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The San Diego Union-Tribune.

Scenic route

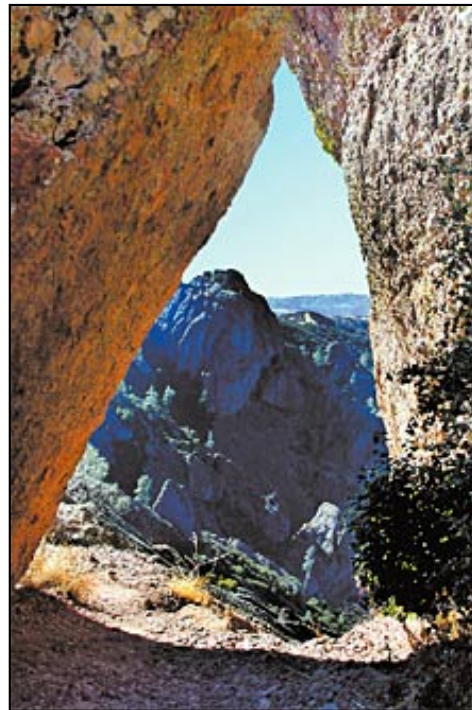
From Pinnacles National Monument to Big Sur, this journey gives you a taste of paradise

By Tom Bentley
May 28, 2006

California is like a fabulous gourmet meal, served in complementary courses of mountain and plain, desert and sea. Our luck is in our access to the table: While even the lofty vistas of the High Peaks Trail at the Pinnacles National Monument didn't afford me a glimpse of the rugged Big Sur coast, I knew it was just a hop, skip and a breathtakingly whippy road away.

Being able to wrangle a weekend where you get equal portions of both is toothsome touring indeed. (Toss in a couple of nights at a superb inn, winery visits and dining at a spectacular ocean-view restaurant and you've got a weekend of concentrated pleasure.)

But even jaded consumers of California scenery would consider Pinnacles a place apart. I've been on most of its 30 miles of hiking trails – from easy to wheezy – and yet time and again I'm struck by the otherworldly aspects of its twisted spires and sharp crags.



TOM BENTLEY AND ALICE BOURGET
The upthrust crags at Pinnacles National Monument display the layered violence of time and geology.

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Pinnacles is one of geology's anvils, a place pounded by volcanic heat and the smithy of wind, water and time, and its visually arresting landscape rewards the hiker around every twist of its trails.

If your taste turns toward oak woodland areas, tinkling streams and gentle trail rises, Pinnacles will graciously grant them. If your needs (and your knees) can move toward the middle, there are higher zones with tougher trails, manzanita and chaparral brush.

Move to loftier altitudes like the High Peaks and you can marvel up close at those serrated rock ribbons and fingers, balancing boulders, spare pines and colorful lichens eking out a living in the high, dry scrub. And so many of the trails have painterly aspects, with swaths of fiery reds and yellows on their cutaway rock sides; walking through them can be like visiting natural galleries.

I wasn't even going to mention the condors, since it's an embarrassment that after multiple hikes I can't seem to spot a bird with a 10-foot wingspan, but suffice it to say that the 13 California condors that have been released into the wild at Pinnacles over the past few years are doing well and are regularly spotted by hikers – with some exceptions – enjoying the higher park trails.

Of course, there's a whole host of other soaring raptors flapping through the airwaves, including peregrine falcons and golden eagles. Condors or not, Pinnacles is a place where your imagination can take wing, whether you keep your eyes to the skies or like to poke your nose into trailside brush.

I can think of no better balance to trailside exertions than luxuriant ease, and my sweetheart Alice and I got that in high style at the Inn at the Pinnacles, just a few flaps of a raptor's

If you go

Pinnacles National Monument: www.nps.gov/pinn, (831) 389-4485



Inn at the Pinnacles: www.innatthepinnacles.com, (831) 678-2400; \$200 to \$275, Friday through Sunday

Chalone Vineyard: www.chalonevineyard.com, (831) 678-1717

Paraiso Vineyards: www.paraisovineyards.com, (831) 678-0300

Mission San Antonio dePadua: www.missiontour.org/sanantonio, (831) 385-4478

Hacienda Lodge, (831) 386-2446

Sierra Mar Restaurant (Post Ranch Inn), www.postranchinn.com/dining.shtml, (831) 667-2800

wing away from Pinnacles itself. The seven-room Mediterranean-style Inn is the handiwork of Jon and Jan Brosseau, who, having grown grapes on their property there for 25 years, are now growing their reputation as innkeepers par excellence.

They have 30 years of local stories to share with any open-eared guests, and their easy conviviality goes well with the house wines, which flow freely at the evening wine-and-cheese frolic in the lavender-encircled courtyard.

And if you really want to fill your time (and glass) with wine, there's no need to be caught in the crush of cars in Napa Valley. Tasting rooms of varied scope and size are an easy, scenic drive from the inn.

Notable among them are Hahn Estates, Paraiso Vineyards, newcomer San Saba, Scheid, and close-by Chalone, long a producer of premium wines. This time around, I found the Souzao port at Paraiso sturdily sound (especially since it was paired with offerings from a brimming melted-chocolate fountain as part of a tasting room party.) And a 2003 Grenache at Chalone was a flavorful delight.

