

Low-Fat Chocolate Cakes • Climbing Roses

THE MAGAZINE OF WESTERN LIVING • FEBRUARY 2006

# Sunset

## The West's Best Inns

24 Great B&Bs for  
Warmth, Comfort,  
and Romance

Tasty Fondues

Visiting  
Yellowstone

Latest Looks  
in Wallpaper





# State of the parks

Discover four premier California state parks just in time for a major ballot measure

Perhaps it's the short days, or the chilly nights, or the lingering lethargy of football season. Whatever it is, this time of year even active Californians seem to hibernate. How else can you explain why so many of California's 265 state parks—wildly popular the rest of the year—are so empty? It may be winter, but most parks are still open, most are blessedly uncrowded, and February typically offers us more than our fair share of bright, sunny days.

Solitude aside, this month is a good time to plan a visit for another reason: California's parks will be in the news as public debate mounts over Proposition 12 on the state's March ballot.

The official title—"Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air, and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2000"—is a mouthful; fittingly, Proposition 12 has big ambitions. The first park bond act placed on the ballot by the legislature since 1988, the measure would provide \$2.1 billion for California state and local parks, coastal conservation, wildlife protection, land acquisition, and other needs.

The four parks described here are not only great close-to-home winter getaways but also good yardsticks by which to measure the value of Proposition 12 for yourself. —*Jeff Phillips*

## Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park

In February, the South Fork of the American River tumbles clear and cold out of the Sierra Nevada foothills. It sweeps in a broad arc past Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park, perhaps depositing more golden nuggets



FOREST ARCHITECTURE: Stately columns of redwood trunks in Big Basin.

near the spot where the California Gold Rush began.

A replica of John Sutter's sawmill stands near that spot. On a quiet winter weekend here, you can listen to a ranger or docent describe the electrifying discovery that turned the mill site at Coloma into a boomtown of 4,000 and eventually led to California statehood. Stroll through the 285-acre park on a self-guided tour of the town's remains, visit a neat small museum, even rent a gold pan and try your luck in the river's shimmering teal waters.

The sawmill replica, which no longer operates, suffers from dry rot and requires considerable renovation. One of the oldest interpretive museums in the state park system, built in the 1960s, needs extensive remodeling and new exhibits. It's one of California's most important historic sites, and park planners hope this much-needed work gets funding priority.

**WHERE:** From U.S. 50 at Placerville, follow State 49 north 8 miles to Coloma and the park.

**DETAILS:** Open 8 A.M.–sunset daily; \$5 per vehicle.

**CONTACT:** (530) 622-3470.

—*Lora J. Finnegan*

## Big Basin Redwoods State Park

A faint mist and the invigorating fragrance of damp bark greet visitors after rain. In every direction, towering coast redwoods spread their deep green canopies over the stillness that has settled on California's oldest state park. Between winter storms, the extensive tangle of redwood grove trails in Big Basin waits to be explored.

A sure bet even in rainy weather is the easy 0.6-mile Redwood Trail loop. Or opt for more expansive views of the park and the surrounding ridges of the Santa Cruz Mountains on the moderate 2.2-mile climb up Pine Mountain Trail, which winds through dense stands of second-growth redwoods to Buzzard's Roost.

Views here sweep toward the western edge of the park, where conservationists hope bond funds will allow acquisition of the long-sought 581-acre Cascade Creek property. The purchase would preserve stands of old-growth redwoods as well as nesting sites for the endangered marbled murrelet.

**WHERE:** From Saratoga, follow State 9 about 15 miles west to its junction with State 236. Follow State 236 west



another 9 miles to park headquarters.

**DETAILS:** Day use (7 A.M.–10 P.M.) \$6 per vehicle; camping \$14.

**CONTACT:** (831) 338-8861.

— Christopher Tritto

## Hearst San Simeon State Historical Monument

Understanding the value of sensationalism helped William Randolph Hearst build his newspaper empire. When he hired architect Julia Morgan in 1919, it was to design a permanent structure on the family ranch where he loved to camp. After 28 years of construction, the hilltop complex that Morgan fashioned could only be described as a castle. Now a state park, it still contains Hearst's extraordinary collection of art and antiquities.

Modeled after a Spanish cathedral, the main house boasts more than 100 lavishly furnished rooms. Just stepping into the dining room is overwhelming: Colorful Italian Palio banners wave above carved 15th-century choir stalls, Belgian tapestries line walls, Irish silver sparkles, and there, next to the English china, are American paper napkins. Hearst was, after all, camping.

Open to visitors for more than 40 years, Hearst Castle—requiring \$20 million for maintenance and historic preservation—needs help. Urgent priorities include restoring the exquisite tilework of the Roman Pool, repairing the Belgian carillon bells in the tower, and preserving the 1,800-year-old Muse Sarcophagus.

