

A Visit to Sykes Hot Springs – *Thomas Evans*

I like camping, but I don't do it that often. When I do, the aim is usually to see a new place rather than exert myself. Yet recently I have been interested in trying backpacking – stemming from some masochistic desire to get as deep in the woods as possible, maybe – so when a friend of mine suggested we go to Big Sur for a three-night trip to do just that, I couldn't resist.

Big Sur is well-known for its coastline and vestigial counterculture atmosphere. It was a major source of inspiration for the writer Henry Miller, where he lived for a period of the latter half of his life. While the mountains of Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park get comparatively less attention, the Pine Ridge Trail is a highly popular hiking and backpacking trail known for its hot springs ten miles inland at the Sykes campground.

The path has three official campsites along the way and several streams. Given the high amount of traffic on the trail, it makes for a safe first foray into backpacking.

In fact, this *was* my first time backpacking and at first I found the preparation process somewhat daunting. My friend and the leader of our group of three gave me a list of the things I would need, which I rented or bought, depending on the sort of thing it was (people don't usually rent toilet paper). I rented a tent, backpack, and sleeping bag from REI. I also bought a bunch of toys there, some which came in useful, some which did not.

I also had to figure out what I was going to eat for two days and packed two wheels of cheese, a bunch of croissants, a jar of lingonberry preserves, potato chips and peanut butter pretzels, a flask of port, fresh arugula, a box of gourmet dry pasta and a jar of vodka sauce. Clearly I was in a "picnic" mindset, and my selections made a stark contrast with the Kraft slices, peanut butter, hot dogs, and sliced bread that my companions packed.

We all also made sure to each pack a gallon of water along with water purification tablets so we could refill at the streams [hint – using fizzy electrolyte drink tablets makes the treated water taste less like snot] – bring water!

We went up separately from Los Angeles, as Hang (our leader) would continue up to San Francisco after the hike. Hang and Lex (our third friend) went up early in one car, and I went up a bit later in another. The drive from Los Angeles is about 5 and a half hours along the Pacific Coast Highway and makes for a scenic journey. We would meet at the parking lot for Pine Ridge Trailhead 3E06, off PCH 1.

We packed our bags together once we met up at the trailhead to ensure we all had what we needed. As cavalier as I was about poundage when I was selecting things to bring along, I painfully realized how misplaced my confidence was when I tried to sling the pack onto my back for the first time. 30 pounds is heavy. I had no choice but to figure out a way to slim things down, which I did by ditching some books, extra clothes, and cooking utensils.

At this point I decided to bring my film camera along instead of my DSLR. Not only is it much lighter, but I figured a film camera would better suit the mood of this little adventure anyway. Plus, I didn't have to worry about dying batteries or breaking expensive equipment. I used black and white film at first, and tried out a color roll later on.

After a lot of reorganization and a *much* later start than we intended, we set out from the trailhead. Things started out smooth, but the second mile of the hike turned out to be, by far, the most brutal. This part of the trail would have been fairly tiring for a short hike, but with backpacks, it was a much bigger ordeal.

The highest point on the way to Sykes is at about a 1500' elevation, and the trailhead is at around 500'. While there are plenty of dips and hills deeper in, the second mile is a constant 1000' ascent with no tree coverage. About halfway up there's a nice view; this seemed to be a popular spot for a rest, and we took one.



Halfway up the initial ascent

Once we got to the top, the trail evened out as we moved in along the trees. The trail hugs the ridge to the side, with a deep valley below. We were losing light fast at this point, so after taking some pictures at the very top as the sun set, we hiked until hitting Terrace Creek and set up camp in the dark.



Taking pictures at the first sunset

The next day was a pleasant hike to Sykes. While there are enough ups and downs in elevation to ensure the walk is tiring, the rolling character of the walk is exciting and the shade and variations in scenery make fatigue less noticeable. The redwoods are huge, erupting from the valley deep below; looking out across to the ridge on the other side, the trees obstruct the view like huge pillars. The magic of the place is undeniable.



Along the trail

As the trail is so popular, running into other hikers is almost inevitable. While some might find the human presence disappointing, I felt this made my first backpacking experience more comfortable as there was less to be concerned about if something went wrong.



Fellow hikers along the trail

Eventually we reached Sykes campground, set up camp, and headed to the hot springs. Finding them is a bit of a hassle, but if you have any difficulty, fellow campers are usually heading there or coming from there and can assist you. The pools are makeshift – with the water shored up using sandbags – and small. As they can get crowded, you may have to check back. Luckily, we were able to get the largest one to ourselves.



Hot springs

We got a late start out of Sykes on the last day, which resulted in us getting an abbreviated night's sleep at Terrace Creek. We woke up at around 5 am so we could get back to the trailhead and I could drive Lex back to Los Angeles, where she had a noon flight to catch.

I found out when we got there that deeper in the mountains is a Zen retreat called Tassajara, supposedly the first Zen training monastery established outside Japan. Zen monks live at the site, which is closed for half of the year for their monastic practice. They are open for the spring and summer (mid-April to mid-September) to the public, with overnight stays, classes, vegetarian meals and a summer Zen intensive program available.

It's possible to get there from the Pine Ridge trailhead we took, but the walk is very long. The shortest route is from Jamesburg, a 14-mile hike. There is also a shuttle for overnight guests from Jamesburg. I wasn't able to visit the center this time, but it seems like a great goal for another trip!

If you're interested in trying a backpacking trip, be sure to do your research on the things you'll need to bring. Check the temperatures for the region, and plan accordingly.



Hang



Lex