



Weekend Getaways

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LAURA A. ODA / STAFF ARCHIVES

A large buck has the green light as he explores the main road through Yosemite Valley.

It's family tour time with giddy son, 5, in Yosemite

By Jessica Yadegaran

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My 5-year-old is so giddy, he's doing a happy dance atop his father's shoulders. It's a crisp Saturday morning, and we are standing before Yosemite's Tunnel View with a small group of hikers. The bright sun casts shadows on the iconic El Capitan and Half Dome rock formations as Benjamin regales us with imagined tales of the creatures lurking beyond the basin.

He gets this way — joyful, then focused and professorial — when immersed in the natural world. I remember how excited he was when he spotted the wonderfully spiky silver-sword plant on a recent trip to Hawaii's Volcanoes National Park and how smitten he was by Olympic National Park's Hoh Rainforest.

Unlike those trips, where we drove and discovered on our own, this time we decided to put ourselves in the hands of an expert for our first family trip to Yosemite. As our senior naturalist guide — Kevin Perry from Groveland's Rush Creek and Evergreen lodges — pointed out the light, swaying flow of Bridalveil Fall, I realized something. Sure, the greatest gift you can give kids is a love of the outdoors. But the greatest gift you can give *yourself* is an excursion that is manageable in duration and intensity — with plenty of snacks and periodic piggyback rides.

We chose this particular tour for its half-day length and easy, mostly flat walks designed for families with kids 4 and older. In addition to lunch and

See **Kids** on Page 10

IF YOU GO

The National Park Service offers a Little Cubs (kids 3-6) program that allows kids to earn a button during their visit to Yosemite Valley by completing a self-guided booklet (\$3) published by the Yosemite Conservancy. They have a similar Junior Rangers program (\$3.50) for children ages 7-13. Find more information at tinyurl.com/h3qav9n.

Guests staying at Groveland's Rush Creek Lodge have several Yosemite tour options, including the half-day Range of Light tour, which runs from 9:15 a.m. to 2:45 p.m. and includes lunch and transportation. The tour is \$95 for adults and \$65 for children under 13; www.rushcreeklodge.com.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF DINO VOURNAS

Juan Birrueta of Gilroy, right, captures the moment as his brother, Robert, sleds down a hill, much to the delight of Juan's kids, Gabriel and Mariah. The sliding hills along Highway 108 near Long Barn have long been a popular spot for snow play.

Dodge Ridge is delightfully un-Tahoe

Family-oriented ski resort offers a casual, laid-back atmosphere perfect for young, novice skiers, snowboarders eager to hit slopes

By Dino Vournas

Correspondent

Shrieks of terror are soon followed by squeals of pure joy as young, novice skiers and snowboarders finally "get it" on the bunny slopes of Dodge Ridge Ski Area in the central Sierra.

That's the driving force behind this family-oriented resort, where hundreds of thousands of beginners — and at least three generations of kids — have been taught the finer points of sliding down a mountain since the ski area opened in 1950. This legacy of lessons, Bay Area proximity, wallet-friendly lift tickets and a certain laid-back coziness make Dodge the perfect family adventure — and one with a distinctly un-Tahoe vibe.

The ski area, blessed this season with a bounty of the fluffy white, is located in Tuolumne County near Pinecrest, roughly 150 miles from Oakland or San Jose. Pack up your ski gear — and bring sleds or sliding equipment for later — and get to the resort early to maximize your fun.

The resort offers several learn-to-ski programs, including a two-hour, one-on-one lesson for 2- to 5-year-olds (\$124, including equipment rentals) and a \$249 Progression Pass for teens (and up), which provides season-long access to daily lessons and a season pass to the lower mountain. You may have started on the bunny slope, but you'll emerge an intermediate skier. Dodge also offers programs for people with disabilities.

After getting the kiddies set up with lessons, savor a cup of coffee on one of the expansive decks, observing your offspring with other nervous parents. Or why not hit the slopes yourself? Dodge has a respectable 1,600-foot vertical drop, utilizing a bit under 900 acres of skiable terrain and serviced by eight fixed-grip chairs and two surface lifts.



TOP: The Long Barn Lodge indoor ice-skating rink in Tuolumne County woos little ones to the ice. **MIDDLE:** Adam Fox hits the slopes at the Dodge Ridge ski area near Pinecrest. **ABOVE:** Tom and Sharyl Anderson and daughter, Molly, 2, of San Ramon, take a lunch break during their day of snow play at the Dodge Ridge ski area.

