PART IV. WINTER TO SPRING SITES

SECTION II – KUMEYAAY EARTH, MOUNTAIN AND SKY

Introduction Followed by Site Directions/Descriptions

Life persists. This lesson manifests itself vividly in the tiny violet penstemon and mariposa and chuparosa that break through the desert sands of Anza-Borrego State Park. As Southern California's Yellowstone, the park attracts those who love both wildness and gentility. They come not for a glimpse of a bear or bison but the crimson-gloved appendages of ocotillo in bloom and the buttery teacups of prickly pear blossoms. Red, a sacred color to the Kumeyaay, no doubt made spring a special time when the rains

give bloom to the ocotillos and tinge the sunset scarlet.

Life persists not only in the dogged determination of beauty here, but in the resourcefulness of the Homo sapiens who drew food, water and inspiration from the desert's gifts.

Kuuchamaa, played a significant role as a spiritual leader of the Kumeyaay people. Emphasizing the principle of shared stewardship of the land rather that private ownership, he brought together bickering bands again and again, He lived on the south side of the mountain now called Tecate Peak (in San Diego County), designated as a sacred place where Kuuchamaa taught the shaman of the

Kuliway, Cahuilla, Cupeho, Quechan, Cocopa, Paipai, and Kiliwa. He continually fostered peace and cooperation among the tribes, revered as their sacred leader, foretold in prophecies. For more information about this history, visit the official website: https://www.kumeyaay.com/kuuchamaa-the-exalted-high-place-of-the-kumeyaay.html

Two of the Kumeyaay groups, the Northern Diegueno and the Kumeyaay, made the southern skirt of this desert their home for centuries. They baked agave, roasted pinyon nuts, boiled and ground acorns, planted squash and melon, and hunted rabbit, deer, antelope and bighorn sheep.

They stayed close not only to the earth but the sky, drawing a healthy diet and flexible shelter from the same plants we admire for their beauty, drawing meaning from the archetypal attributes of light.

They coaxed the seasons into existence—and simultaneously celebrated their arrival—at the solstice rock in the Fish Creek Mountains, where a pictograph seen through a hole in a cave in the light of summer solstice suddenly erupts in luminous color.

Traditionally, a Kumeyaay shaman would choose an elder to observe the sun in relation to specific geographical features, some of which also appear in the Viejas and Cowles mountains. Often a cross-shaped rock alignment and a bisected circle

absorbed the particular shadow that marked winter's transition. When winter solstice arrived, the new year began and with it, a renewed cycle of economic, social and community-related rituals. Equinoxes, as well, were measured by obscure pictographs illuminated only at the primal moment.

The summer solstice crept in by night, appearing as a gift on a summer morning. To the Kumeyaay, the three stars in Orion's Belt, depicted in sand paintings as three dots in a row, represented the Mountain Sheep. The Pleiades, known as the Hearts of the First People, took shape in sand paintings as four stars arranged in a box, with two ancillary stars angled beside them. At dawn on an early June morning, the

emergence of the Hearts of the First People signaled the approach of the solstice. By this time, Orion's Belt had vacated the morning sky.

Each day's solstice, from day to night, from storm to calm, from shadow to light, also spoke to the soul of the Kumeyaay and Northern Diegueno. The wind, clouds, thunder and rain took on dimension as spirits that spoke to humankind and assisted mortals in extracting a living from the land. These peoples also revered the forces of nature as sources of knowledge. The Diegueno creation myth includes a celebration in which the people built a brush enclosure and invited the great serpent Umai-huhlya-wit from the ocean to participate in their ceremony.

The serpent attended but could not fit inside the enclosure. On the third day, when he had coiled himself inside as tightly as possible, the people set fire to the brush and burned him. The serpent exploded, scattering his innate knowledge of customs, songs, ceremonies and languages over the land. In this way, the world's people acquired them.

Consider this legend not as a simplistic tale but, rather, a symbolic myth that praised the miracle of nature as a reflection of the divine and a source of learning for humanity. This philosophy colored the search for inner wisdom with meaning, just as the symbolic use of color expressed meaning in the outer

world. Find your own meaning in the red blossoms and sanguine skies of Kumeyaay country.

Blair Valley Pictographs

4 miles, easy

Directions: From San Diego, take Highway 8 east and turn north onto Highway 79. From Los Angeles, take any eastern freeway to the 15 south, then head southeast on Highway 79. Turn east on Highway 78 and south on S-2. After about six miles, watch carefully for a small Blair Valley sign on the east side of the road. Just north of the sign, the primitive road begins. Follow this one-lane in ten miles, watching for pot holes and signs that direct you to the pictograph trail. Note the signs for the shorter Mortero walk. Include it at the end of your hike, if time permits.

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Stone served hallowed purposes for the early desert dwellers of Anza-Borrego. Cleft by earthquakes, polished by erosion, painted and glossed by oxidization, stones gave presence to place. Human hands could touch it, move it, use it, but not break it. It served as a home for creatures of the underworld.

