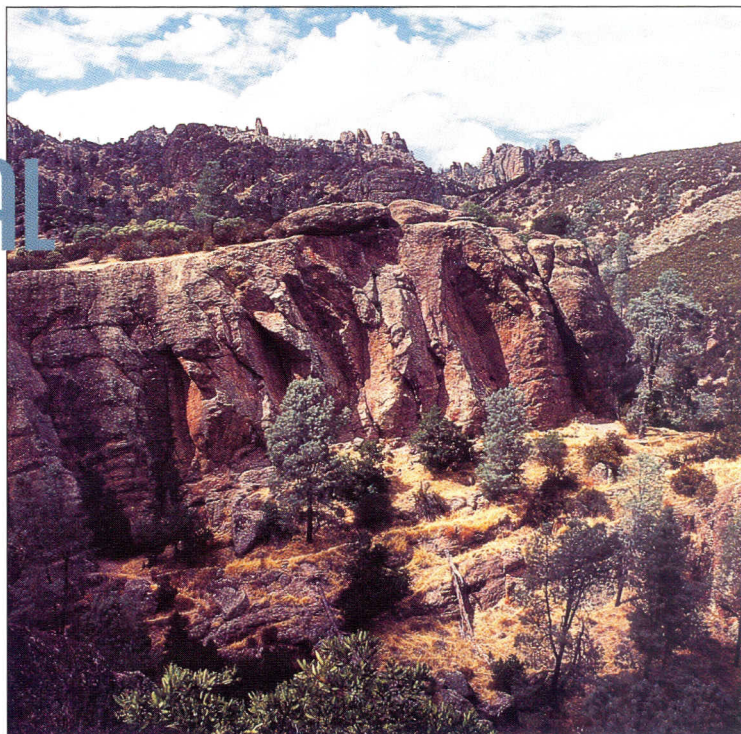


PINNACLES NATIONAL Monument

California, U.S.A.

By Steve Roper

Pinnacles offers an astonishing mixture of ecologies. Lichened spires thrust upward like mushrooms from chaparral-covered hillsides. A hundred yards away, a streamlet meanders through a pocket meadow, with buckeyes and sycamores casting shadows onto wildflowers. Live oaks everywhere speckle the landscape. Talus caves hold dark mysteries. Add intricate trail systems and quality rockclimbing to this potpourri, and you have a unique place, a volcanic wonderland.



"The most extraordinary mountains": at the Discovery Wall, you'll learn why. John Harlin

THE LAYOUT

The monument caps a small mountain range 130 miles south of the San Francisco Bay Area. Although roads lead into Pinnacles from both the east and the west, they do not meet. The two roadheads, only three miles apart, require more than an hour to connect by car. The West-Side Roadhead, with only a small ranger station to mark it, is reached from Soledad, on U.S. Highway 101. The East-Side Roadhead, sporting a nondescript visitors' center and little else, can be reached by following State Highway 25 south for thirty miles from Hollister; a short spur road then leads to the Pinnacles. To connect the two sides of the monument by road, leave U.S. 101 near Gonzales and cross the Gabilan Range on narrow, twisting Gloria Road, which eventually joins Highway 25.

DISCOVERY

Two hundred years ago this month Captain George Vancouver debarked from his British frigate near Monterey and hiked inland a few days to get the general lay of

the land. Cresting a hill, he stopped dead in his tracks. Clustered atop a coastal range twenty miles to the east were "the most extraordinary mountains." He walked no closer, for his mandate was to explore the Pacific coastline, not the interior. But the distant view impressed him: "The columns, which looked as if they had been raised with much labour and industry, were of great magnitude, seemed to be of elegant form, and to be composed of . . . cream-coloured stone."

Little recorded human activity took place during the next century in the assembly of rocks known today as Pinnacles. By 1890, however, local ranchers, determined to save the region from mining development, did just that. We can thank Schulyer Hain and Congressman J. C. Needham for prodding Congress into establishing Pinnacles National Monument in 1908. For many years thereafter, the monument was one of the least visited in the country: it was off the beaten track, had no accommodations, and was, in truth, a place better known for rattlesnakes, heat, and poison oak than its

scenery. Then the rockclimbers discovered it, and today they make up a large proportion of the visitors.

CLIMBING

Dave Brower. Frank Sacherer. Jim Bridwell. What these legendary rockclimbers have in common is this: the initial first ascents of their illustrious careers were done at Pinnacles. Brower was the first ever to use ropes at the monument; between 1933 and 1935 he put up several bold routes, including one on the most famous Pinnacles formation, the Monolith. Sacherer and Bridwell arrived three decades later; the latter ferreted out numerous lines, including the first 5.10 route and the first A4 epic. A resurgence of climbing in the 1980s, including dozens of controversial sport climbs, led to the present number of routes: more than 500.

Pinnacles rockclimbing can be as unsettling as it is unusual; the volcanic rock, a dark-pink rhyolite breccia, is knobby and often untrustworthy: some of

the knobs are so big you think you'll rip them from their matrix—and this does happen occasionally. Amazingly steep faces can go at the 5.6 level; wild overhangs are possible also; nearly seventy routes are 5.11 and higher.

Yet the monument offers a splendid variety of easy climbs; it's the perfect place to teach people, even children, the ropes. One word of warning, though: an experienced leader is mandatory for such activities. Rank beginners will almost certainly get into trouble with routefinding and runouts. Described below are some recommended circuits for two groups: beginners and moderates. The latest climbers' guide should always be used in conjunction with these descriptions: even finding the formations in the monument can be frustrating, and no attempt here has been made to specifically locate routes.

