

Three choices are available to make side trips outside of cities on vacations without private transportation. In San Francisco last month, the choices were: rent a car, join a tour, or hire a guide and his car. Business was so bad for the small companies, the latter was the best deal. Also, we needed to be in Muir Woods in the redwoods before the tour buses arrived. I wanted my friend to have a better angle of view of this natural magnificence than peeking between some guy's ear and his head, or shooting around the bill of a baseball cap on a trail too crowded to move.

To avoid this, we left the hotel before 7 a.m., escorted by a hired guide. In an hour, we were on the trail underneath the giant redwoods alone. So early the light was poor, nevertheless the privacy reigned sacred among the mystic creaking of branches and flicking sound of black and white woodpeckers swooping in short flights from trunk to trunk, tapping a mating call at every landing.

Sounds don't echo in such dense and tall coverage. It's my nature to whistle on a walk. Under the redwoods, the tune barely left my lips. Trilling "Can't Live Without You Baby," my favorite, under the grove means the sound waves hover around three feet or so in circumference. Until

I caught on to the phenomenon, I was walking in a mass of broken whistles stifled by the forest.

Mr. Muir, the early protector of the woods, explored the grove so thoroughly he tied himself in the treetops during a lightning storm. Alone by the sign telling about Mr. Muir's lightning experiment, I peered into the trees with binoculars, wondering how deep lightning reached down the trunks. Tried to imagine being tied aloft in a big thunderstorm in a 250-foot redwood.

I stood in the stillness below the snapping of the branches and heard the very stream rushing that Mr. Muir waded his horse across to reach the wilderness. Mr. Muir remains a renowned naturalist. Deciding whether he used good judgment depends on how many trees you've seen in your life split to the base of the trunk by a lightning bolt.

An hour into the woods, voices came from the parking lot. In 30 more minutes, small chattering groups hit the trails. By the time we reached the car, all the parking spaces were filled with buses and oversized vans. Big women wearing baggy white shorts and wrinkled tee shirts matching green flip flop rubber sandals squished around, herding wild kids and driving every chipmunk and wren deeper into the forest. The chance of communing with nature, like Mr. Muir, would have taken quite a tree

climber. For the next six hours, few pine cones or pine needles free-fell from the trees without being deflected by human form.

We drove from Muir Woods to the lighthouse at Point Reyes. Part of the Point Reyes National Park permits stocking cattle on lands called a "pastoral zone." Black and white Holsteins and small herds of beef cattle range on lands as windswept as the islands off the coast of Ireland. Tule elk grazing on the hills add an Old World aura to the scene. Better, the tall antlers of the elks are reminiscent of Old World paintings of stags being chased by hounds in royal forests.

"Pastoral zone" is National Park terminology meaning the pastors relinquish the testamentary rights to pass the land on to their heirs and learn to live with the public until they die a natural death, or the experience kills them. Once before at Point Reyes, I left the road on a trail to discover a group of tourists gathered around a Holstein having her calf. If the old cow surrounded by sightseers was an example of a "pastoral zone," the pastor and his black and white milk cow had to be mighty patient to produce any milk and butter.

Once at Point Reyes, we stood on the observation deck, watching visitors climb and descend the 300 steps a

lighthouse keeper once transversed to keep the lamps burning. On stormy nights, (and there were and are many on this point jutting out in the Pacific,) he had to hold on to a rope to keep from being swept over the steep cliffs. Below we saw seals and sea lions sleeping on slick black rocks under swarms of cormorants and gulls. The black, jagged rocks broke the waves into white pinnacles of spray. At hand, a kid transported by his parents at a great cost in money and time to see Point Reyes showed his appreciation by rattling the coin return on a pay telescope.

On the home lap, we repaid the time gained by beating the crowds. Even though three lanes were open crossing the Golden Gate Bridge, traffic stalled for an hour. So in the end, neither the private guide nor the tour bus could beat the creeping barrier a bumper width apart.