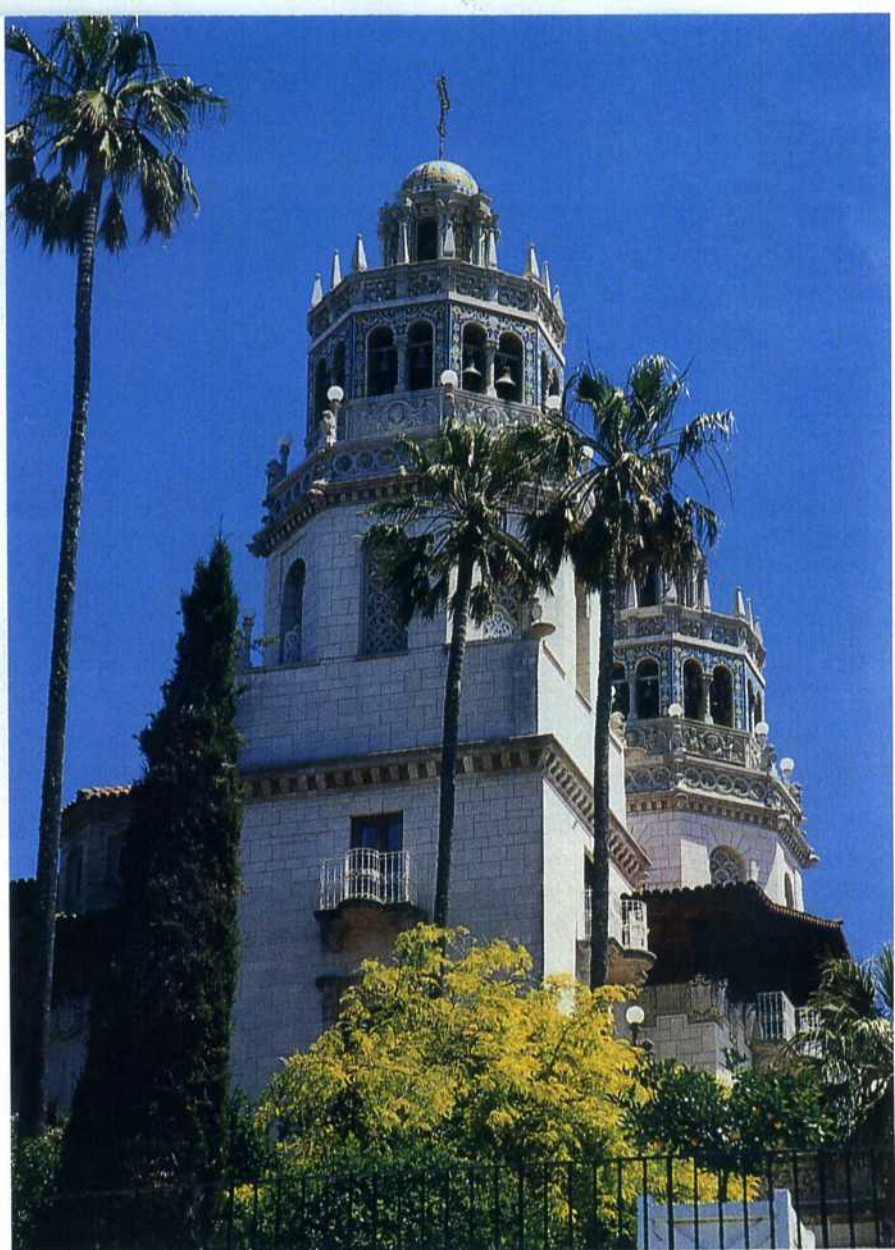
**WHERE:** Park visitor center is off State 1 about 40 miles north of San Luis Obispo.

**DETAILS:** At least three different tours offered daily, starting at 8:20 A.M.; \$14, \$8 ages 6–12.

**CONTACT:** (800) 444-4445 for tour reservations; [www.hearstcastle.org](http://www.hearstcastle.org). — J.P.

## Chino Hills State Park

The urban entrance to Chino Hills State Park gives little hint of the rural surprise that awaits you 5 miles up the gravel road—12,000 acres of pristine,



SILENT CARILLON BELLS in the grand towers of Hearst Castle could ring again after restoration with Proposition 12 funds.

hilly Southern California grasslands. It's hard to believe this wildland is within a two-hour drive of half of the state's population.

The park is crisscrossed by well-maintained trails great for runners, hikers, and mountain-bikers, but it's also a haven for wildlife. The Upper Aliso Canyon Trail is a 4-mile (round-trip) streamside walk beneath sycamores, oaks, and willows. Roadrunners cross the path, and kestrels hover over a nearby field. Sometimes visible on the trail are footprints of raccoons, deer, coyotes, and bobcats.

What keeps the wildlife in Chino Hills healthy in spite of nearby develop-

ment is a narrow strip of private land called Coal Canyon. It connects the park to Cleveland National Forest farther south, allowing bobcat, mountain lion, and deer populations essential room to roam. Frustrated park planners are still looking for funding to purchase this vital wildlife corridor before development severs the link.

**WHERE:** Follow State 71 to the Soquel Canyon Pkwy. exit, then go west to Elinvar Rd. Head south on Elinvar three blocks to the park entrance.

**DETAILS:** Day use (8:00 A.M.–sunset) \$5 per vehicle; camping \$8–\$9.

**CONTACT:** (909) 780-6222.

— Michael Tennesen ♦