But if the Brosseaus had their way, they'd have a tasting room of their own at the inn, hosting the six California wineries that buy their pinot and chardonnay grapes, but that's a plan still in the concept stage. "We're a full-service inn, and were always adding things, kind of like the Winchester Mystery House," says Jon Brosseau. "We're working on getting a pool, too."

Their latest additions are a DLP projector with a 100-inch screen to show foodie movies such as "Tortilla Soup" and "Babette's Feast," plus a tap-beer dispenser to provide guests with cold draft beer after a Pinnacles hike. But for Alice and me, the inn is more like the Fabulous Relaxation House than



TOM BENTLEY

Julia Morgan's architectural eye is still in evidence in her design for William Randolph Hearst's Hacienda.



TOM BENTLEY

Honorio Della offers spirits and good cheer at Chalone Vineyards.

the Winchester.

As Jon Brosseau says, “The people are the best thing about the inn. We're still waiting for the guests from hell, but they haven't been here yet.”

I'm of a mind to think that the big whirlpool tubs in the beautiful tile-floor rooms are the best thing about the inn, but why argue? We also had no argument with the breakfast banquets, a savory souffle one morning and a fine French toast the next, with all manner of fresh fruit, sausages and other tasty side dishes tilting the table.

It was with a satisfied but wistful sigh that we pushed away from our second morning at the inn's table, but Big Sur beckoned.

A raft of California history, old and new, can be pleurably traversed between Pinnacles and the coast. From the nearby town of Soledad (plenty of decent Mexican restaurants, if you want to drop into town from the inn),



TOM BENTLEY AND ALICE BOURGET

A vineyard on the back side of the Inn at the Pinnacles glows not long after daybreak.

scoot south for 20 miles on Highway 101 and take the Jolon Road (G14) exit just out of King City. Driving on Jolon Road will once again confirm that California has become one huge vineyard – vines dress up fields and hills for miles on end. The oak forests of the surrounding area are beautiful, ruled by stately old trees.

Twenty minutes of driving on Jolon Road will bring you to Mission Road, and five miles on that will take you to the beautiful Mission San Antonio de Padua, founded in 1771. The mission is distinguished by the fact that it's in the middle of an active military training base, Fort Hunter Liggett, where your entrance is checked at the gate. Entrance is free, but you'll need to show a driver's license, proof of insurance and registration to get a visitor's pass. This is a place where you'll want to keep your Corvette in first gear – both St. Anthony and the military police will see you if you speed.

But don't let that deter you from enjoying the beauty of the mission's grounds, chapel, garden courtyard and gift shop. But even before you get to the mission itself, you really should take a look at the Hacienda Lodge, right on the base itself.

Built by famed architect Julia Morgan in 1929 to house William Randolph Hearst's San Simeon ranch workers and

celebrity hunting guests, it's a beautiful Mission-style building, including a domed wing and expansive grounds. Incongruously enough, it's now owned – and unfortunately furnished – by the military, but it has a variety of interesting guest rooms for prices as low as \$30 a night, and includes a huge three-bedroom suite for \$160 a night. There's also a bar (with a striking Hearst-era fireplace) and restaurant on the grounds.

But just peeking in the modest Hacienda restaurant got us thinking of our final trip destination: the fabulous Sierra Mar restaurant on the grounds of one of California's – and the country's – spectacular hotels, Post Ranch Inn in Big Sur.

The drive to Sierra Mar, beginning only minutes from the mission, is appetizer aplenty. That would be Ferguson-Nacimiento Road, which winds its bucolic way through the sun-dappled Los Padres National Forest (campgrounds abound) to breathtaking coastal vistas, dropping you onto Highway 1 a bit south of Big Sur proper.

We had enough time before dinner

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to do the Big Sur dance: a nice hike down into sparkling Partington Cove (one of innumerable but arresting Big Sur strolls); a glance at all the unusual goods at the Nepenthe shops; and a bracing cup of coffee at the Big Sur Bakery.

Sunset found us at Sierra Mar, a glass-walled aerie where soaring hawks share your view of the crashing waves below. The restaurant is polished but friendly, with a four-course prix fixe menu that changes daily and uses organic, seasonal ingredients.

One caveat: Sierra Mar doesn't do discounts. The dinners are \$85, and if you like to quaff a celebratory glass or two from their very deep cellars, you could run into some serious coin shortages.

For instance, we started with glasses of Pierre Morlet Reserve champagne, which was delicious, and should be, at \$17 a glass. A glass of Two Hands shiraz I had a bit later was only a bit lower on the scale, but again quite luscious. My first course, a chanterelle mushroom risotto, was so good that it almost ruined me for the rest of the repast, but I recovered enough to find zesty joy in butternut and squash pear soup, a timbale of artichoke, porcini mushroom and fennel, and a strawberry-lemongrass soup with vanilla bean ice cream and strawberry gele. Petits fours followed. Everything was fresh, savory and complex – and absolutely delectable.

Since the lodging at Post Ranch is as dear as the dining, home to Santa Cruz County we headed, soulful, sated, and content. California's table, always laden, had again given us sumptuous

servings of scenery, history and mood. And even if I didn't see those shifty condors, I knew that I had eaten better than them.

■ Tom Bentley lives in Watsonville.

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