

The Pinnacles National Park

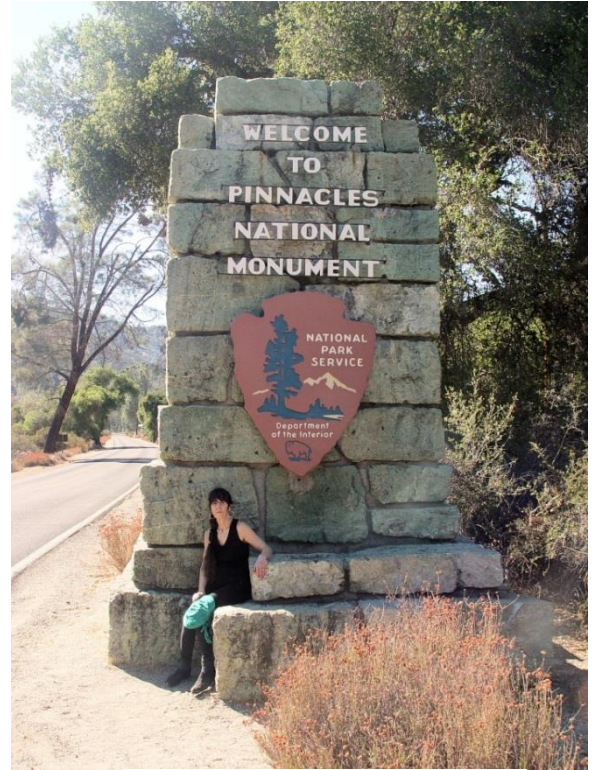
A treasure in our back yard

Gene & Sharon Cisneros

June 2, 2013, the first six visits.

We were very disappointed that the contractors that were remodeling the exterior of our house, a two month project, insisted upon working on the Friday and Saturday of the Northern California Mineralogical Association (NCMA) conference, which prevented us from attending. With only Sunday left, before the ripping, tearing and incessant hammering was to begin again, we thought about a one day escape from the suburb. But where to go for just a day? The beaches would be crowded and the traffic heavy. There were no mineral collecting sites accessible for a one day trip and the Clear Creek area was still under BLM closure. Remembering that the Pinnacles National Monument had recently been promoted to National Park status, I suggested to Sharon that we go there for the day.

Bright and early on Sunday morning we set off for the Pinnacles, just an hour and a half South of San Jose. We stopped in the small town of Hollister, just 30 miles from our destination, to pick up some food and drinks for the day. The Safeway offered a giant 18" 3 lb. submarine sandwich, slightly overkill, but a bargain to be sure. We packed our ice chest and continued on. A half an hour later we arrived at the entrance to the Pinnacles, a place that I had visited many times in my youth, when it was still undeveloped, and that brought back fond memories of my earliest explorations. I was surprised to see that the road into the park was now widened and paved,



Park access from Highway 25



Sharon views the rugged weathered remains of the ancient volcanic field.

temperature was already over 80°. Our goal was to hike to the Balconies Cave, which would be about a 6 mile round trip. While hiking the relatively flat trail that wound below the massive towering spires and crags,

as it was only dirt back in my earlier visits, some 55 years ago. And farther on, to my greater surprise, we next approached a visitor center, general store and improved camp ground, complete with a swimming pool. After quickly obtaining our day permit, we continued on to the North most access to the Old Pinnacles trail head where parking was available. It was around 10 am by then and surprisingly the

it was hard to believe that this spectacular volcanic field had originated some 250 miles south of its current location and was moved, over the millennia, by tectonic plate movement along the San Andreas Fault.

