

THE REDWOOD COAST: AWE-some Adventure

By Lou Jurassic

"The Redwoods, once seen, leave a mark or create a vision that stays with you always... It's not only their unbelievable stature, nor the color which seems to shift and vary under your eyes, no, they are not like any trees we know, they are ambassadors from another time."

John Steinbeck

A visit to California's northern coast, that remote stretch between San Francisco and the Oregon state line, renders the term "awesome" utterly inadequate. One of the most over-used words in our modern lexicon can't begin to describe the level of wonder inspired by the world's largest redwood forest. You simply have to be there to understand the grand dichotomy of the experience. The vibrancy of the planet's oldest living things sparks an acute awareness of your surroundings—the cedar-scented air, the clear-running streams, the abundance of birdlife and, of course, the enormous trees. Even the undergrowth—ferns and bushes, mostly—are denser, taller, and more impressive than those in any other woods. Sensory overload sets in. At the same time the level of peace and tranquility is palpable. No wonder an encounter with these ancient groves ranks high on so many "bucket lists."

In addition to offering a fresh perspective of where we fit into this universe, the trees provide a tangible link to the past. Redwoods date to prehistoric times and many of the California coastal trees have been standing for 2,000 years. The exact trees that inspired Steinbeck's words render me nearly speechless today. Just try to wrap your head around all the historic events that have occurred in more than two millennia! These groves prompt all kinds of pondering.

You can spend a lifetime getting to know the superstars of the redwood world. Humboldt Redwoods State Park, just 45 miles from United Express service to Eureka, California, is a wonderful place to start. Begin your tour at the visitors' center where you'll be dazzled by redwood facts and figures. The park's 53,000 acres includes more than 17,000 acres of pristine, old growth redwoods and many luminaries of the redwood world. A drive



along the Avenue of the Giants offers the best way to become quickly acquainted with some of its most impressive residents. This 32-mile road celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. When Highway 101 was created to provide a fast and direct route to San Francisco, a segment of the old road, built in 1880 for stagecoaches and wagons, was preserved. The resulting drive passes through many forests that have never been harvested. To fully appreciate the experience, pick up a guide book at the visitors' center. It offers info about the trees and the small towns settled in their midst.

Plan to take your time. You'll want to drive very slowly and stop often. Be sure to pull over for the Rockefeller Forest, so named because John D. Rockefeller, Jr. toured the area and promptly gave the Save the Redwoods League \$1 million to buy its 10,000 acres. This land is believed to be the finest specimen of old growth trees in the world. The public has been enjoying its wonders since 1921. They include

DID YOU KNOW?
Coast redwoods are the tallest known tree species in the world.

DID YOU KNOW?
Mature coast redwoods average more than 150 feet in height; the tallest exceed 350 feet.



Visitors drive along the Avenue of the Giants.

DID YOU KNOW?
As a species it is estimated that the redwoods have been on earth for more than 100-million years.



The Dyerville Giant fell in 1991. Prone it is two-stories tall.

DID YOU KNOW?
Individual trees in Humboldt Redwoods State Park have been standing for more than 2,200 years.

many special attractions, such as an arboreal skyscraper estimated to be more than 2,200 years old and the aptly named Immortal Tree. Though not the oldest or tallest of the coast redwoods, it may be the most resilient. It bears the battle scars of 950 years of living. A logger's ax remains stuck in its trunk; numerous lightning strikes left enduring scars and destroyed its top 45 feet (it's still more than 250 feet tall); floodwaters have discolored its bark, and during recorded history numerous forest fires ravaged its surroundings. Miraculously the tree survives.

Less resilient was the Dyerville Giant. The 370-foot, 500-ton behemoth was estimated to have been more than 2,000 years old when it fell in 1991. Wet ground, a case of root rot and the chain-reaction collapse of smaller nearby trees prompted its demise. The Giant's toppled carcass now extends almost 400 feet in length; the uprooted base still stands as high as a two-story house. It's located in the Founders Grove, a forest that is also home to the 346-foot Founders Tree. Both are accessed by an easy half-mile hike.

The avenue is so amazing you may need to be reminded that a visit to the Redwood Coast is much more than a drive through a park. An abundance of recreation is made all-the-more stimulating because of the phenomenal backdrop. There are 250 campsites in Humboldt Redwoods State Park's three campgrounds and they are rarely crowded. A fourth is reserved for horsemen. More than 100 miles of trails meander through an expanse so enormous you never feel crowded or rushed. The Eel River runs adjacent to the Avenue of the Giants and provides fishing and swimming opportunities. Small towns still dot the forest. Historic Ferndale is especially notable. Well-preserved Victorian buildings give visitors a glimpse of yesteryear. The town was founded in 1850, and if that seems like a long time ago, consider how it stacks up against the redwoods—our living link to a very distant past.

United Express, operated by SkyWest, provides easy access to a redwood adventure. Get to Humboldt Redwoods State Park via air service to Eureka, California, just 45 miles to the north. For more of the big trees, consider a trip to Redwoods National Park with direct service from San Francisco to Crescent City. The airport is just four miles from the park.

IMAGES: SAVE THE REDWOODS LEAGUE

DID YOU KNOW?

Coast redwood bark is often more than a foot thick and is resilient when confronted with fire.



HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

The world's first "motor home" was built in 1917 when California native and redwoods enthusiast Charles Kellogg carved a "home" from a piece of fallen redwood and had it mounted on a new four-wheel-drive Nash Quad truck. He drove it around America, criss-crossing the country four times to raise concern about the rampant logging of the magnificent trees. Dubbed the Travel Log, Kellogg's home on wheels brought awareness of the giant redwoods to people who had no idea such trees existed. The Travel Log remains on display at the Humboldt Redwoods Park Visitor Center.

YOU CAN HELP SAVE A TREE

Hartley Ruskin, executive director of the Save the Redwoods League, knows that his organization cannot rest on its laurels—impressive as they may be.

"The parks that we so enjoy, like Humboldt Redwoods, were created by people who believed that there was a higher and better use for these forests than to supply railroad ties and roofing shingles," he said. "By individuals joining together, whether they were giving a dollar or in the case of Rockefeller, a million dollars, our organization was able to set aside more than 180,000 acres and establish the 62 parks and reserves that inspire countless visitors."

However, the work is not finished according to Ruskin. "The trees are very resilient and yet they are very fragile. We know that they can be felled quickly and rapidly. They are timeless and yet we, as people, have the power to either protect or destroy them. An important part of the redwoods story is the story of people coming together to protect the places they care about."



DID YOU KNOW?

Coast redwoods are susceptible to high winds and flooding.

More than 70% of existing redwoods are not protected from land use conversion or aggressive forestry. Much of the work today is in the second-growth forest. Ruskin said the Save the Redwoods League works with private owners to responsibly manage the land. It's also involved in reforestation, conservation, and research into the effects of climate change on the big trees and the planet. ■

To learn more visit SaveTheRedwoods.org.



DID YOU KNOW?

There are only 24 albino redwoods in the world. Six are located in Humboldt Redwoods State Park. (BTW, they're really a parasite. Because they tap into the host trees for sustenance, they lack chlorophyll.)

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