LEARNING THE ROPES

From the East Side Roadhead, head up to the Bear Gulch Reservoir, a thirty-minute jaunt. From the dam (built in the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps), you'll see, up and to the left, several leaning spires. The westernmost one, the First Sister, has two 5.5 routes on its outer, sloping face, perfect for beginners. Back at the dam, head upward toward the High Peaks, stopping to scramble up the perfectly named Anvil. The Photographer's Delight, far up in the High Peaks, might look intimidating, but it's short and only 5.2. The belayer will want a camera. Next, work north along the High Peaks Trail to the Sponge, a pleasant 5.2 route with a fabulous view. Kids love this climb and its exposed rappel. A little further north is the Tuff Dome area, with the easy blob known as H & L and an end-of-the-day graduation climb, the normal route on Tuff Dome (5.6).

MODERATION

Again, a competent leader is necessary if you want a good, safe adventure on this strenuous but technically modest day. Head up toward the Bear Creek Reservoir once again, but this time pause at Discovery Wall, only ten minutes from the East Side Roadhead. Here, three fine routes emit their siren call; all are 5.6 and

all get quality stars in the latest guidebook—and all are potentially serious routes, regardless of their rating. The Portent is a face climb; Swallow Crack involves thin cracks; the Cleft is, horror of horrors, a chimney climb, something all neophytes should experience once. Head next to the Monolith's Regular Route, a 5.7 or 5.8 climb best done in two pitches. Then move upward several miles to the High Peaks and do Long's Folly and Condor Crags. Dragonfly Dome and Freedom Dome are musts on the way back to the roadhead.

HIKING

You don't need to be a rock jock to enjoy Pinnacles. Several hiking trails rank high among California jaunts. You'll be amazed at the trailbuilding efforts of the CCC in the 1930s; nothing fazed these lads, apparently, and paths lead along narrow, handrail-equipped ledges into apparent cul-de-sacs where finally your eye will spot a row of "pigeon-hole" steps dotting a steep wall.

To see these spectacular trails, which sometimes tunnel through the spires, head for the High Peaks from either of the two major trailheads. The East Side start

is excellent, since a five-mile loop trip can be made. But by starting from the west, a smaller loop at the top becomes possible; these soulful paths fully explore the confusing topography of the High Peaks.

Small kids and those up to sixty will enjoy a less strenuous adventure: the Bear Gulch Caves, accessible from the East Side Trailhead. Be sure to carry a flashlight; while the caves are simply passages under immense talus blocks, they are as dark as a bat's nostril. Various short loop trips, a mile or two in length, can be made. The best one, perhaps, is to go up through the caves to the reservoir, retrace your steps to the start of the caves, then return via the Moses Spring Trail, stopping off at the Monolith to watch the rockclimbers in action.

RAPTORS AND THE SEASONS

It's no surprise that a relatively isolated area with cliffs equals Nirvana for raptors thinking of their progeny. But the great influx of climbers during the last decade has upset the breeding patterns of almost-endangered species, an untenable situation. Especially on the Balconies and on the Machete Ridge, climbing routes are closed for as much as five months a year, a seeming imposition until one learns of last spring's harvest: forty-one prairie falcons and four golden eagles.

Although winter and spring are the best climbing seasons at Pinnacles, nesting raptors also are present. Most routes, however, especially those lower down and closer to human influence, are unaffected by the closures. For these routes, March is easily the best month to climb, except during rare stormy periods. Still, it's a good idea to call rangers about closures if you plan to come between January 15 and July 1. Summer and early autumn, it must be said, are not good times to visit: temperatures hover in the nineties until about October 15.

HIGHPOINTS AND HIGHLIGHTS

- Highest point: North Chalone Peak, at 3,304 feet; a three-and-a-half-mile trail leads to its top, which provides a grand vista of the Salinas Valley, site of many a John Steinbeck story.
- Most famous villain: Tiburcio Vásquez, a murderer-bandit who in the 1870s often eluded the law by burrowing into the Bear Gulch Caves; he was later caught in San Jose and strung up.
- Biggest talus block in California: the forty-million pound Monolith; its underside forms the roof of the "Big Room" in the caves.
- Most enduring climbing legend: the Swiss blacksmith John Salathé, who in 1946 led the fearsome Hand with no bolts while his belayers cowered; it's only 5.6 but it's still the scariest 5.6 around.
- Most unfrequented trail: the North Wilderness Trail, which connects the two sides of the monument; you will see nothing but wildlife, since it is unmaintained and the longer of two such connecting trails.
- Best exploring territory: if you don't mind the lack of trails, the brush, and the scree, then the entire southern half of the monument is for you; few have ever heard of, let alone seen, Frog Canyon, and perhaps other hidden gems await.

RESOURCES

Call or write Pinnacles National Monument, Paicines, CA 95043; (408) 389-4485. No accommodations or facilities are available inside the monument, and towns are relatively far away; it is still a primitive place. It's best to bring all supplies except water. A large private campground, with a small store, lies a few miles to the east of the eastern entrance: contact Pinnacles Campground, Inc. at (408) 389-4462. The map on the monument brochure is quite adequate for hiking, although topo maps are available at the visitor center, as are minuscule guidebooks and checklists. Mandatory for climbers is the excellent *Climber's Guide: Pinnacles National Monument*, by David Rubine (Evergreen, CO: Chockstone Press, 1991).

