



Thousand Trail’s Pio Pico Preserve: A Getaway Less Than An Hour Away

by Ondine Brooks Kuraoka

After only 35 minutes on a cold December evening, we were rounding the last rural twists and turns on our way to Thousand Trail’s Pio Pico preserve in Jamul, rocky canyons and cliffs dancing in dusky shadows on either side. The ubiquitous Starbucks, McDonald’s, and Wal-Marts of our suburban life felt pleasantly distant.

We were grateful for such a short drive, enabling us to leave on Friday after work and arrive in time for dinner. We were greeted at the security check-in and directed to our weekend home, one of Pio Pico’s “Getaway Cabins.” Boasting 180 acres, Pio Pico guests can choose among RV accommodations, trailer rentals, tent campsites and the Getaway Cabins.

Our Tree House Getaway

We walked in from the breezy evening and were warmed by the cozy décor of wood veneer paneling, country comforters and large windows to admire the 400-year-old oaks. The sunset-speckled, leafy view gave the cabin the feel of an elegant tree house. Our sons Roy, 4, and Leo, 2, immediately climbed upstairs to the children’s loft, a pint-sized hideaway with brightly colored comforters, a box of Legos, toy cars, puzzles, and games.

The boys loved their nest and spent their first hour building towers and rolling off the beds (safely situated mattresses on the floor). An amusing point was the loft’s low ceilings; Roy and Leo could stand but we had to duck ridiculously each time we came up. We pretended to bonk our heads on the ceiling, which they thought was hilarious.

Family-friendly Dining: Scrumptious and Casual

For dinner we made our way to the Coyote Canyon Cantina, located in the activity center, for a hearty dinner of fish and chips, chicken nuggets and salad. The atmosphere was casual and friendly, perfect for families with simple cafeteria-style benches and tables buzzing with conversation. We could relax knowing that if our two young diners got restless they could ricochet a bit without raising any eyebrows.

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There were shelves of jigsaw puzzles, books and magazines. The Cantina is open on weekends. During the week or between mealtimes on weekends, the El Coyote Grill is another convenient option. The Grill offers freshly made hamburgers and a variety of sandwiches, including scrumptious barbecue sandwiches.

Idyllic: Stars, Popcorn and Privacy

After dinner we enjoyed an evening walk alongside the oaks, the mountain song of the wind rustling overhead and birds chittering to and fro. The stars looked so close; Roy and Leo stumbled along with their heads bobbing upward, devouring the rare sight of the bejeweled, black mountain sky.

Our cabin was comfortable with central heating and a gas fireplace. We cuddled up for story time on the sofa, sipping cocoa and munching on popcorn. When bedtime was nigh, the loft was so inviting that there was no struggle from our two sleepy birds.

My husband and sons ate a simple breakfast of cereal and bananas around the dining table, the dawn's honeyed light sweetening the too-early morning. I slept in, cocooned in the privacy of the master bedroom, a blissful couple of hours for this mother of marauders.

Later we made our way to the Cantina for a more substantial breakfast, enjoying the swap meet/craft show on our way in. We had sausages, eggs, hash browns and pancakes with M&Ms arranged in smiley faces for our sons.

Crafts, Bumper Boats and Campfires

Chad Dragan, the Recreational Coordinator, facilitated a craft activity after breakfast; Roy, Leo and I made easy holiday wreaths. Dragan has a degree in recreation and is now in charge of updating recreational activities for Thousand Trails throughout Southern California.

Summer highlights for kids include a new BMX bike track, skateboard ramp, bumper boats and fishing pond. New soccer goals are also in the works. There are regularly scheduled summertime dances with DJs or live music. Candy bingo, seasonal crafts, and the walking club are ongoing Pio Pico activities.

Warmer weather also heralds the campfire program, which takes place most Friday nights after dinner is served. Featuring camp songs and s'mores, everyone is invited. Fires are prohibited throughout the campsites due to fire regulations so the campfire is a well-appreciated treat.

Our sunny breakfast sky was rolling with heavy grey clouds by early afternoon. My husband took Roy and Leo to the youth center, where they rolled pool balls around the pool table for an hour. The youth center is welcomingly casual with sofas, beanbags, and plenty to do. A stereo playing in the background, kids are immersed in air hockey, ping-pong, non-violent arcade games and board games. Balls may be checked out for use in the playing areas outside the center. There is also a new TV and a toddler area with toys and books.

Rain pelting down, Roy and Leo splashed in puddles all the way back to the cabin, the dripping trees and moist soil radiating their dense aromas. As San Diego drought children, it might as well have been raining gold coins; our sons were almost hysterical with glee over the thundering downpour.

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Though the rain canceled our plans for miniature golf, we did hone our skills at Checkers and Candyland. And best of all, Roy and Leo had plenty of mud walks, complete with leaf boat races.

A Relaxed Pace and Room to Roam

Robert Corona of National City returns to the Getaway Cabins as often as possible with his 12-year-old daughter and 16-year-old son. “My kids enjoy the pool and the games at the recreation center. My daughter loves the loft; she didn’t want to leave. It’s nice to get away from the city and all the cars. You feel at home; you go there all stressed out and you come back relaxed.”

Maricela Hitchner of San Diego tent camps at Pio Pico with her husband and three children, ages 1 ½, 11, and 13. “The pace is nice and you feel very safe. The youth center is great; you can sit on the sofa and supervise your younger kids. My kids like the ping-pong and the playgrounds.”

Surrounded by wooded thickets and grassy meadows, the Pio Pico preserve has a relaxed pace where visitors can have the experience of their choice. Those who seek solitude will find quiet walks and restful nights. But there is plenty of conviviality as well, with guests lingering over meals and enjoying impromptu games of shuffleboard.

Pio Pico is perfect for family reunions, with lovely gathering places and lots of room to roam. The Trading Post is well stocked with items you might have forgotten, whether it’s bread, sunscreen, a hat or a book.

The Comfortable Outdoors

Far from roughing it, this is the comfortable outdoors. Recreational possibilities abound, with swimming pools, spas and saunas, ball fields, basketball and volleyball courts, playgrounds, miniature golf and horseshoe pits. The convenience of laundry, restroom and shower facilities make stays at Pio Pico as easy as they come. My husband and I marveled at how refreshed we felt after our weekend together, thanks in large part to our mud larks slumbering peacefully above.

America’s oldest and largest national network of RV and camping facilities, Thousand Trails is a family membership vacation program and offers over 50 camping preserves in 16 states and British Columbia, Canada. Thousand Trails also provides its members luxurious escapes in Getaway Cabins and hundreds of resort destinations in the U.S. and throughout the world.

The Pio Pico preserve is located at 14615 Otay Lakes Road, Jamul, CA 91935.

Free Getaway

For more information call 1-800-560-8833. Ask about the Promotional First Visit 3-day, 2-night stay. Visit the web site at www.thousandtrails.com.

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<p>Ondine Brooks Kuraoka is a freelance writer in San Diego. She and her family love getaways of all kinds. Her website is www.sandiegofreelancewriter.com.</p>
