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Photographs by STEVE HAGGERTY

WEEKEND ESCAPE TO DEVIL'S PUNCHBOWL

ZEN OUT ON THE ROCKS

HIKE INTO THIS PARK ON THE NORTHERN EDGE OF THE SAN GABRIEL MOUNTAINS FOR A LESSON IN THE POWER OF QUAKES

BY ANNE Z. COOKE

MY HUSBAND, Steve, and I were hankering for a break from traffic and the daily whine of gas-powered leaf-blowers, so we tossed our hiking boots and the sunscreen into our car and headed to Devil's Punchbowl, an L.A. County park near Pearblossom on the north edge of the San Gabriel Mountains. Years ago, when we first hiked to the bottom of this geologic gorge, its giant sandstone slabs tossed on end by colliding earthquake faults, the silence was tangible, restful, primeval. And it still is, though the Antelope Valley population has grown eightfold, from 60,000 residents in 1980 to nearly 500,000 today. The tab: \$295 for two hotels, excluding tax, \$185 for meals and \$46 for gas.

THE BED

We sampled two lovely hotels in Palmdale, the 90-room Courtyard by Marriott at the International Shopping Mall, and the 107-room Hilton Garden Inn at the Antelope Valley Mall, 22 miles from the Punchbowl. Their differences were trivial because they compete for the same customer, the aerospace industry, Palmdale's lifeline. Keeping out-of-town workers happy for weeks or months requires amenities that tourist hotels don't want or can't afford: big indoor and outdoor pools, hot tubs, self-serve laundries, conference rooms, business centers, free Wi-Fi, lavish bedrooms furnished with every comfort and 24-hour food.



IF YOU GO

SANDSTONE

slabs, top, dominate at Devil's Punchbowl, where the 1-mile loop trail leads to miles-long views.

THE MEAL

Ask Palmdalians for their favorite, and they will recommend Medrano's, a family-owned Mexican restaurant in the Antelope Valley Mall, a short walk from the Hilton Garden Inn. We sat in a booth in the dining room among crowds of noisy diners and familiar paintings of haciendas, cowboys and mountains. A smiling waitress took our order for two beers and salsa with chips, followed by the special, "three for \$11.99." This began with an overflowing green salad followed by an enchilada stuffed with slow-roasted shredded beef, a plump chicken tamale, a perfectly cooked *chili relleno* and, of course, rice and *frijoles*.

THE FIND

Devil's Punchbowl Natural Area is always being tossed by the San Andreas, Punchbowl and Pinyon faults. It's a first-

hand lesson in earthquake power for kids of any age, best explored on the steep 1-mile loop trail around the rim and 200 feet down to the creek at the bottom. Stop first at the visitors center near the parking lot to pick up a trail map and peer at the live snake exhibits. Follow the signs for scenic views from two longer rim trails of 3.7 miles and 7.5 miles. Bird walks, moonlight hikes and geology talks may be scheduled but depend on the day and the weather, unpredictable here at 4,750 feet. Picnic tables invite families to make a day of it, but camping is not allowed.

THE LESSON LEARNED

We left home after the evening rush hour, driving north on the 405 and California 14 to Palmdale. Online photos of a motel near the first Palmdale exit looked like the type of plain but clean motel where we often stay on long-distance trips, so we booked a room. To our dismay, the desk clerk was rude, the halls were dark and dirty, and pop music shook the walls until 2 a.m. But we were tired and the room was clean, so we stuck it out. "Look first, then leap," is now stamped on my forehead.

Courtyard by Marriott, 530 W. Rancho Vista Blvd., Palmdale; (661) 947-4100, bit.ly/courtyardpalmdale. Rooms from \$169; best availability for Friday and Saturday nights. Wheelchair accessible.

Hilton Garden Inn, 1309 W. Rancho Vista Blvd., Palmdale; (661) 998-2000, Palmdale.hgi.com. Rooms from \$115; best availability for Friday and Saturday nights. Wheelchair accessible.

Medrano's, 1173 W. Rancho Vista Blvd., Palmdale; (661) 224-1145, medranospalmdale.com. Open daily. See website for hours and menu. Two steps into the entrance may hamper access.

Devil's Punchbowl Natural Area and Nature Center, 28000 Punchbowl Road, Valyermo; (661) 944-2743, bit.ly/devilspunchbowlnaturalarea. On California 38 in Pearblossom, turn toward the mountains at Longview Road, then follow the signs. Wheelchairs can navigate 50 feet of the rim trail near the visitors center.

CALIFORNIA BUCKET LIST

FOREST LAWN LIFTS SPIRITS

BY CHRIS ERSKINE

Why: Forest Lawn Glendale is one of the world's grandest cemeteries — in setting, in scope, in star power. Step inside and honor the memories of dozens of famous names.

What: California in spirit, with wide lanes and sunny vistas, Forest Lawn Glendale is a far cry from the grim graveyards seen in most places. The 300-acre cemetery dates to 1917 when Hubert Eaton took it over in hopes of celebrating eternal life. It hosts funerals, art shows and weddings. Ronald Reagan married Jane Wyman in one of its chapels. Grab a map from the info booth as you enter the lush and hilly cemetery. Out of respect for privacy, the map will not guide you to the stars' graves, but with a bit of detective work you can find the resting places of Elizabeth Taylor, L. Frank Baum of "Wizard of Oz" fame, Jimmy Stewart, Walt Disney and Nat "King" Cole. Michael Jackson? He rests in a section not open to the public.

Info: Forest Lawn Glendale, 1712 S. Glendale Ave., Glendale; (323) 254-3131, forestlawn.com/parks/glendale. Free



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