

# The Delights of the Dunes

Chumash treasures and Hollywood relics lie buried beneath these golden sands. BY CLAUDIA ARMANN



I AM TREKKING IN THE SHADOW OF THE West Coast's tallest beach dune, stopping periodically to empty the sand from my sneakers. My progress is slow but invigorating. Maybe I won't make it to the top of 450-foot Mussel Rock today. But the medley of sand dunes and fluid blue ocean is exquisite from where I stand now.

The Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes are full of color and complexity. Lupine bushes and sea rocket cling to the sand alongside silver-green dudleyas, petite look-alikes of the popular garden agave. In late winter, coreopsis—the sunflowers of the

coast—burst to life like a golden sunrise.

I turn back and see the pattern of my footprints leading from the Santa Maria River mouth where I started the walk. There are other footsteps too: the tracks of tiger beetles, crickets, coyotes and deer. Every trail across the wind-sculpted sand hints at a story of life in the dunes. But farther beneath the surface—unknownst to the casual hiker—is a brimming encyclopedia of tales waiting to emerge with the ruins of Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*.

Such is my excitement at these possi-

bilities that I return one week later with guide Leslie Mosson, who leads a hike into the dunes where DeMille filmed the silent classic. During the summer of 1923, 2,500 actors descended on Guadalupe to recreate ancient Egypt. In this serene setting it is hard to imagine Camp DeMille and its hospital, jazz band, dance hall and kitchen churning out 7,500 sandwiches and 400 gallons of coffee each day.

On today's hike, Leslie takes our group of 10 to the beach where DeMille filmed the parting of the Red Sea.

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"This scene was filmed at high noon because DeMille wanted to shoot without shadows," Leslie says.

The raccoon, Western pond turtle, moorhen and muskrat we see as we head across Oso Flaco Lake somehow lack the drama of the 200 camels and 3,300 farm animals that DeMille brought to the dunes.

Today there are no Israelites fleeing Egyptians, just a gathering of Western gulls and a sea otter afloat on the waves. But we can almost hear a crew member respectfully announce, "Ready when you are, C.B."

Other footage was shot a few miles south, where DeMille erected a 10-story-high backdrop of Pharaoh's City. The set—along with 21 five-ton sphinxes and other props—was buried in the sand when filming wrapped. Inspired by a clue in DeMille's autobiography, a group of movie buffs located the site in 1983. Archaeologist John Parker and documentary filmmaker Peter Brosnan surveyed the area in 1990 and are raising funds to excavate the sets.

The dunes have already yielded some artifacts—medicine bottles, costume fragments, tobacco tins—on display at the Dunes Center in Guadalupe. One find, the plaster face of a 12-foot lion, was uncovered by a boy playing in the dunes in 1993.

"If a thousand years from now, archaeologists happen to dig beneath the sands of Guadalupe," DeMille wrote, "I hope that they will not rush into print with the amazing news that Egyptian civilization, far from being confined to the valley of the Nile, extended all the way to the Pacific Coast of North America."

DeMille can rest assured that modern day archaeologists know that the legacy of the dunes began not with Egyptians but with the Chumash Indians. At the end of our hike, Mosson locates a Chumash site cradled in a dune hollow.

The Chumash, who inhabited the area as early as 8,000 years ago, feasted on shellfish and discarded their food scraps in shell piles

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called middens. The midden we find is a scattering of bleached white pismo clams.

It's amazing to ponder that ancient hands gathered these very shells from the ocean reef nearby. These trash heaps are treasures of the kind we tend to see only behind museum glass. But here on the dunes, I can sink my knees into the sand with my face inches from these shells that served as dinner centuries ago.

The first midden I ever discovered was at the base of Mussel Rock where the dune makes a final descent to the coast. That was years ago, on my birthday, when my husband and I slid on our derrieres down the steep but plush dune to the beach below. Scenery and history aside, the dunes exist for play and pleasure.

The cove was ours alone, fringed with an elegant profusion of calla lilies. I marveled to find domestic flowers thriving in a place so wild and remote. Perhaps they were part of my birthday wish, along with the delicate swallow nests on the cliff and the wave-carved arch that rose from the sand at water's edge. The silver seals on the reef a mile south and the city of sea lions on the rock island offshore were as enchanting as any birthday wish I can remember.

Whether the sphinxes and lions ever rise from the dunes, there will at least be swallows, wild strawberries and sea-scented air for those who don't mind sand in their shoes.

*To Get There:* From Santa Maria, drive west on Highway 166 (Main Street) to the free beach parking lot. The hike to Mussel Rock is five miles roundtrip. From the parking lot, walk south along the beach, then climb onto the dunes when you arrive at the first headland. There is no trail across the dunes, so you must blaze your own, taking care not to walk in vegetated areas. Or join a guided walk organized by the Dunes Center at 951 Guadalupe Street in Guadalupe; (805) 343-2455.

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