When I clicked into my skis for a little tour, I found plenty of groomed runs, open-powder trails and bumps to sample, all on natural snowfall. From base-area lifts 1, 2 and 6 one can access the beginner runs and terrain parks. Chair 3 offers up an assortment of intermediate slopes, the always fun

See **Dodge** on Page 10

IF YOU GO

Dodge Ridge ski area: Find details and directions to the ski area — which is at 1 Dodge Ridge Road, Pinecrest — at www.dodgeridge.com. It's a good idea to carry snow chains on these roads. Lift tickets are \$24-\$72 for a full day; kids 5 and under are free. Lesson reservations are recommended.

There is no lodging on the mountain, but you'll find cabin rentals and other lodging options in Pinecrest, Strawberry, Long Barn and Twain Harte. Make reservations early. In a pinch, you can usually find rooms in Sonora, 33 miles away.

Leland Snowplay: Open six days a week from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; closed on Wednesdays. 34033 Leland Meadow Road, Pinecrest; www.snowplay.com

Long Barn Lodge ice rink: Open daily for public skating (\$8.50 plus \$2.50 for skate rentals) at 25957 Long Barn Road, Long Barn. Skating lessons are offered on Mondays and Thursdays. Find hours and details at longbarn.com.

Dining: Local favorites include Pinecrest's Steam Donkey (pinecrestlakeresort.com) for rack of lamb and other upscale fare, Cold Springs' Mia's (www.mias.com) for brick-oven pizzas and Twain Harte's The Rock (www.rockoftwainharte.com) for barbecue and burgers.

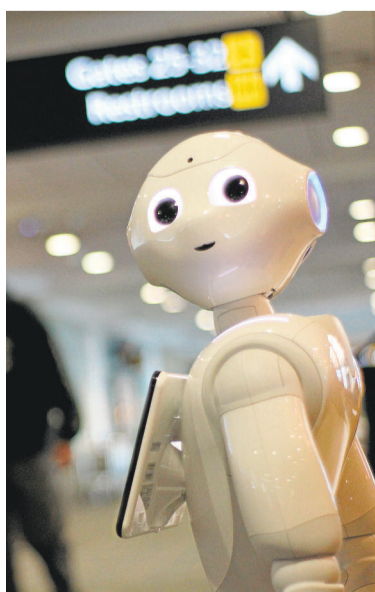
Nearby: Other family-friendly fun in the area includes Columbia State Historic Park, the restored former Gold Rush boomtown, and Railroad 1897 State Historic Park in Jamestown.

Travel Tips: Flights and bots

Cabo nonstop: Southwest Airlines launched its first international flights from Oakland International Airport to San Jose del Cabo/Los Cabos and Puerto Vallarta earlier this month, with three daily flights to Cabo and two to Puerto Vallarta. It's a flight path already enjoyed by travelers flying out of San Jose or San Francisco, but a first for OAK. Details: www.southwest.com

Escape Lounge: There's more passenger comfort to be had these days at OAK's Terminal 1, with the opening of the premium Escape Lounge this winter near Gate 8. For a \$45 fee, guests can lounge in the swanky space, surf the free Wi-Fi, nosh from a menu designed by Oakland chef and restaurateur Chris Pastena (Chop Bar, Lungomare, Calavera) and enjoy complimentary drinks, including boozy ones. Details: www.oaklandairport.com

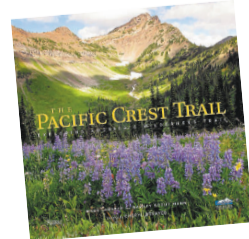
Robot pals: OAK may have Pepper the Robot — a 4-foot-tall robot stationed near the Pyramid at Ale Taphouse in Terminal 2; check out the awesome video at bayareane.ws/2kYFAcl — but San Jose's Mineta International Airport has a robot playground. You'll find the iPal Playground near Gate 25 in Terminal B, with a humanoid robot that can sing, dance and entertain kids. Details: www.flysanjose.com



ANDA CHU/STAFF

Travel Book: Hiking the PCT

If you've ever hankered to trek the Pacific Crest Trail, which runs 2,659 miles from the Mexican to the Canadian borders, chances are good you've read Cheryl Strayed's "Wild," seen the Reese Witherspoon-helmed movie and laughed over the "Gilmore Girls: Summer" homage, where PCT hikers greet each other with "Book or movie?"



