

exploring

A Hike for Non-Hikers Mt. Madonna County Park Neil Wiley

Spring has sprung. It's a good time to go outside. But, you don't have to be a seasoned hiker looking for a daylong trek. After all, you may be sharing the hike with your children. Their curiosity is fueled by lots of energy, but you might find it exhausting. Here is how you can escape the confines of your house without hurting your feet.

Drive south on Highway 17 to Santa Cruz, then turn left on Highway 1. Hopefully, before someone asks "When do we get there?" you'll see the sign for Highway 152. Turn left to drive through scenic Watsonville up through the more scenic Hecker Pass. When you reach the top, turn left on Pole Line Road. (The road is prettier than its name.)

At the gate house entrance, pay \$6 for parking. Be sure to ask for a free map and brochure. The rest is easy.

Just past the gate house, drive your car to the first right to visit Valley Views 1, 2, and 3. You don't even need to get out of your car. But, when you see a bench on the right side, you can get out and walk a few steps to enjoy the view of southern Santa Clara Valley and the mountains beyond. Even if the children don't appreciate the view, they can run around on the grass.

If you haven't seen the sign for Twin Giants, drive around the loop until you



find it. A grove of giant Redwoods is only a short distance from the road. You can walk around the giants and touch their many descendants.

Next, drive north up the park's main road. If you are a hiker, you could take a long uphill walk up Blue Springs or Rock Springs trails to the northern part of the park. Either way, you can see the amphitheater, park office, museum, bathrooms, two deer pens, and a giant meadow. It's a good place to rest or picnic, even if you haven't been hiking.

A short walk to the east of this park center takes you to a historical site. You can read about it on a sign on the left (north) side of the road. Continue along the road a little farther. Numbers on the right show you the way to pieces of history: a plaque, broken walls, stairways that lead nowhere, and open windows without glass.

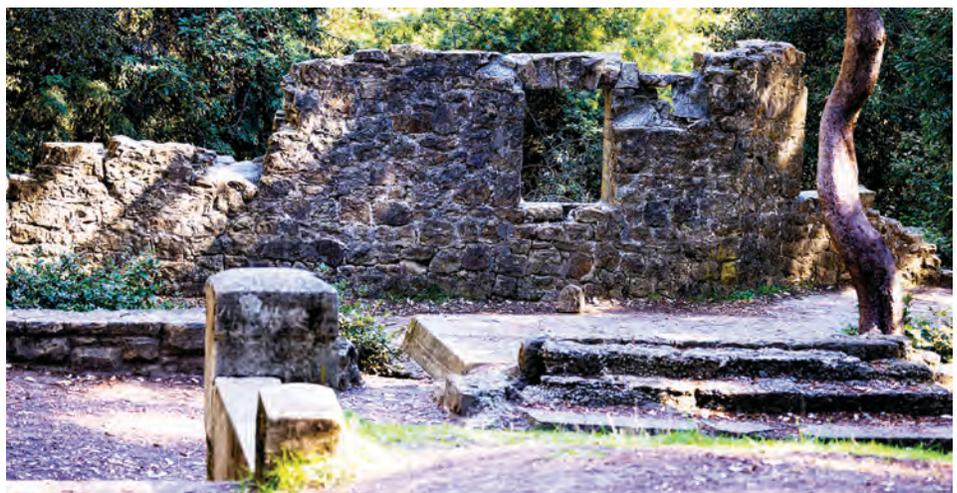
These are the last vestiges of Henry Miller's fourth house. Built in 1901, this vacation home included seven bedrooms

and baths, a living room with a veranda on three sides, and a notable accessory—a 3,600 square-foot ballroom. Now it is all interesting rubble. So much for long-term real-estate investment. On the other hand, Henry ended up with 13,000 acres of land.

You can see all this within a few steps of your car, not bad for a hike without hiking.

If, however, open air experience has encouraged your spirit of adventure, this 4,605-acre park has many miles of trail.

The most family-friendly trail is named for the California newt. This 1.5-mile trail takes about an hour and 15 minutes.



Cell service may be spotty, but you can use your mobile phone and the Agents of Discovery app to hear about the park's natural, cultural, and historic resources. For information, email interp@prk.sccgov.org. Other popular short-trail networks with colored markers are named Banana Slug, Gray Fox, and Mountain Lion.

Want more exercise and adventure? Mt. Madonna offers 14 miles of trails for hikers and equestrians. You can always wander, but be sure to carry a map. If you like more planning, you can sign up at alltrails.com. You can see descriptions, pictures, and maps of 21 trails in Mt. Madonna Park. They range from easy to hard. In the first seven listed, the longest is the 9.3-mile Mount Madonna Loop. The shortest is the 2.4-mile Meadow Trail Loop.

Want to stay longer? Choose from 118 drive-in and walk-in reservable campsites with barbecue pits, food lockers, and picnic tables. RV sites and yurts are also available.

Dogs are welcome on leash, but bicycles are prohibited on all park trails.

For more information, call the park office at 408-842-2341. You can set your GPS destination for 7850 Pole Line Road, Watsonville, California 95076.

I extended my explorations by taking Pole Line Road out of the park to Summit Road, and drove along the ridge on dirt and occasional gravel to Loma Prieta Way. Signs say it is not a through road, but if you have all-wheel drive, don't mind a dirty or muddy car, and are willing to drive 10 miles an hour, it is passable. It's not recommended, but it was an adventure.

