

PERSONAL JOURNEYS

A Memorable Place

Majestic redwoods brave fire, time

By PEG SILLOWAY
SPECIAL TO THE SUN

Standing before a towering redwood tree in cool, dappled September sunshine was awesome. If the bald eagle is America's symbol in the sky, the redwood is the emblem on the land.

My husband and I encountered these stately giants during five days in Santa Cruz, Calif., which is tucked into the curve of Monterey Bay, south of San Francisco.

With its face to the broad Pacific and its back in the mountains, Santa Cruz County harbors boutique wineries, scores of artists, miles of astonishing beaches and a mini-castle right out of the Highlands of Scotland. We enjoyed all these, but two state parks — Big Basin Redwoods and Henry Cowell Redwoods — were our favorite stops.

The drive to Big Basin was part of the adventure as the road snaked into the hills above Santa Cruz with heart-stopping switchbacks. We were rewarded by the sight of black-tailed deer — like half-size reproductions of their familiar white-tailed counterparts — wandering near the parking lot. Raucous jays were overhead, and a distant rat-a-tat-tat announced a woodpecker nearby.

Both parks featured well-marked and well-maintained walking loops of less than a mile that pass some of the



Towering redwood trees are preserved in state parks in Santa Cruz County, Calif.

largest and most interesting redwoods. The trails are wide and smooth enough to accommodate strollers and wheelchairs, allowing those of all ages and abilities the experience of walking through an ancient, fragrant forest.

Redwood trees are *Sequoia sempervirens* — ever-living sequoias — and

they are well named. At Big Basin, the tree named Father of the Forest is estimated to be 2,000 years old. Before Columbus found America, before the Norman invasion of England, before Nero saw Rome burn, this tree was growing in this place.

As redwoods reach to the sky, lower branches die and fall off. The trees are so tall, it is hard to see the tops. Place a redwood next to the Statue of Liberty, and the topmost branches would be higher than the lady's torch.

One secret of the redwoods' longevity is the bark. Layers of fibrous material provide perfect insulation. The tannic acid the bark contains keeps insects and bacteria at bay, and, when fire roars through the forest, the foot-thick bark provides protection. Flames can burn through and destroy heartwood, but if enough living tissue remains, the tree will survive.

I stood in the center of an ancient veteran with scorch marks 100 feet up its side — still alive and growing — and looked straight up to the sky.

During our five days in California, we went to the redwoods on our first day and again on our last. These trees take the worst nature can do to them and continue to grow and reach ever higher. That's something for all of us to think about.

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