

FALL COLOR FOR YOUR GARDEN P. 43

Sunset

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BEACH
near Trinidad,
California

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WINNERS FROM OUR READER CONTEST

"I SHOULD WARN YOU ABOUT THE ROOSEVELT ELK," SAID MARNA POWELL, OWNER OF KAYAK ZAK'S, A BOAT RENTAL CONCESSION IN HUMBOLDT LAGOONS STATE PARK, AS SHE DRAGGED A YELLOW PLASTIC KAYAK DOWN TO THE WATERLINE FOR ME. WHILE I TIED A SLEEPING BAG TO ONE END, SHE CONTINUED, "THEY'RE CALVING."

"Really?" I said, mostly ignoring her as I pulled on a waterproof jacket and neoprene booties. "I hope I get to see that."

"Well, the females can be very hormonal and protective," she said. "You can stare down the males, but the females don't go for that. They'll kick you to death with their front legs."

I stood upright and looked from Powell to the lagoon, wondering what I'd gotten myself into. This was day one of my road trip down the far northern coast of California, that remote 200-plus-mile stretch (80 miles of which is called the Lost Coast) between the Oregon border and the logging town of Fort Bragg. It's where rain-soaked forest and rugged mountains hide mysterious little towns, wild beaches, calm lagoons, rogue marijuana farms, and apparently homicidal elk. This is untamed California at its best.

The drive, on U.S. 101, takes about 4½ hours. But because the road swerves inland for some of the most dramatic stretches, I'd planned a meandering and exploratory approach, beginning with this kayak trip across Stone Lagoon.

I paddled a half-mile to the far side of the lagoon, where Ryan's Cove Campground lay hidden in the dense forest and brush, then pulled the kayak ashore and carried supplies to a campsite on a little promontory. Humboldt Lagoons State Park protects three big estuaries—small bays, in essence, separated from one another by rocky headlands and from the rough ocean by long sandbars. Looking out from my campsite, I could see black cormorants flying over the glassy water and Sitka spruces rising into the coastal mountains beyond.

That night I grilled grass-fed steaks over a wood fire and drank good local Sangiovese, tapered off with creamy local Humboldt Fog cheese. I slept well under the stars and got up before dawn. Three ducks came swimming across the lagoon in triangle formation, one ahead and two following—except they weren't ducks at all. Only as they grew closer did I realize that I was seeing a family of river otters in search of breakfast, hunting steelhead.


MANY PEOPLE KNOW that Redwood National Park protects the tallest trees on Earth, including Hyperion—named in 2006 the world's tallest known living organism, at 379.3 feet. Some people even know that the nearby Lindsey Creek Giant tree was the most massive single-stem organism of any kind before it toppled during a 1903 storm. But few realize how difficult it is to find these trees. Nobody will tell you the exact location of Hyperion or any other exemplary redwood. Those trees are the number one reason travelers come here, true wonders of nature recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and yet not even the rangers will give you the slightest clue where to look.

Get lucky like me, however, and you'll wander into the woods only to hear a woman's voice saying, "You do know which tree you're looking at, don't you?"

There was a rustling in the ferns, then she emerged: silver hair, round eyes full of exhilarated awe. Her name was Deb Scott and she'd come all the way from Missoula, Montana, to see these trees. "But I still didn't know how to find them," she said. "So I was in the campground and I saw this young man and I had a feeling that he knew and I said to myself, Be bold, be bold. I walked up to him and said, 'I just drove 900 miles to see the great trees and I would so love it if you could tell me how to find them.' He looked at me and smiled, and then he just told me."

Scott turned to face back in the direction from which she'd come. "That's Iluvatar," she said. "It's one of the largest."

I looked up and still farther up and then up a little more, and I struggled to make sense of what I saw. That tree seemed to go on forever, like a living god hidden in plain sight, and that's how I discovered something else you may not know, if you're anything like me: Standing below one of these gigantic coastal redwoods, allowing your mind the time and quiet to absorb its vastness, can be emotionally overwhelming. I'll admit that I am a nature-loving type, but believe me when I say that never in my life—not while hiking the Andes or dangling from Yosemite cliffs—have I spontaneously wept in response to a view.


The North Coast's redwoods are the tallest trees on the planet.

Philosophers have a word for this quality in nature: sublime. An ancient concept, the most common definition involves a greatness distinct from beauty, on a scale our minds cannot calculate, measure, or imitate. The idea is that while mere beauty produces benign pleasure, true sublimity elicits cathartic understanding of the immensity of creation and also of one's own blessed insignificance. Iluvatar delivers that and something else: Ancient, alive, beautiful, and yet profoundly vulnerable, Iluvatar and the other great redwoods in the park elicit a uniquely tender awe in the human heart.

