

Volcanoes shaped the state's landscape

Adam Blauert, Modesto Bee, 9-7-11

California's geography has been shaped by volcanic activity and plate tectonics, with glaciers and erosion playing supporting roles. Many of the state's most memorable and unique landmarks tell the story of this volcanic past.

In this part of California, lava flows filled the channel of the Stanislaus River about 9 million years ago and has remained solid as the surrounding rock eroded. The result is the Table Mountain formation that stretches from Knight's Ferry beyond Sonora along Highway 108. A moderate three-mile trek to the top of this formation starts at the end of Shell Road in Jamestown and takes hikers to the amazingly flat top. To avoid the heat, try it in the spring or fall.

Further east along Highway 108, the Columns of the Giants formations are reached via an easy half-mile trail; these volcanic remnants are accessible to people of abilities on a paved trail.

South of Hollister, Pinnacles National Monument preserves the remnants of an ancient volcano. Hiking trails wind up among jagged crags and down among caves. Best visited in spring or fall, the park offers trails for all ability levels. The Bear Gulch Caves Trail is an easy introduction to the park's landscape and features a descent into a cave. Be sure you bring a flashlight.

In addition to the Devil's Postpile National Monument, there are many signs of volcanic activity in the Mammoth Lakes area. One of the most notable is Hot Creek, a bit east of Mammoth on Hot Creek Hatchery Road. Percolating down through the rock, water is heated by magma and then boils up to the surface. Steam and tropically blue water astound visitors. Another geothermal area open to the public can be found at Grover Hot Springs State Park, near Markleeville on Highway 89.

In the Bay Area, the Sibley Volcanic Regional Preserve is a landscape that was formed by volcanoes, although it may not be apparent to the untrained eye. Trails and interpretive signs help visitors see the volcanic past.

To the far north, Mount Shasta is an extinct volcano. Lassen Volcanic National Park is one of the state's best areas to learn about volcanism. The three-mile trail to Bumpass Hell, an active geothermal area, is a moderate walk to an area where mud pots and fumaroles boil furiously. Lava Beds National Monument preserves a volcanic landscape and offers visitors access to over 30 caves that formed as lava tubes — vents for fumes escaping from volcanoes.

Several caves are open to people of all abilities, while others are more challenging. Medicine Lake is California's version of Crater Lake. Although much smaller, the beautiful lake sits in an ancient volcanic crater.