

'Back yard' camping trip opens up new terrain

By Kathryn Reed

MARKLEEVILLE – Hiking into Thornburg Canyon I kept wondering why it had taken me so long to even know this area about an hour from South Lake Tahoe even exists.

Thank goodness for the recommendation from the Grover Hot Springs State Park employee that we explore this gorgeous area with its expansive view into Pleasant Valley and foreboding rock structure above it.



Pleasant
Valley from
the
Markleeville
side.

Photos/Kathryn
Reed

Discovering new territory and revisiting a favorite waterfall were part of our annual girls' camping weekend in August. With the nights spent at the campground neighboring the hot springs, we spent our days on foot seeing what Mother Nature had in store for us.

Sue and I arrived first. With our campsite occupied, we drove around checking out the other 75 campsites until we stumbled

upon a U.S. Forest Service presentation about fire safety that involved Smokey Bear and the advice not to try to run from a bear.

That afternoon the four of us stretched our legs along the nature trail. Unfortunately it's one of those trails the state park plans to do away with, but you don't that while you're on it. You just keep wondering what the 26 numbers mean and why it leads you into a marshy area.

On Sunday we head for the waterfalls.

Instead of stopping at the pools above the first falls, Darla leads us farther up the path. That is, if you can call crossing the stream multiple times, following the trail.

Despite our circuitous route, it was beautiful. Less than a handful of people were seen this whole hike – adding to the tranquility of the day.

Even a month ago the water was flowing rapidly – a reminder of the abundance of snow the Sierra received last winter.

Later that day we soak in the hot springs that are walking distance from the campground. We get in free because they are closing early since no lifeguard is on duty. (With the state parks' financial situation a bit precarious, I'd call before making the trek for a day at the springs.)

Something about camping makes things like spaghetti, a taco bar, pancakes, and eggs all taste better. Maybe it's all that fresh air mixed in instead of the normal stale indoor air.

Fortunately, we brought plenty of wood with us – at 5,800 feet this area cools off at night and stays that way well into the morning.

On Monday we hop in Pam's truck for a short ride to the trailhead the parks employee recommended. We head toward the town of Markleeville, turn right on Pleasant Valley Road and

make another right on Sawmill Road. We park before we need four-wheel drive, but before the gate for the trail.

A steady climb along what is clearly a road takes us to the trailhead for Thornburg Canyon.

This is all part of the Mokelumne Wilderness. Had we completed the entire 7-plus miles, we would have ended up in the Blue Lakes area. We didn't know that at the time.

It's a forest of mostly pine and hemlock. Beyond the overlook into Pleasant Valley it's a single-track trail that in some places has waist-high Manzanita on either side.

Sagebrush and tall grass consume other portions of the trail.

Looking into that valley it seemed like cattle and cowboys should be rustling there. Trails go through there, making me want to explore the area again and find out a little history about this land.

In the distance the peaks still have snow – which at this rate is likely to be there until the white stuff starts falling again.

We trek up farther, thinking we'll reach the rock formations we had seen from the overlook. But they are never around the next bend. Instead, with no markers on the trail telling us how far we've gone or how far we have to go, we decide cocktail hour is approaching.

It's time to enjoy the campsite.

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