

Central Coast: Past, Present, Future

Central Coast: Past, Present, Future - Gaviota Wind Caves challenging, beautiful



By Mark James Miller, July 9, 2017

Of all the sights to see and places to visit on our Central Coast, few are more unique and more of a challenge to access than the Gaviota Wind Caves atop the Santa Ynez Mountains in Gaviota State Park.

If you are willing to undertake a difficult climb up the steep, rocky trail that leads to the caves, you will behold some of the most amazing displays of natural beauty you have ever seen.

The caves are a unique and beautiful sight. Most are tan, others have a reddish hue. Some are large enough to walk in, others are small and narrow. Some have a jagged shape at their entrance, others resemble a circle cut into the mountain. You can go into one and emerge on the other side and get a breathtaking view of the Pacific Ocean, which is only a mile away.

As you look outward from some of the others you will see the yellow and green wildflowers that cover the hillsides below.

All the caves have smooth, rounded edges and finely-honed walls, floors and ceilings, giving them a polished appearance. This polished look is the result of a process called "tafoni" or "honeycomb weathering" that began 5 million years ago when the Santa Ynez Mountain Range was formed during the late Miocene Epoch.

These mountains consist primarily of sandstone, a porous, sedimentary rock that is clastic, or made up of fragments that allow water to percolate through them. This fragmentation is part of the reason the wind caves form.

Running parallel to the Pacific Ocean, the mountains are pelted with salt spray, carried by the wind. The salt water penetrates the grains of the sandstone, then evaporates, leaving salt crystals behind, embedded in the rock. As the salt crystals grow, they displace the grains of sand.

Over the eons, cavities are formed in the rock as the process continues, one grain at a time. As you hike up the trail toward the caves you will see that the nearby hillside is pock-marked with holes that are actually wind caves in their infancy.

But be warned, the trek up the hill to the caves is not an easy one. The trail is narrow in places and very steep. The underbrush ahead is so thick it is impossible to see how much further you have to go. The ground reflects the heat from the sun, making an ample supply of water a must on a warm day. There is no shade until you reach the first of the caves near the top of the hill. But if you are willing to make the effort, you will be rewarded by the beauty you will find when you reach the caves and see what nature has created in the Gaviota hills.

Gaviota means “seagull” in Spanish, and according to legend the name was given to this part of the Central Coast by Spanish soldiers who killed a seagull when they passed through with the Portola Expedition in 1769. The Portola Expedition took place at the behest of King Carlos III of Spain and was the first European exploration of California.

From the summit 700 feet above sea level it’s not hard to imagine what a seagull can see as it flies between the hills and then out to the ocean. It is a breathtaking, panoramic view of the mountains and the sea, of the highway far below and the green hills all around.

To get to the Gaviota Wind Caves take the 101 and exit at Gaviota Beach Road. The caves are visible from the highway.

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