"Me too," said Scott, seeing the tears on my cheeks. "I found the Grove of Titans yesterday," she said, referring to a remote cluster of giant coastal redwoods. "I just sat on the forest floor and cried for hours."

THE NEXT DAY, I pointed the car 20 miles south to the tiny fishing village of Trinidad, where snug homes and tidy lawns overlook the Pacific Ocean. I strolled over to the little red-and-white lighthouse on the bluff. This turned out to be an exact replica of a still-working lighthouse hidden somewhere on the opposite side of a promontory outside town. Why would anybody build a replica so close to an original, I wondered, when I noticed granite slabs near the lighthouse door: It was a memorial with more than 100 names etched into rock, each representing a local fisherman lost or buried at sea.

This gave me a deeper appreciation for the halibut dinner I enjoyed that night, in the eccentric but excellent restaurant The Larupin' Café. The memory of all those names—fathers, sons, brothers, husbands—had a similar effect in my tasteful room at The Lost Whale Inn. I was just settling into my feather pillowtop bed when I heard sea lions bellowing and barking. I looked out the big picture windows and saw craggy offshore rocks that could easily have destroyed a fishing boat in a storm.

Those sea lions were still bellowing and barking in the morning as I left. I asked innkeeper Brian Hiebert how any creature could have the energy for such nonstop yelling.

"Those are our noisy neighbors," he said. "We usually have 20 to 30 out there, but right now we've got about 200 sea lions having babies. We call it wildlife month."

Fishing isn't the main industry up here, of course. Logging and dairy farming used to be, but now Humboldt County is the epicenter of the multibillion-dollar California marijuana industry. Even with marijuana laws changing, this shadow economy gives the area that curious quality of something concealed, of some unknown life.

I took a walk around downtown Arcata, 15 miles south, and noticed a preponderance of lawyers' offices, plus stores with names like Moonrise Herbs and Bigfish Vapor Lab. I heard a dazed-looking young woman say, to her male companion, "Wait, I thought we were in Chico."

"No, baby," he said. "Wrong city. This is Arcata."

Eureka, directly across the oyster beds and sailing fetches of Humboldt Bay, has an entirely different feel: rugged outskirts

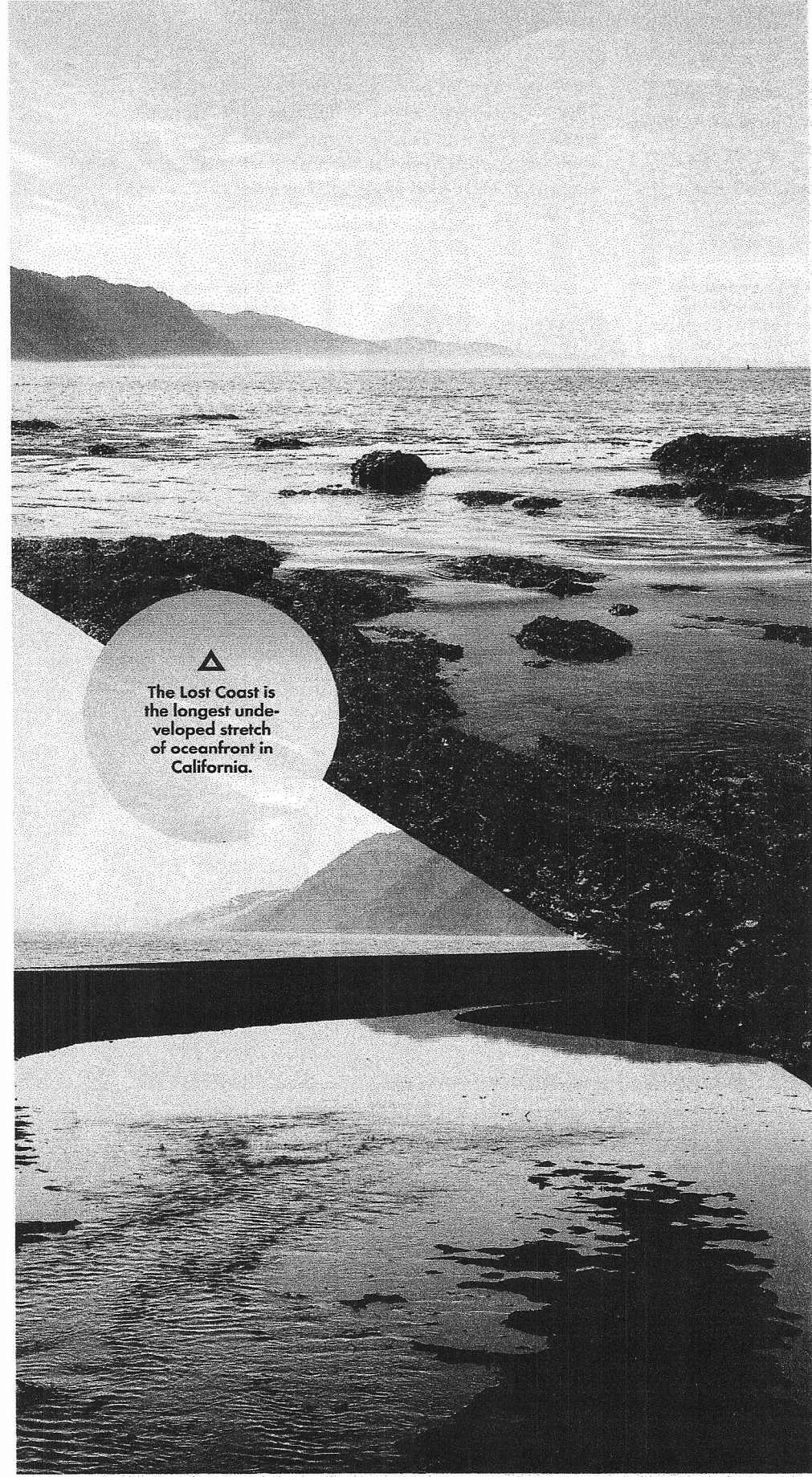
PHILOSOPHERS HAVE A WORD
FOR THIS QUALITY IN NATURE:
SUBLIME. AN ANCIENT CONCEPT,
THE MOST COMMON DEFINITION
INVOLVES A GREATNESS DIS-
TINCT FROM BEAUTY, ON A
SCALE OUR MINDS CANNOT CAL-
CULATE, MEASURE, OR IMITATE.
THE IDEA IS THAT WHILE MERE
BEAUTY PRODUCES BENIGN PLEA-
SURE, TRUE SUBLIMITY ELICITS
CATHARTIC UNDERSTANDING OF
THE IMMENSITY OF CREATION.



