

By Mark Hougardy

Bear Gulch Cave

Pinnacles National Monument

My 7-year-old daughter, Anna, was first out of the car upon arriving at Pinnacles National Monument. “Come on slow pokes, let’s go!” We walked up a meandering canyon trail to the entrance of the Bear Gulch Cave.

Pinnacles National Monument is a two-hour drive south of San Jose. This natural playground includes bizarre rock formations, house-sized boulders and my daughter’s favorite, Bear Gulch Cave.

We felt a cool breeze from the cave’s mouth. Anna instructed us, “Mama, Papa, don’t forget your flashlights.” My wife, Christiane, and I smiled and followed our young adventurer.

At first, the cave was dark. Then our eyes adjusted to the low light, silhouetting us against shafts of light that pierced the ceiling. Small rocks crunched noisily under our feet as we walked. A bat darted overhead.

Being mindful of the bat’s home we walked more quietly and lowered the beams from our flashlights. In the distance, we heard a low rushing noise from a waterfall. Several minutes later, we stood next to a gushing spray of water. Our lights illuminated the waterfall that disappeared 20 feet below.

Further in the cave, the trail dove underneath enormous boulders that interlocked between the walls of the canyon. “These are as big as the house!” exclaimed Anna.

This was the view as the family climbed out of the cave.

Pinnacles National Monument

To continue your own explorations of Pinnacles National Monument, go to nps.gov/pinn. Driving directions: To reach Bear Gulch Cave, take Hwy 101 south through the city of Gilroy to Hwy 25 south. On Hwy 25, go through the town of Hollister and continue about 30 miles to the east entrance of the monument.



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Seven-year-old Anna Hougardy climbed the stairs out of the cave that led to this beautiful reservoir.

The trail snaked between boulders to reveal a narrow staircase carved into the canyon wall. Climbing out, we were greeted by a small reservoir surrounded by amazing, awkwardly-shaped rocks. My daughter spotted our favorite picnic area across the water.

We enjoyed lunch in a shaded area. Overhead, a vulture, or a condor, glided on thermals. In the distance, rock climbers carefully made their ascent up a stone monolith. A hummingbird zipped in close, startling us, then quickly sped off. The rest of the afternoon we continued to explore the many trails of this natural playground.

Finally, the sun became low on the horizon and signaled the end of our day. We returned through the cave and back to the parking area.

As the family car turned onto the highway, I asked, “So Anna, what was best about today?” No reply. Our young adventurer was asleep. ■

Mark Hougardy is a Silicon Valley parent and consultant to park interpretive organizations.

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