

## **The Bridge To Nowhere.**

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Recounts a hiking experience at California's San Gabriel

### **THE BRIDGE TO NOWHERE**

All roads lead to the wilderness, where useless compulsions don't stand a chance against the power of nature.

We came upon it in the early morning hours, 5 miles upstream in the middle of California's San Gabriel Wilderness. It looked like something the intrepid adventurers in *The Lord of the Rings* might have come across on their mystical journey: an ancient, weather-beaten bridge, perhaps the entryway to a long-forgotten city, gracefully spanning a deep, narrow gorge. No road led to it, no road led away.

As I stood there, mouth open, my friend Chris edged over, nudged me, and whispered, "And you wanted to turn around."

The day hadn't started well. Chris, who had said he'd been on this trail many times before, couldn't find the trailhead parking lot. To make matters worse, he hadn't brought a map. Now, understand that I'm a map freak, a person who spends as much time looking at a topo as I do the scenery around me. On backwoods and road trips, I secretly double-check the validity of Rand McNally and National Geographic maps.

In any case, when Chris suggested this trail, a wry hint of a smile on his face, he refused to tell Martin, Jason, and me what was so special about the place. "It's a surprise" was all he said, which didn't sit well with me. Like most map obsessives, I'm also compulsive about knowing exactly where I'm going, how long it'll take to get there, and what's waiting for me.

"Hey, it's not like you have to rush to catch the bus back to the city," Chris chided when we finally pulled into the parking lot. I grimaced at his reference to my hiking days in New York City. Back then, I'd catch a bus out of the inner-city Port Authority bus terminal and take the 2-hour ride to where the Appalachian Trail bisected one of the twisting country roads running through New York's Harriman State Park. The driver would let me off at the trail marker and I'd hike to where the AT crossed another road with bus service back to the city. Not only did I have to hike a certain distance in a 2-day period, I also had to be at my end destination at a specific time to catch the ride home. I'd obviously brought my rush-down-the-trail habit when I moved to California, and Chris was trying to rid me of it.

The hike in was relatively easy, though we spent too much time crossing and recrossing the same stream. I boulder-hopped for a while but eventually gave in and sloshed across like everyone else. The scenery was magnificent, but that's to be expected when you're in the Narrows of the East Fork, the steepest river gorge in southern California. Slanting rays of early morning light sliced through the golden alders and danced across the tumbling waters.

And I wanted to turn back. I was getting wetter and angrier with every step. My toes were cold and tingling. I started to complain.

Hiking has always filled me with both excitement and an unbelievable sense of calm. So why was I angry? Was it a classic case of map withdrawal? Anxiety over not knowing where the heck I was going?

While I was deep in personal psychoanalysis, the bridge came into view. I was, to use one of Chris's favorite sayings, "slack-jawed and awed." Then it hit me, a rare and fleeting moment of instant clarity in which I remembered the reason I'm drawn to the wilderness: It makes me feel like an explorer. In that instant, I got a small taste of the sense of discovery early explorers must have felt, when every day was a journey to a new unknown. And I realized that precious feeling had been overwhelmed all these years by my control-freak nature and map fixation.

Without saying a word, we all sat down and stared.

"So Chris," I finally whispered, knowing he was waiting for the question, "what's the deal with this bridge?"

He leaned back, getting as comfortable as one can on a rock, grinning like a Cheshire cat. "It's called the Bridge to Nowhere. Back in the 1930s, they tried to build a highway through the East Fork to connect the San Gabriel Valley with the desert," he said, motioning eastward over the mountains. "But the great flood of 1938 washed away all those plans and the highway, leaving only the bridge."

Chris paused, then added, "It rained steadily for 4 days."

The hair on the back of my neck stood on end as I looked from the bridge back to where the trail disappeared around a sharp curve behind us. The sound of the wind pulsing through the narrow gorge suddenly brought to mind the rush of water racing down the mountain, wiping out everything in its path. It was easy to imagine thunder echoing off the sheer walls as torrential rain pummeled trees already being whipped into a whirling-dervish frenzy. I felt as if I were at a sacred site where a great, ancient battle had been waged. And lost. And the bridge was all that remained. It stood alone, high above the water, a silent reminder that there is a dominant force, one that will not be subdued.

"Nature raised up and said, 'There will be no civilization here!'" Jason declared.

Then I remembered the strange, unnaturally smooth portions of the trail. "All that flat rock?"

Chris nodded. "What's left of the road."

I looked around, glad nature had won this battle. It made the land feel wilder, more remote, more powerful. In another 10 years, the remnants of the road will be gone, broken apart by roots and washed away by rain. Only the bridge will remain, a gateway to the great wilderness beyond and the secrets waiting there.

Chris cleared his throat. "I think this is the best hike we've been on all year." There were nods all around.

I leaned against a rock and pulled my hat down to protect my face from the sun, and to hide my immense grin. Nature had worked her magic, and all was right with the world.

"So," I asked as we stood to head back, "where are we going next week?" Then I smiled and quickly held up my hands to ward off the answer. "No," I said shaking my head, "surprise me."

By Susan Wolven

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