

Travel the World in California

By John McKinney

I have contemplated California from a hundred peaks, meditated upon it along thousands of miles of trail, but it wasn't until I hiked across the island of Rhodes, 7,000 miles from home, that I began to understand California's place in the world.

A few summers back I was hiking through a Greek nature preserve called Valley of the Pethoules (butterfly). A fairyland it was. Countless orange butterflies are attracted to the valley by the sweet resin of the storax tree, which is used to make frankincense.

As I hiked along, the butterflies rose in clouds. How very much like the scene back home in Point Mugu State Park, I thought, where a multitude of orange monarch butterflies cluster every autumn. And I recalled the eucalyptus grove in Natural Bridges State Beach, which hosts the largest gathering of monarch butterflies in America.

Leaving the butterflies, my trail climbed to Kalopetra (Good Rock) Monastery. A young monk in the traditional black cassock and stovepipe that was as surprised to see me as I was to see him. With traditional Greek hospitality, he shared what he had—the panoramic view from the monastery's lofty heights.

As we looked over valleys and villages, forest and sea, we talked a lot about the island—the late arrival of the wildflowers, how the rocky peaks “touch the sky.” When the monk learned I was from California, he wanted to know what my land looked like.

I thought for a moment. “Some of it looks a lot like Rhodes.”

“It must be very beautiful then,” he concluded.

Since my accidental pilgrimage to Good Rock Monastery, I've found a little bit of California in Europe and more than a little bit of other countries in California's state parks. Unquestionably, much of California's coast and coastal mountains share a sea-tempered Mediterranean climate—the hot days, the cool nights, the long, hot summers, the short, rainy winters—with Spain, Greece, Italy, North Africa and the South of France. State Parks in the Santa Monica Mountains (Will Rogers, Topanga, Malibu Creek, and Point Mugu) are Mediterranean-to-the-max.

Some parts of the Southern California coast seem bathed in that soft, magical Mediterranean light, in particular the south-facing Malibu state beaches (Topanga, Malibu Lagoon) and the similarly oriented Santa Barbara state beaches (Refugio and El Capitan). I'm far from the first to make this comparison. A hundred years ago, travel writers and tourist brochures were beckoning Europeans and Americans from colder climes to visit “America's Italy.”

If you don't feel like hassling with passports, airline travel or the decline of the dollar, enjoy the world-class destinations in California's state parks. Thanks to California's richly diverse terrain, you don't have to travel far to imagine yourself in a foreign country. Armed with a little imagination and a California State Parks map, you can tour the world by exploring the Golden State. Here's how to set your own international itinerary without leaving California.

Little Switzerland

For a taste of the Alpine world, head for Mt. San Jacinto State Park, surely the park system's most Swiss-like terrain. Even the gondolas of the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway are Swiss-built, and they give hikers access in 18 minutes to the state park's

high country that once required a day's strenuous hike to reach. The tram takes you over one of the most abrupt mountain faces in the world—over cliffs that only a bighorn sheep can scale.

The namesake crags in Castle Crags State Park remind me of Switzerland, too. They seem strangely misplaced, as if a little bit of the Alps had been transplanted to the Klamath Mountains. Most motorists zoom by the granite spires that loom over I-5, but a lucky few stop and have a grand alpine hiking experience in the state park.

Israel

Mono Lake is often called “California's Dead Sea” but is actually a life-support system for a great many birds. A great place to access this ancient lake is from Mono Lake Tufa State Reserve.

Of course what's a desert without a palm oasis or two? Surrounded by arid mountains, the state's Indio Hills Palms, operated by The Nature Conservancy, is strikingly similar to parts of Israel.

Notable Coasts

When a winter storm rages against the shingle beaches of Del Mar and Torrey Pines State Beach, it's easy to recall the Devon and Dorset coasts of Britain. Nearby Cardiff-by-the-Sea and Cardiff State Beach must have been named by someone inspired by this coast's resemblance to the seaport town of Cardiff in southeast Wales.

With its great tide pools, colonies of harbor seals and shorebirds, dramatic bluffs and beach, Bean Hollow State Beach reminds some coast walkers of the British coast near Cornwall. Foxgloves growing along the stunning coastal trails of Sinkyone Wilderness State Park recall the pathways in Exmoor National Park in southern England.

Wilder Ranch State Historic Park won't remind many visitors of Belgium, but it does share a cool humid climate with this country, perfect for growing Brussels sprouts. Fans of this vegetable will see more than they ever dreamed possible in the state park—more than 12 percent of the nation's production is grown in the park.

Nearly every time I hike along Leo Carrillo State Beach on the Los Angeles County/Ventura County line, I see a movie company in action. The propmaster rolls a few exotic palms onto the beach, and Leo Carrillo doubles for the South Seas. Another favorite coast walk that reminds me of a far-off locale is the hike up Morro Bay's sandspit for a close-up look at “the Gibraltar of the Pacific”: Morro Rock.

Bella Tuscany

Some visitors arrive at Bothe-Napa Valley State Park by accident, not design; they've just completed a tour of one of the renowned Napa Valley wineries and are looking for a place to picnic. But if it's the park's proximity to wineries (just down the road are dozen more) that first lures travelers, it's the park's Tuscan beauty that brings them back.

Like Tuscany, parts of California wine country seem a work of art—a montage of farms, hamlets, vineyards and nature preserves. Sugar Loaf Ridge State Park high points

offer great views of Napa Valley vineyards and hikers in Jack London State Historic Park walk past vineyards that recall those in Montepulciano, one of Italy's most noted wine regions.

Pilgrimage to Spain

Of California's 21 missions, the best restored is La Purisima; it's also the only mission with a sizable amount of land preserved around it—and the only one with hiking trails. When I walk on El Camino Real and other trails in La Purisima State Historic Park, I'm reminded of the hills of northern Spain and of the famed Camino de Santiago, the ancient path of pilgrims.

John McKinney's newest book is "Happy Trails, Hiking The Trailmaster Way" For more of his hiking tips, visit www.thetrailmaster.com.