but also the cheerful quality of a downtown revival. Stores and restaurants radiate vitality and newness. The commercial fishing fleet, in the harbor, looks big and strong and buoyed by still-sustainable fisheries in salmon and crab.

I spent the final evening of my trip 20 miles south of Eureka, in the odd but charming town of Ferndale, near the banks of the big Eel River, in lush dairy lands just north of the King Range. I don't believe I've ever seen a place quite like Ferndale, a perfectly intact turn-of-the-20th-century village that seems to have stopped growing 100 years ago but that somehow remains alive. As if frozen on a Hollywood movie set, the butcher still sells local beef and lamb, next to sidewalks with hardly a soul in sight. The empty shoe shop still offers wool socks and work boots.

A folding sign on the street pointed toward Artisan Alley, where I found an open garage cluttered with model ships handcrafted by a slender man who sat in the back. He smoked a cigarette and drank Coca-Cola. His name was John A. Doerner—"but people call me Andy," he



▲
The Lost Coast is
the longest unde-
veloped stretch
of oceanfront in
California.

said—and he told me his boats were mostly replicas of historic sailing ships that once carried the big old-growth logs down the coast to San Francisco.

“You from around here?” I asked.


“I was born in Eureka and we lived all over, but my family has been from Ferndale since 1852. There are three plaques in town, and I’m related to somebody on all three of them.”

We chatted a while, and then I walked outside. Other artisans work in that alleyway, including a man they called Digital Dan. Digital Dan lost his voice to Agent Orange in Vietnam, they said; now he does fine Victorian-style millwork and stained glass, making trim and filigree for the old houses in town. A local potter wanted to show me, so he led me through a fence to where Digital Dan keeps a 10-foot-high model of an intricate Victorian house beneath a pavilion roof built precisely to shelter it.

“We call the model house Shirley,” said the potter. “And we call the roof thing Shirley’s Temple.”

I dined at Hotel Ivanhoe, a saloon and restaurant where an older gentleman at the bar was telling two other men that, as he put it, “Grandpa built the barn above the flood line of the ’55 flood, but then the flood of ’64 came and it was up to the cows’ knees!” They ate peanuts as they talked, dropping shells in a huge pile on the floor. There were vintage guns on the walls. My fillet of sole was perfectly cooked in a lemon-caper-white wine sauce. While I ate, I heard conversation at the bar escalate toward still-bigger floods, then toward the fun of flying over one of those floods in a small plane, watching the Eel River overflow its banks. From there, talk drifted toward small planes in general, and then to the pure joy of flying—high into the sky where, I imagined, you might see enough of this enigmatic region to understand its many mysteries.

*Daniel Duane is the author of five books, including **Caught Inside: A Surfer's Year on the California Coast**. He lives in San Francisco.*

 **DIGITAL BONUS** By the surf on Black Sands Beach—watch our video: sunset.com/blacksands.