well with the generous guacamole topping. Average chips were made much better with great red chile and *pico de gallo* sauces. Everything is made fresh so the pace is relaxed, but the savory fare forgives any wait. And you can always view the considerable collection of Diego Rivera prints on the walls.

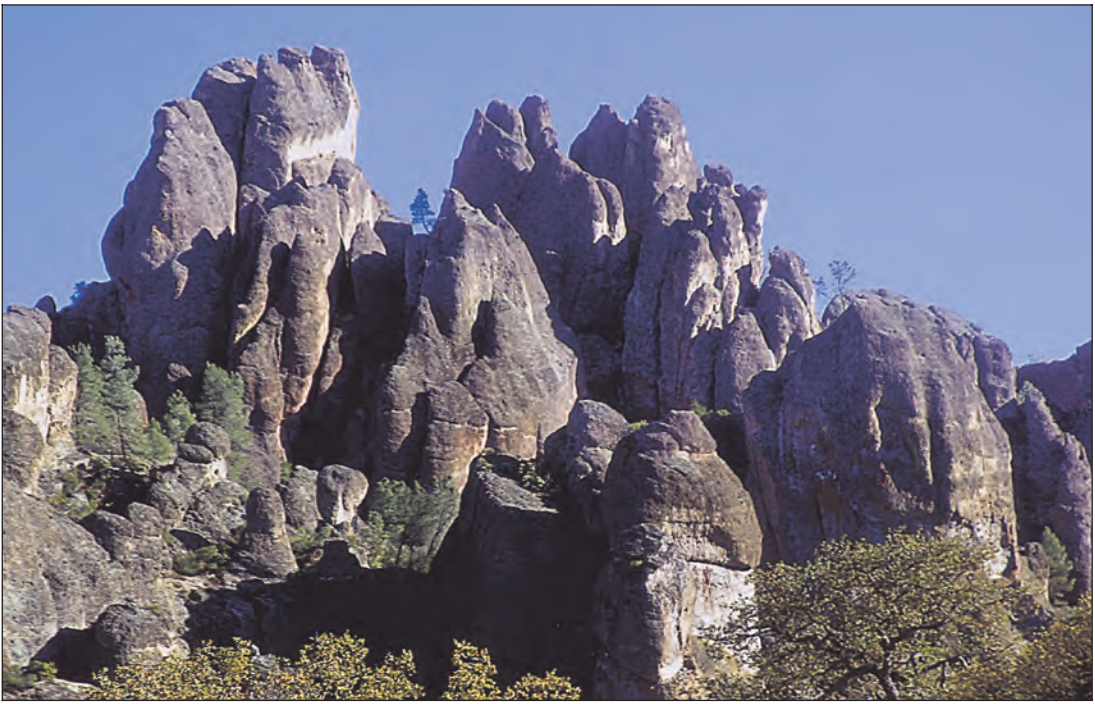
The find

Pinnacles’ volcanic heritage is dramatic and varied; 30-plus miles of hiking trails cross the park, from the condor crannies seen on the strikingly carved canyons of the High Peaks Trail to the oak-tree bedazzled flow of its rolling hills. This time we took on the nearly 10-mile trudge over the Balconies Cliffs Trail and through the long creek-side cruise of the North Wilderness Trail, marked by 128 stacked-rock cairns. (Yes, we counted.)

The lesson learned

There’s a pretty fair ridge-top ascent on the tail end of the North Wilderness trail, when you might already be a bit tuckered. Next time, I’d start on the North Wilderness Trail and save going over the Balconies Cliffs for the finish. Still a bit of an uphill, but the deep drama of the volcanic magic will restore you.

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THE PINNACLE’S volcanic heritage can be seen in the spires and crags that dot the area.



THE COZY Manzanita Room at the Inn at the Pinnacles is a relief after a long hike. Hearty breakfasts help power the day.



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THE CREEK-SIDE North Wilderness Trail in Pinnacles National Park features 128 cairns.

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Office of Tourism

Mexico comes first in top 5 destinations

It’s Mexico, cruising to victory by a mile despite a limp. Then comes Canada, followed by the United Kingdom, the Dominican Republic and France. These are U.S. travelers’ five top foreign destinations as measured by a new survey of travel data from 2012. In that year, U.S. residents made 20.3 million trips to Mexico (mostly by land) compared with 2.5 million to Britain. These numbers come from the U.S. Department of Commerce’s National Travel and Tourism Office, which surveys Americans on their travels abroad and surveys foreigners on their travels here. Overseas travel by Americans rose by 5% to 28.5 million in 2012 — faster than travel to Canada or Mexico. Over the same period, U.S. residents’ travel to Canada rose 3% and travel to Mexico fell 1%. American trips to Mexico were down slightly in 2011 and 2012. The annual figure has hovered between 19 million and 21 million since 2004.

— CHRISTOPHER REYNOLDS



Caesars Entertainment

Vegas mall opening

The first properties at the Linq, a new retail dining and entertainment area in Las Vegas between the Quad and the Flamingo, have opened. The open-air mall, which boasts a 550-foot-tall Ferris wheel called the High Roller as its anchor, is to open in stages this year. Businesses already welcoming customers include the Haute Doggerly, an eatery featuring hot dogs from Sahlen’s of Buffalo, N.Y.; Koto, a gift shop with a line of products featured in trend-setting blogs; O’Sheas, an Irish-themed casino that used to front onto the Strip before closing its doors to make way for the Linq (it’s now inside the Quad and features six beer-pong tables); and the Purple Zebra, a self-serve daiquiri bar.

— JAY JONES

Share your videos

Readers’ travel videos have been rolling in, and we’re still collecting them for one more day. The deadline for submission is Monday. Some selected videos will be screened Jan. 18 and 19 at the L.A. Times Travel Show at the Los Angeles Convention Center. Here’s how it works: Using your original work, you create a video of a place you’ve been within the last five years. Submissions must be received by Jan. 6. Use of music from the YouTube audio library is allowable (or other sites that provide royalty-free music, so please indicate a source when you submit your work), but other copyrighted music, photos, images and works may not be used. Info: latimes.com/travelvids.

— TIMES STAFF



180s.com

Plugged in and warm

The folks at 180s pioneered behind-the-head soft-shell ear warmers, and now the company has added built-in wireless high-definition Bluetooth speakers and a microphone so you can keep your ears toasty while listening to music or having a phone conversation on Bluetooth-enabled devices. No more fiddling with external headphones on cold outings. Just charge the speakers with the included USB cable, pair with your device, and head on out, using the control button at the center of the right earpiece. The earmuffs take about 3½ hours to charge, which will provide about eight hours listening or talk time. The ear warmers’ adjustable click-to-fit malleable frames make for unisex comfort on a range of head sizes, and the earmuffs collapse for compact storage. 180s Bluetooth HD Ear Warmers cost \$80. Info: www.lat.ms/1hjCSa.

— JUDI DASH