Given this "temple" status, rock walls proved worthy canvases for spiritual art, usually applied reverentially by the hands of a shaman. At least 50 rock art sites in Anza-Borrego tell the stories of several different tribes as they perceived the world in several different time periods. The San Luis Rey style developed only 200 years ago or less, along with the Chinigchinish religion. The religion came over from

San Clemente and Catalina islands and was adopted by the Luiseno, who taught it to the Kumeyaay, Cahuilla, and Northern Diegueno peoples. Toloache, or datura, induced hallucinations for the religionists seeking visions. Rites of passage played a major role in the religion, as did fasting, obedience and self-sacrifice. The rigidity of the religion, manifest in the San Luis Rey style of pictographs, accepted linear designs associated with certain rites that vary little in terms of creative expression.

A particularly accessible example of these pictographs exists at the border of the Northern Diegueno and Kumeyaay territories. It probably

originated from Northern Diegueno artists about 200 years ago.

The San Luis Rey pictographs in the small central area of Anza Borrego separate the western petroglyphs of the north and the La Rumorosa style of the south. The Western petroglyphs, typically bighorn sheep, abstract patterns, and anthropomorphs, date back as far as 4,000 years in the Great Basin, which supports the idea that the Cahuilla migrated into Anza-Borrego 1,000-1,500 years ago. However, some of the rock art here seems even older and may have originated from an earlier tribe.

The La Rumorosa style, associated with the Kumeyaay, dates back to 1500 A.D. Its

anthropomorphs, sunbursts, circles and abstract motifs, the most colorful and prolific in Anza Borrego and yet well tucked away in the desert, extend south as far as Baja and even beyond the Mexican border. This creative style indicates more freedom of expression than the predictable patterns of the San Luis Rey style, which reflect the more rigid structure of the religion from which it emanated.

This book's attention to the San Luis Rey example stems from its relative accessibility and the desire to encourage walkers to stay on designated trails to see those pictographs already approved for public viewing. Only this one site remains open to the public without special permission ever since a careless

camper lit a fire under a pictograph, totally demolishing it.

The route to the pictographs starts in Blair Valley, at the end of a 10-mile dirt road. Four-wheel drive, though not essential, makes the trek easier.

Dozens of cars take turns backing up on the one-lane road at any given time on a sunny spring weekend to see the modest Chinigchinish gallery. The trail begins in a rock garden littered with brittlebrush, yucca, ocotillo, cat claw, and cholla whose halos capture and sustain the wan afternoon light. The scent of creosote cleanses the air and the mind. The pinyon trees, namesake of these

mountains, break the gray of the boulder fields with evergreen sprigs.

Study the rocks on your right in the early part of the trail. Several formations suggest yoni, fertility rocks incorporating natural lines, shapes or crevices and sometimes a hand-drawn emphasis on womb-like qualities. Not all such rocks were blessed by the shamans, or the yoni would lose their sacred value. As recently as 1930, the elders could remember many infertile couples going to a yoni with a shaman to complete a rite that would ensure pregnancy. Other rocks along this trail suggest solar calendars and other symbolic uses.

The pictographs appear on the east side of the trail, one mile in. Natural pigments have kept them intact, even though they have sustained some smoke damage from campfires.

The patterns probably relate to the girls' initiation ceremony. (Boys' initiation ceremony pictographs generally remain hidden from public eyes.) The chain or rattlesnake design represents a messenger from the Chinigchinish god, who sometimes came to punish the disobedient. The sunburst, a common symbol in La Rumorosa style pictographs as well, probably indicated the importance of the sun in daily activities and rituals. The break in this particular sunburst may or may not indicate an eclipse.

Those who turn back after viewing the pictographs miss a rare meditation opportunity. Walk about another mile to where the trail dead-ends at a cleft in the timeless rocks. This U- shaped perch overlooks a wash and the panoramic view of the Vallecito Mountains.

Unless you've brought along vocal birders studying the wash, a primordial silence will welcome you, and you'll relish this portal as a high point of the day. No doubt the spot proved inspirational to the shamans, who may have seen it as a magnified passage into the spirit world.

Indulge in your own passage to another realm before returning to the trail, to a perhaps less tranquil definition of reality.

Squaw Pond & Desert Overlook

Squaw Pond and Desert Overlook - 1 1/2 - 2 miles round trip, easy to moderate

Desert Overlook - 1 mile, moderate

Directions: From San Diego, take Highway 8 east and turn north onto Highway 79. From Los Angeles, take any eastern freeway to the 15 south, then head southeast on Highway 79. From the 79, turn east on Highway 78 and south on S-2. Look for Agua Caliente County Park after about 15 miles. This hike may not justify the drive in midday, so call ahead for camping rates, and make a night of it. Look for the trailhead just northwest of the camper registration station.

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The sky gives birth to a progeny of stars a million strong. Human eyes lift to worship their mystery. Human hands mimic creation, rustling small campfires to life to reflect back only a feeble strain of that celestial light.

