

Ferry Road is one of the finest low-elevation day hikes in the Mother Lode. There are two limestone arches at Natural Bridges; however, cross-country hiking to the second bridge makes the first bridge a more popular place to stop. Suspended more than 30 feet at its entrance, the first arch spans gracefully above the crystal-clear waters of Coyote Creek, inviting visitors for year-round adventure.

The Natural Bridges represent only a small portion of the Gold Country's vast expanse of marine limestone and dolomite rocks. In fact, this section of Coyote Creek cuts directly through the largest mass of carbonate rock in the Sierra Nevada. The creation of these amazing features had to be staggering, but it is thought that the craggy and potholed surfaces were produced by groundwater leaching the carbonate from the rocks during a time when they were buried deep underground. Much like the formation of limestone caves, such as nearby Moaning Cavern, the archways began as a chasm deep under the Earth's surface. Subsequent erosion, caused mostly by rainfall and streams, exposed these formations for us to enjoy.

Natural Bridges is a day use area maintained by the New Melones Reservoir branch of the Department of Reclamation. This means well-maintained trails with wooden bridges, nicely cut steps and terraces. During even the harshest winter months, the Natural Bridges Trail is usually free of mud and safe to walk. Additionally, these land managers have conveniently placed a bathroom at the start of the three-quarter-mile hike and constructed a very nice parking facility. The trail is well marked and although steep in some sections, it is considered a very moderate hike to the first archway.

To get to Natural Bridges from Tuolumne County, take Highway 49 north to Parrotts Ferry Road and turn toward Columbia State Historic Park. Parrotts Ferry Road takes you to Calaveras County over New Melones Reservoir (about 6.6 miles). After crossing the bridge, continue for 1.2 miles to the Natural Bridges Day Use Area; this is a well-marked paved lot on the left.

To get to Natural Bridges from areas to the north, take Highway 4 east out of Angles Camp to the town of Vallecito. Turn right onto Parrotts Ferry Road and continue for 3.6 miles and park at the day use area on the right.

China Gulch beckons from the Coast to Crest

Spanning nearly 300 miles and gaining more than 8,700 feet in elevation, the Mokelumne Coast to Crest Trail (MCCT) is turning out to be a marvelous addition to California's already booming network of hiking trails. When completed, the MCCT is planned to start at Shoreline Regional Park in Contra Costa County. From there it will slice eastward through the heart of the Gold Country and eventually finish at Calaveras County's portion of the Pacific Crest Trail atop Ebbetts Pass. Crossing over some of the most scenic terrain in California, this monster is destined to become a hiking masterpiece.

While the entire length of the MCCT would be an astonishing feat for even the most enthusiastic long-distance hiker, this fact does not necessarily single out this amazing resource for only the most dedicated athletes. As with any trail, when sections of the path come close to a major road, that portion of the trail quickly becomes a makeshift trailhead. Luckily, the developers of the trail planned

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