

Mountain Refuge

By Stephanie Levin-Gervasi

American Way - Sojourns

When Native American tribes first made their summer homes on Volcan Mountain's remote peaks centuries ago, they called it a "place where the water comes from." Land speculators christened it Sunrise Valley, and cartographers dubbed it Earthquake Valley. But regardless of what it's called, Volcan Mountain is a stunning sight. The pristine landscape seventy miles east of San Diego near the town of Julian was sealed off from the world for nearly half a century. Now a portion of the privately owned mountain has gone public and is open to visitors.

Because the area's ecosystems are populated with rare birds and endangered species, recreational activity that might disturb the balance is strictly prohibited. But just because you can't picnic at will and camp overnight doesn't mean there's not plenty to do and learn here.

The public portion of the 2,194-acre preserve is 228 wonderfully steep acres. You can trek to the summit with a docent - a climb of about 1,000 feet, to an elevation of 5,353. It's a feast for the senses, peppered with geography, archaeology, and botany lessons. And you will be rewarded at the top with a panoramic view of the Anza-Borrego Desert and beyond to the Salton Sea fifty miles away. If you're not ready for such an extended hike, there are shorter excursions also chock-full of fauna, flora, and facts.

On the mountain, lush forests, woody succulent scrub, and chaparral open up on apple-green meadows. Ancient clusters of rare Engelmann oaks mysteriously flourish, and, in the spring, wildflowers bloom in a riot of color. Deer graze, mountain lions prowl, large-blotched salamanders play hide-and-seek, and yellow-breasted chats nest. At last count, more than twenty-five endangered species inhabited this carefully tended land.

It's a refuge indeed, especially when you consider that the land was being eyed by developers who wanted to build estate-sized homes on the steep slopes. Community members formed the Volcan Mountain

Preserve Foundation, and, along with the county, they were able to buy what is now the preserve from the cattle-ranching Rutherford family.

Some of those same folks put in hundreds of volunteer hours hand-carving the wooden entranceway to the park. Inside that entrance, you're in store for a rare and privileged peek at a landscape that very nearly went the way of the rest of Southern California.

Volcan Mountain Preserve Foundation, (619) 765- 0650; Julian Chamber of Commerce, (619) 765- 1857. Free tours are given on the second Saturday of each month.