We're approaching the start of PCT season — permits for long-distance hikes of 500+ miles are available now. "Thru-hikers" heading north typically begin the trek in mid-April to early May. And whether you're an avid hiker or an armchair traveler — or a "Wild" devotee — you'll want to check out the new, lavishly photographed "Pacific Crest Trail: Exploring America's Wilderness Trail" (Rizzoli, \$40). The book, which includes archival images and historical detail, as well as page after page of gorgeous photographs, was written by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Mark Larabee, managing editor of the Pacific Crest Trail Association, with a forward by Strayed. Available at local bookstores, Amazon and at www.pcta.org.

— Jackie Burrell, Staff

Wish You Were Here



COURTESY OF HEIDI RACHERLA

MEXICO: More than 30 friends and family members joined Santa Clara resident Roland Huynh in Puerto Vallarta last summer to celebrate his 40th birthday. The group included, from left, his parents Hai and ThuVan Huynh, wife Tan Nguyen, birthday boy Roland, sister and brother-in-law Heidi and Sangam Racherla, and brother and sister-in-law Arden and Samantha Huynh, holding niece Abigail and nephew Miles Huynh.

Travel tips: "All-inclusive resorts are a great option for large events, providing a perfect combination of individual time and group activities," Heidi says. "Most conveniently, there are so many dining options available 24/7, and since all costs have already been paid, there's no need to split the check at every meal. Just bring lots of small bills for gratuities. Relax and have fun being together!"



COURTESY OF CAMPOS FAMILY

FRANCE: Andrea Lanzafame Campos, right, and her friend Linda Kyriazi — classmates at Pittsburg High, class of 1971 — "had a reunion of sorts in Paris this summer," Campos says. "We met up with a group of other cousins and friends and spent a week seeing many of the spots we had missed in past trips: Shakespeare & Company, Jim Morrison's grave in Pere Lachaise, Monet's garden in Giverny and Versailles (pictured)."

Travel tip: "Our hotel was in Montparnasse. We could take the Metro back in the afternoon or evening and relax at local restaurants, stroll through a park, shop in the supermarkets and watch Parisians live their everyday lives."



COURTESY OF VINCE NAVARRA

ALASKA: San Jose resident Jim Laumond, left, and Campbell's Vince Navarra took a Holland America cruise from Seattle to Alaska to celebrate Navarra's 65th birthday. One of the trip highlights was a city tour in Ketchikan, pictured, that included a visit to Totem Pole Park. "They actually had classes and carved some beautiful totem poles," Navarra says. "It's usually rainy in this region, but our visit was sunny and the weather was similar to the Bay Area. It was a great time."

Travel tips: "Do the tours, as you can experience the real side of life in this beautiful part of our country."



COURTESY OF KAREN LACHTANSKI

CROATIA: San Jose resident Karen Lachtanski took a side trip to Dubrovnik while on a business trip to the Czech Republic. Dubrovnik is "a gem on the Adriatic shore," she says. The city "is where many of the King's Landing scenes from 'Game of Thrones' and 'Star Wars: Episode VIII' were filmed."

Travel tips: "October is a good month because the weather is mild compared to July and August, (which) are heavy tourist months. Be prepared to walk a lot. Take the gondola (www.dubrovnikcablecar.com) for a fabulous view of this walled city."

Share your travels with us! Send your vacation selfies to jburrell@bayareanews.com. Be sure to tell us who's who, where they're from and where you are — and include a couple of travel tips to help fellow readers globetrot, too. Find more Wish You Were Here features at www.mercurynews.com/tag/wish-you-were-here/.

Geo-Quiz



JACKIE BURRELL/STAFF

Suspected arson, political rallies — and a gold Bonanza. Where are you?

Clue: No opera whatsoever

Answer: Find it at www.mercurynews.com by searching for "Geoquiz."

Last week's answer: The Dutch Windmill, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco



LAURA A. ODA/STAFF ARCHIVES

The best place to spot Alpenglows lighting up Half Dome is from Yosemite's Sentinel Bridge at sunset.

Kids

Continued from Page 9

transportation, Perry promised to provide history lessons about Yosemite's most famous and impressive wonders, as well as a few hidden treasures only a seasoned expert would know.

