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### Pinnacles provides glimpses at condors, history

AFTER EASY DRIVE FROM BAY AREA, STRENUOUS HIKES LEAD TO VANTAGE POINTS

By Tom Bentley  
Special to the Mercury News

#### PINNACLES NATIONAL MONUMENT -

Emptying California's pockets would be like emptying a 6-year-old's pockets: You'd find a variety of entrancing objects and curios, all worth a conversation or two. In California's case, you'd come up with a Yosemite here, a Joshua Tree there, a Big Sur tucked away, and a Pinnacles jutting about.

It was at Pinnacles National Monument where my sweetheart Alice and I spent a recent weekend of hiking and sightseeing, wine tasting and whirlpooling, and we barely tapped the rich well of resources for Bay Area locals looking for nearby respite and recreation.

The park itself has had plenty of dramatic history -- about 23 million years' worth. That's the heyday of the ancient volcano whose remnants form the monument's amazing rock spires and crags. Because of the San Andreas Rift Zone's torquing and twisting of the big plates that make up the Earth's crust, Pinnacles is 195 miles north of its original location.

But we weren't as concerned with the past as the present -- taking the Juniper Canyon/High Peaks/Tunnel Trail loop, which is a fairly strenuous 4.1-mile hike that begins at the park's west entrance and takes you from the low live-oak watercourses through the manzanita and chamise chaparral to spectacular views in the goggle-eyed heights of rough rock.

We were on a condor hunt (hoping it wasn't the other way around), because Pinnacles and the Ventana Wilderness Society have collaborated to reintroduce condors to the monument's environment. Six free-flying young male condors are now extending their 9 1/2-foot wingspans on the thermal winds above the Pinnacles, with two young females getting acclimatized before release. There are plans to have 20 to 30 of

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the gigantic birds make their home there over the next few years.

Among the 30 miles of hiking trails (from easy to exhausting) at the monument, the High Peaks trail is one of the best for spotting the condors roosting or in the air. The young birds are curious, and there have been some incidents involving birds landing close to park visitors since the late 2003 release.

Park rangers ask hikers to stay at least 100 feet from the birds and be aware that harassing these federally protected birds is a crime. Our crime as we ascended was in mistaking the more common (but huge) turkey vultures in flight to be condors, only to realize as we closed in that they lacked that majestic wingspan and strikingly unsightly face of their condor kin.

Other Pinnacles rewards were less elusive. It's the kind of place where it's easy to say "Wow!" as every new switchback angle reveals more of the time-machine aspects of the ancient rock walls and canyons. Dinosaurs wouldn't look out of place among the cut slab faces and bulging boulders. Each level of ascent dramatically presents its renewed reward: a fresh view. Pinnacles doesn't match the drama of our governor hurling a Humvee through a bank vault, but it is nature's drama, with both big-picture glory and fine-detail subtlety.

Trailside offerings of various wildflowers help to propel you upward, as do the high currents of floral scent that move up from the meadows below. Colors are arresting: bright reds and yellows of lichens mixed with mossy greens, various shades of fire on the rock faces. Pitched in environmental enclaves amid the hard rock, life is everywhere, from lizards to lupines. When I saw a hummingbird pause for a moment on a bush at one of the higher spots we visited, I considered how its two-inch shimmeringly winged glory contrasts nicely with the condor, its monster-winged companion of the air.

For this trip, Alice and I had come up with a good travel recipe, one that creates a perfect blend of exertion and indulgence. By day, push your muscles to the edge of complaint at Pinnacles; by night, have that edge smoothed away in sweet repose. The repose is available in scads at the Inn at the Pinnacles, a Mediterranean style bed-and-breakfast just a deep hiker's breath (two miles) from the otherworldly topography of the monument.

We arrived at the inn at dusk, just in time to settle into the lavender-flanked courtyard for the sunset show. The view from that courtyard is like an open-air theater in the round: the sun slid down behind the Gabilan Mountains, a performance rendered in soft, layered pastels.

"We like to say it's a 370-degree view," says Jon Brosseau, co-owner of the inn with his wife, Jan. The Brosseaus bought the 160 acres of surrounding land in 1978, planting grapevines in 1980 that now cover 30 acres. They opened the six-room inn in 2002. While the dusk settled, we enjoyed the house chardonnay, courtesy of some of those homegrown grapes.