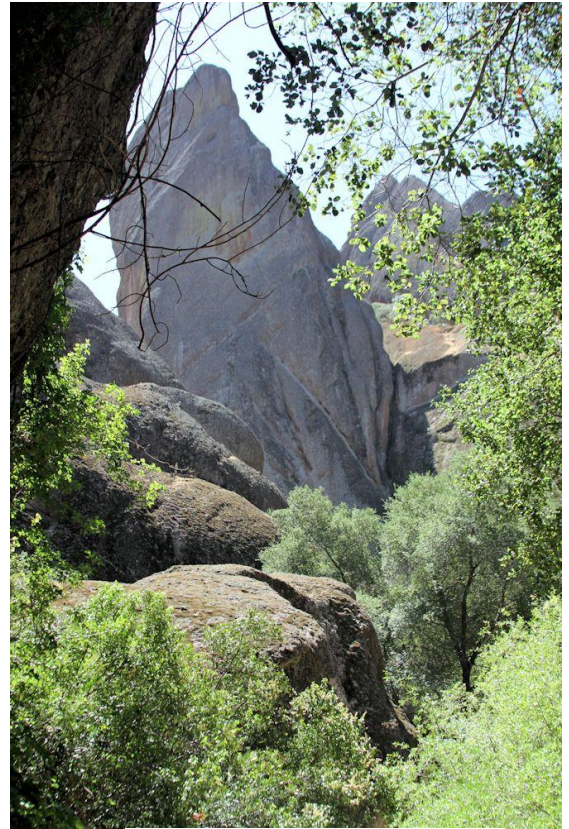
As we hiked along the temperature soon exceeded 100° and we were wondering why we were doing this, but we pushed on, as the scenery was extraordinary. After an hour walk we finally approached the Balconies Cave but then inadvertently took a wrong trail, taking us off course and up a very steep trail winding up and into the spires. Realizing that this was not consistent with our map and overwhelmed by the heat, we backtracked a mile back down to the main trail whereupon we discovered the trail to the cave nearly hidden by bushes. By then it was well after noon and our energy was sapped and needed replenishment. We found a nice grassy area and broke out the giant submarine sandwich, which now looked even larger than it did in the store, and feasted. We soon felt



Sharon enjoys a cool spot and big sandwich

was a cool 60°, and a relief from the heat outside. Since the cave is not formed by water action, which can create smooth and uninterrupted formations and passages, the talus caves are quite irregular and require the additional effort of crawling over, under and around the huge boulders. Though this particular cave extends for only a few hundred feet, it requires some exertion to get through it. As we were fairly exhausted by then and thinking about the hike

reenergized and resumed our search for the elusive, at least for us, Balconies Cave. As we continued on and entered a narrowing canyon that had a small stream running out



View from near Balconies Cave

of it, we felt a blast of cool air from ahead that contrasted the dry hotness that we had previously been enduring. And finally, as we ventured further, the entrance to Balconies Cave was visible. To clarify, the caves at the Pinnacles are called talus caves, meaning that they are formed by the avalanche of huge boulders into canyons. The temperature inside the cave

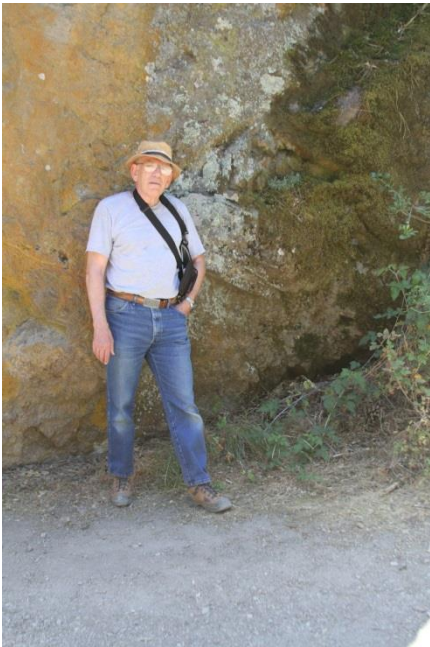


Sharon enters Balcony Cave

back to the trail head, we decided to only venture a short distance into the cave and return another day for a more complete exploration. The access would be far shorter from the west entrance of the park.

On the long hike back to near the trail head, we met a family that was headed in the opposite direction. Because of poor and unclear trail signs, they went to the wrong trail head and that would cost them and their two small children an extra seven miles, or so, of hiking in extreme heat. Having obtained water from other hikers, they set off in correct direction.

We were tired and relieved to arrive at the trail head and our truck around 5 pm. Reviewing and discussing the map, on the trip home, we realized that we had only begun to explore the many trails of the park. Our first outing was very conservative regarding the difficulty of the trails, and we thought about how we might get into shape for the more ambitious treks. The next order of things for preparation was to visit



Gene and the lovely *Toxicodendron diversilobum* plant (poison oak)



our local outdoor supplier for two pairs of the best hiking shoes available. We hoped that our feet would be recovered in time for the next visit to the Pinnacles. Until then....