

Five places for lava lovers to visit

Spud Hilton, San Francisco Chronicle, 8-25-12

The National Park Service calls volcanoes "monuments to Earth's origin, evidence that its primordial forces are still at work." That, and they're just plain cool. They're portals to the liquid underworld and reminders, on occasion, that Mother Nature can be supremely cranky. Thanks to the "ring of fire" around the Pacific Ocean (and a few isolated hot spots), the West can be a lava lover's dream.

Museum of Northern Arizona, Flagstaff

If San Francisco had the same density of volcanoes as the San Francisco volcanic field in Arizona, the city would have 147 lava-spewing peaks (and more affordable real estate). The museum explains this bizarre geologic hot spot with exhibits and hands-on displays that cover the spectrum of lava-related learning. Don't know a lava dome from a cinder cone? You will. 3101 N. Fort Valley Road, (928) 774-5213, musnaz.org.

Lava River Cave, Bend, Ore.

The lava that flowed through this artery kept moving after the tap was shut off, leaving a mile-long empty tube you can explore (hint: bring extra batteries for the flashlights). While long ago the heat would have easily vaporized your body, these days the average temperature is 42 degrees, so bring a jacket, too. Lava Lands Visitor Center, 58201 S. Highway 97, (541) 593-2421, fs.usda.gov/centraloregon (click on "Recreation," "Other activities" and "Caving").

Volcano House Hotel, Big Island

It's been closed since the start of 2010, but officials began the "gradual reopening" on Aug. 18 of this hotel on the rim of Kilauea caldera. The 32-room lodge (20 rooms with "crater view") back in 1866 hosted Mark Twain, who said: "The surprise of finding a good hotel in such an outlandish spot startled me considerably more than the volcano did." Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, Nâmakaniipao Campground (which also has A-frame cabins), (808) 756-9625. Latest news: nps.gov/havo/planyourvisit/lodging.htm.

Devils Postpile National Monument

Geologists estimate that the Reds Meadow Valley was, for a while, a 400-foot-deep lake of lava. The slow-cooling basalt formed hexagonal columns (think really old rock candy) that were worn flat on top by glaciers. The resulting walls appear to have been made by drunken stonemasons run amok. Open June through late October. Devils Postpile National Monument, Mammoth Lakes (most visitors park at Mammoth Mountain Ski Area), (760) 934-2289, nps.gov/depo.

Crater Lake, Ore.

It's either a water-filled basin left from the eruption of Mount Mazama or the result of the Chief of the Below World (Llao) falling in love with a Makalak chief's daughter. Either way, Crater Lake is breathtaking. It's the deepest lake in the country (300 feet deeper than Tahoe) and holds 5 trillion gallons, and is equipped with its own cinder-cone island. June through October, drive or bike the 33-mile rim road. Crater Lake National Park,