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## A Hidden Secret in California

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Photographs: Peter DaSilva for The New York Times

Under a lacy green canopy of giant redwoods, we were Lilliputians in a Brobdingnagian world.

On the western slopes of the Santa Cruz Mountains overlooking the Pacific Ocean, two friends and I climbed along the spongy moss-covered banks of a burbling canyon creek.

Everything was supersized in a kind of lush, “Land Before Time” way: the soaring trees overhead, the enormous sprigs of clover underfoot, the fern fronds that reached out every which way. Silvery lichen dripped from gnarled oaks, completing the lost-in-fairyland feel.

That this momentary portal to a quiet, prehistoric world is just an hour’s drive south of San Francisco makes it all the more miraculous. Purisima Creek Redwoods is one of 26 preserves that make up the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District — a collection of protected parcels of nearly 60,000 acres between San Francisco and San Jose.

In March, the district purchased its latest piece of land, the 340-acre Lobitos Ridge, which lies west of the Purisima Creek Redwoods parcel; the ultimate goal is to create a corridor of public space that reaches to the ocean.

And though all the trailheads lie within an hour’s drive of several major urban areas, the hundreds of miles of hiking trails are little known except to local residents.

All told, the district includes an area of about 550 square miles, and offers a staggering variety of topography.

Hikers can meander under tall, dense stands of redwoods, or clamber through the scrubby chaparral. Preserves closer to the ocean are characterized by grassy salt marshes.

In between, there’s everything from oak woodland to wide-open meadow; the terrain is home to mountain lions, tree frogs and rare species like the western pond turtle. (One illustrated sign on the trail offers this useful advice should you be attacked by a mountain lion: “Fight back.”) Some west-flowing streams are spawning grounds for steelhead trout (spring) and Coho salmon (fall).

One reason the preserves remain so unknown is that hiking is the chief pursuit. (During our trip, on a beautiful late spring weekend, we encountered just a handful of other hikers and mountain bikers.)

“Trails are what we do best,” said Leigh Ann Maze, a spokeswoman for the district. “The



Hikers amid ancient oaks in the Los Trancos Open Space Preserve.



A sweeping view from the Black Mountain Backpack Camp, the Open Space District’s only public camping area.

philosophy of the Open Space District is really one of low-intensity use. There’s not much on the preserves besides really great trails for people to explore.”

Still, there are numerous ways for visitors to experience the land.

The district offers a full program of naturalist-led hikes, challenging mountain biking climbs, family-friendly educational wildlife programs and equestrian nature trail rides.

Some activities focus on ethnobotany; one scheduled hike explores how the Ohlone tribe used native plants for healing and medicinal purposes. Others require more adrenaline.

The Tour de Open Space, which is in June, is a 16-mile single-track mountain bike circuit that climbs 3,000 feet through the Skyline Ridge, Russian Ridge, Coal Creek and Monte Bello preserves.

Access to all the preserves is free, as are almost all of the activities.

Only the Black Mountain Backpack Camp at the Monte Bello preserve permits camping. It is about 15 miles west of Cupertino, where campers get stellar panoramas of the Santa Clara Valley and nearby Mount Hamilton.

Given the hundreds of miles of hiking trails winding through the various district preserves, there are options for every range of fitness and ability.

Though the Harkins Ridge Trail that we took, for example, is a strenuous one that goes straight up for about two and a half miles, it isn’t the only way to see the Purisima Creek Redwoods Preserve; there is also the half-mile-long Redwood Trail, an easy and flat trail that begins at the north entrance and leads to picnic tables sheltered by redwood groves.

When we got tired of climbing, we headed back the way we had come: west, toward the ocean. As we wended our way out of the foothills, we passed picturesque red barns, horses lazily flicking their tails and fragrant eucalyptus groves.

That night, we bunked down at the **Beach House**, a 54-room hotel in Half Moon Bay, perched on a bluff overlooking the rocky finger of a jetty and Pillar Point Harbor, a working fishing marina (depending on the season, you can get fresh crab and salmon right off the boat). All evening, a distant foghorn made faint calls out to sea.

The next morning, after a breakfast of fresh berries and banana walnut bread, we struck out on the five-mile coastal trail just in front of the hotel. Surfers vaulted up over the waves and skirted the jetty as we hiked along the windy bluffs and dropped down to the beach.

After the previous day’s hike, with its immense vistas, this was a new way to see the coast. Make your way to the district’s preserves, and you’ll see that it’s just one piece of the bigger picture.

### IF YOU GO

Of the 26 preserves of the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District (650-691-1200; openspace.org), 24 are free and open daily from dawn until 30 minutes after sunset.

**Beach House Hotel** (4100 North Cabrillo Highway, Half Moon Bay; 650-712-0220; beach-house.com/half-moon-bay-hotels.html); doubles from \$175, including continental breakfast.