"We let the land tell us where to put the inn," says Jon Brosseau. It's at 1,600 feet on the Chalone Bench, the local land mass whose limestone-ridden soil gives it enough distinction for a wine appellation. That limestone "lens" swathes a big chunk of the territory's soil, evidence of the existence of the Salinas Sea millions of years ago. You can see a great distance from the inn's courtyard to the Salinas Valley below, where the mercifully distant fog bank indeed looked like the sea.

Grapevines need to struggle to produce good fruit, but it's a productive struggle: Even the "heartbreak grape," pinot, can do well at Pinnacles under the right conditions.

Though grapevines may struggle, inn guests don't: The big whirlpool-jet soaking tub in our tiled-floored

room took every bit of that Pinnacles climb out of our grumpy muscles. And when the meadowlark working on his scales woke us the following morning, we were fresh for different challenges.

After a robust al fresco breakfast at the inn, we wound down the oak- and grapevine-crested hills to the small town of Soledad, on a mission to the Soledad Mission. Or, more accurately, to Mission Nuestra Señora de la Soledad, dedicated to Mary, the Mother of Christ as Our Lady of Sorrows in 1791. That dedication proved to be sadly accurate, for the Soledad Mission endured a painful history, battling with adobe-melting weather and an unreliable supply chain. It fell into almost total ruin after secularization in 1834. Today, there is a rebuilt chapel and a small wing of seven rooms, displaying mission artifacts of pottery and tools, baskets and bullets. Above the chapel altar is a statue of Mary with a plaintive look, wearing floor-length black lace. Above her is a painting of a heart with seven knives piercing it.

We had to drown our sorrows in something, shifting from Mission spirit to local spirits. The Soledad area is host to many Central California wineries -- if you count the Carmel and Monterey areas, there are 20 tasting rooms open for visits, including Chalone, near the monument.

We needed to put something solid in our stomachs, and Pacheco's market in Soledad fulfilled that need in full. We bought two massive, tasty burritos that became the basis for two days' worth of lunches. It's a very traditional market in the largely Latino town, with interesting spices and goods not seen at conventional stores. Perhaps Mexican food at dinner sounds uncreative after that lunch, but we were very happy to join other Inn guests at La Fuente in Soledad that evening. Though their menu advertised themselves as the "Taco of the Town," I chose Camarones Rancheros, a spicy shrimp dish high on the savory satisfaction scale.

When we first planned our trip, we thought we might also go to the National Steinbeck Museum in nearby Salinas and perhaps even venture a bit farther to the shoreline in scenic Carmel or Monterey, but we were fully entertained simply sticking to the Soledad area. We'll be back -- it's a California pocket I want to pick again, and there's a big buzzard I need to get a glimpse of.

#### IF YOU GO

**Pinnacles National Monument**, 5000 Highway 146, has two entrances: east and west. The west entrance can be reached via Highway 101 to Soledad, then east along Highway 146 to the Chaparral area. The east entrance is reached via Highway 25, south of Hollister and north of King City, then west on Highway 146. Entrance fee is \$5. Hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. For visitor information, call (831) 389-4485 or visit [www.nps.gov/pinn](http://www.nps.gov/pinn).

**Tips:** Bring sturdy shoes, sunblock and plenty of water; summer temperatures can climb to more than 100 degrees.

**Where to stay:** Inn at the Pinnacles, 32025 Stonewall Canyon Road, Soledad; (831) 678-2400, [www.innatthepinnacles.com](http://www.innatthepinnacles.com). Rates: \$200 to \$225; open Fridays through Sundays. Full breakfast; wine and cheese in evening.

**What to do:** **Mission Nuestra Señora de la Soledad**, 36441 Fort Romie Road, Soledad; (831) 678-2586; [www.californiamissions.com/](http://www.californiamissions.com/)

[cahistory/soledad.html](http://cahistory/soledad.html). Free.

**Chalone Vineyard**, Stonewall Canyon Road and Highway 146, Soledad; (831) 678-1717, [www.chalonevineyard.com](http://www.chalonevineyard.com). Tasting room open 11:30 to 5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays.

**Where to eat: La Fuente Restaurant**, 101 Oak St., Soledad; (831) 678-3130.

**Pacheco Tienda y Carnicería**, 615 Front St., Soledad; (831) 678-0914.



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