



SCENIC MORRO BAY: SOLID AS A ROCK.(L.A. LIFE)

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You could say that Morro Rock, the 576-foot monolith marking the entrance to Morro Bay, is like any other big rock. Of course, you could say that Whistler's mother was just like any other mom.

The volcanic basalt orb, believed to be 22 million years old, draws you in close, then looms indifferently while you contemplate its tremendous girth and its weight - a mere 20 million tons.

The only drawback in our mulling of the rock's majesty this day was that it took all of 10 minutes, leaving us a windfall of unconsidered free time - 2-1/2 days, to be exact.

Thankfully, the town of Morro Bay, about 200 miles north of Los Angeles, didn't leave us feeling between a rock and a hard place. There was enough to do in this seaside hamlet - besides stone circumspection - to keep the parents of 3-year-old twins occupied during a three-day weekend.

We spent a deliciously lazy afternoon along the Embarcadero, a wharf area lined by shops and eateries. At one point, we found ourselves luxuriating at an outdoor table, picking at crumbly, nutty muffins and sipping hot drinks: My wife, a cappuccino foamier than beach break; I, a mug of high-octane Sumatra java.

In Centennial Park, across from the Embarcadero and in the shadow of a certain large rock, two pensioners matched wits on the park's giant cement chessboard.

The men, long past their prime, struggled to move the nearly waist-high redwood pieces. It took one man 10 minutes of straining, resting and lifting just to castle on queen's side. I tried to render assistance. Big mistake. I received an elbow to the ribs.

The last time I was in this park, during Morro Bay's big Harborfest in October, players were ordering around live actors who played the roles of the chess pieces. Occasional timeouts were called so the queens, rooks, castles, knights, pawns and bishops all could go to the bathroom.

The problem with human chess pieces is that they tend to talk amongst themselves, which disrupts player concentration and gives the chessboard the look of a very compact costume party.

The city of Morro Bay sees no small number of weekenders, honeymooners or members of the business conference crowd, either up from Los Angeles or down from the Bay Area. But it's far enough from both points to retain a small town's unjaded feel.

This becomes apparent when I ask a clerk at the Inn at Morro Bay, one of the Central

Coast's more upscale hotels, whether many celebrities stop in.

``Radar," said the man.

``Excuse me?"

``You know, Radar O'Reilly. From `MASH.' "

``Oh, yeah. Was he in here?"

``Just a few weeks ago," the man said, in an official, all-in-a-day's-work tone.

While the town of Morro Bay has remained somewhat removed from many of the state's epic battles, some of them find their way here, too. Some even originate in these climbs.

Morro Bay and its two state parks, Montana de Oro State Park and Morro Bay State Park, has been caught up in California's mountain lion debate.

Curious, I strike up a conversation with a park ranger at Montana de Oro, a sprawling reserve containing sand spits, jagged cliffs and lush woodlands.

According to park ranger Rene Avant, sightings of the big cats in Montana de Oro have increased over the past five years.

But he attributes some of this to the mountain bike phenomenon, theorizing that mountain-bikers, because they're traveling faster and often more quietly than hikers, sneak up on the big cats with greater ease, which, he says, may account for some of the increased encounters locally.

But cougars aren't exactly crawling out of the woodwork here, either.

In the 17 years Avant has been on the job, the only mountain lion he's ever seen was on the viewfinder screen of a camcorder brought into the ranger station by a group of hikers who had come face to face with the big cat.

On our final day in Morro Bay, before we would have to return to Tuesday morning job sites and child-rearing duties, we decided to experience first-hand a measure of the rich flora and fauna the area's outback is known for - ``Petite Big Sur," as it is nicknamed.

On a four-hour hike through Montana de Oro, during which we climbed dunes, traversed the coastal marine terrace and trudged through sage scrub, we did have a sighting of sorts. It was on a trail that led us down through verdant riparian woodlands of willow, cottonwood and large canyon oaks and then up toward the park's Alan Peak. When we had nearly reached the Alan Peak summit at 1,649 feet, we turned a switchback and there it was. That infernal rock.

MEMO: For information, contact the Morro Bay Chamber of Commerce, 895 Napa St., Morro Bay, Calif. 93442; (805) 772-4467.

CAPTION(S):

3 Photos

Photo: (1) A fixture of the Morro Bay sidewalk scene is a private home known simply as

``the flower house."`

(2) The Morro Bay Aquarium combines elements of science, entertainment and kitsch. The stuffed shark is a must.

(3) Morro Rock looms large as a boat sets out to view underwater kelp beds at the mouth of Morro Bay.

Jeremy Bagott/Daily News

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