As we hopped in the van and drove along the gurgling Merced River toward the national park's northern entrance, Perry explained the difference between the 300 to 500 American black bears that call Yosemite home today and the California grizzly, which no longer exists here, despite its presence on the state flag. Euro-American settlers perceived grizzlies as a threat to life and property and killed them in large numbers. The last one was shot outside the Yosemite region in the early 1920s, Perry told us. Everyone in the van let that one sink in.

We parked in the valley and made our way through the towering trees toward Yosemite Falls, as Perry pointed out a cluster of rocks that some kids were using as a makeshift slide. He encouraged Benjamin and the other child in our group to join him (sweet: first climbing lesson). From there, we made the short, paved walk to the base of the falls and took in all three: Upper Yosemite Falls

(1,430 feet), the Middle Cascades (675 feet) and Lower Yosemite Falls (320 feet) with their strong, steady streams that, come spring, transform into roaring runoff.

After taking us to stunning viewpoints of Half Dome, our guide knew we were ready for a break. Perry led us to a clearing in neighboring Sentinel Meadow, where we sat outside the old superintendent's house, which was set awash during the 1997 Yosemite flood.

We munched sandwiches, chips and apples from our sack lunches and asked Perry to share his most incredible hiking story. He'd been hiking — not here, but in the Mojave Desert along a ravine on the Pacific Crest Trail, when he suddenly heard a loud buzzing in the dry grass. The word "rattlesnake" entered his mind, and he started to high step and run.

"Then I felt the wind of the snake as it struck after me," he told the kids, who weren't the only ones with eyes wide. "I was just inches from being bitten by one mean Mojave rattlesnake!"

We sat motionless, imagining a run-in with a rattlesnake. It was so quiet that the only sound we could hear was the wind tickling the grass. Then, a pair of deer appeared in our clearing, their serene pose banishing any thought of rattlers — and Benjamin grinned once more.



COURTESY OF DINO VOURNAS

Maggie Diaz and son Fernando careen down a sliding hill alongside Highway 108 near Long Barn in Tuolumne County.

Dodge

Continued from Page 9

black-diamond Face and some challenging double-blacks. It leads the way to Chairs 7 and 8, which open up the largest swath of terrain on the mountain from the 8,200-foot summit, including the expert tree runs, Fast Eddies and Sonora Glades. At the summit, I took the T-bar up a few hundred yards to access The Shots trails and the wide-open, natural Granite Bowl, filled in nicely this season thanks to monstrous snow dumps.

At break time, there are several options for food and drink on the mountain. Try the North Fork Bistro for special treats and apres-ski, cafeteria-style eats at the Creekside Café. Go for brews at the Boulder Bar or the slope-side Local's Café. Or brown-bag it inside or out at several locations. Confused about anything? Just ask, say owners Sally and Frank Helm, for whom friendly and helpful staff are a point of pride.

Want more winter fun? The Long Barn Lodge has a vintage 1970 indoor ice-skating rink that awaits your double-axels and majestic pratfalls.

Want to get outta Dodge for a spell? You'll find Leland Snowplay eight miles east, at the end of Leland Meadow Road. For \$37 on weekends or \$23 weekdays (but closed on Wednesdays), you can ride a lift up the hill on an inner tube and slide down a variety of chutes. Owner Lance Vetses touts the climb-free fun, his caring staff and their safety record. "We have to offer a great value," he says. "We are competing with free."

Did someone say free? One of the pleasures of life is finding some great fun on the cheap side — at sliding hills just off the main highway. Folks have come here for decades, bringing toboggans and inner tubes and setting up chairs and snow picnics for a day of sliding, snowball fights and snowmen. The nostalgia was not lost on me. My very first snow-sighting and bout of snow play was on these very hills as an excited 11-year-old.

Just use common sense. Make sure your run-out does not include Highway 108 or a big cedar. Be sure to heed posted parking rules, too. You'll find some popular turnouts just before the town of Long Barn, a few miles past the town and yet another at the Strawberry bridge, all heading eastbound.

Want more winter fun? The Long Barn Lodge has a vintage 1970 indoor ice-skating rink that awaits your double-axels and majestic pratfalls. Open from mid-November to mid-March or later, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. most days, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. on Fridays, Saturdays and holidays, with most hours dedicated to public skating. A mere \$8.50 will get you ice time and \$2.50 for skates.

Plan a visit to this Tuolumne winter wonderland and guarantee bringing back fond memories or creating a whole new set.

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