A walk up the Desert Overlook Trail at Agua Caliente County Park showcases night falling on the campground where soft voices, hands, eyes and stars all replicate an age-old pattern. Kumeyaay villagers once nestled near the natural hot springs that serve as the centerpiece of the current campground, protected by a fortress wall of shallow hills on three sides and a desert plain on the fourth.

Those who can navigate the trail's few rough spots in dimming light will find peace with historic ritual here.

Begin before sunset on the trail's lower stretch, forking right to Squaw Pond. A walk down its mesquite-cloaked path may startle quail, rabbits and other creatures into flight. You may catch an oriole or some other illustrious bird in song. The sandy desert wash makes for good tracking and easy walking.

Watch for a mortero in the middle of the wide trail. Squaw Pond, actually just a seep or damp spot, feeds a lush plant community, which may have served as a pantry for tribal people who collected the plants there and ground them in the mortero, an early version of the Cuisinart.

The trail varies little beyond this point, so turn at any time and walk back up to the fork, where a right turn and a quarter mile walk will lead you to the Desert Overlook views described above. Turn from the campground scene to meditate on the western hills. Smell the cool of creosote, mesquite, and pinyon at the descent of dusk. As you watch the sunlight lick the cholla and red-tipped ocotillo for the last time and descend back down the trail, linger on flat ground, away from camp, to watch the million stars burn cupules in the sky. Be grateful for the show, and enjoy the first-hand knowledge that nothing denudes the night sky like a clean, vast desert.

Moonlight Overlook Trail

1/5 mile loop, easy to moderate

Directions: From San Diego, take Highway 8 east and turn north onto Highway 79. From Los Angeles, take any eastern freeway to the 15 south, then head southeast on Highway 79. From the 79, turn east on Highway 78 and south on S-2. Look for Agua Caliente County Park after about 15 miles. Pay the $2.00 day use fee or call ahead for camping rates to take advantage of morning and evening light and cooler temperatures. Look for the trailhead across from campsite #33, next to campsite #140.

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Moonlight, firstlight, dusklight—you name it. The Moonlight Overlook Trail, seen in any light, illuminates the soul. It rises out of the hot springs basin that once served the Kumeyaay people and now serves locals and campers spoiled by its modern enclosure.

At dawn, a chorus of quail and mourning doves and whispering bushtits will accompany you up to a sandy meditation site on the right side of the trail, overlooking the wash. Seen with the inverted red umbrellas of ocotillos in bloom, the walls that hide the campground, the yucca and mesquite and the swall of early morning shadows, this sandy site becomes a spiritual haven.

Continue on the white path, watching for cupules (small holes carved in a pattern in the rock) and larger holes probably used for storage. Large grinding rocks are also strategically placed along the trail.

Nature's prolific streak of imagination blossoms in the cactus garden that follows. Barrel cactus, prickly pear, beaver tail, and groves of cholla—several species—decorate the field to the left. When captured in bloom, they look so perfectly planned that you'll feel guilty not having paid a trailhead admission.

The trail drops into a sandy wash, which winds along walls of striated rock upended so that one side stands vertically and the other horizontally, in a

remarkable manifestation of earthquakes long past. The seismic activity that created the Tierra Blanca Mountains ripped this fault line through the park, creating a pathway for water to come to the surface and form the park's natural springs. In addition to feeding the campground's two mineral water pools, the springs show up in seeping water farther in on the Moonlight Overlook trail.

Before you reach the evidence of the springs (wet ground under your feet), look for a chasm in the rock on the right side of the trail. An enclave with a sandy pedestal rimmed by tall rock walls suggests private introspection for a thinker, whether sculpted by Michelangelo or practiced by a Kumeyaay

shaman. One impression in the rock, viewed from a few feet back, frames a faint anthropomorph, apparently a natural white etching reinforced by human hands. The indigenous people believed that spirits entered and exited the earthly plane through caves and holes in the rock. This spot would have provided several natural pathways for such supernatural travelers.

Anza-Borrego's formations generated many mansions for those spirits who lived in the rocks. Watch for peculiarities in the stones of the distant cliffs after you pass through the lush spring and walk out onto the open flats, looking toward the ridge on your right for views of possible sweat lodges and

solstice rocks. Rock cairn arrows on the wide path point out interesting features. Circles of rocks found in the wash may indicate foundations for home sites or may have served other symbolic purposes. Archeologists have not yet agreed on their significance. Indigenous peoples, like any others, must struggle through conflicts over nuances of cultural difference between families and nations and customary principals for organizing sustainable societies. The California peoples found paths to diplomacy with one another over long periods through spiritual teachers such as those the Kumeyaay, who spread the message of peace and shared stewardship among neighbors such as the

Cahuilla, thus sharing the beauty of these sanctuaries.

Thinking of this example is not exoticism but mere evaluation of history. Think of it as you pass beyond the cairns, where the trail bends and vast fields of ocotillo garnish the lush spate from here to the campground, where mesquite once again becomes the dominant plant feature. The loop ends at the caravan side of camp, near campsite 63. Veer left, and wend your way back to the park entrance.

Hike this trail at the threshold of day or evening. If you manage to find solitude here, you will assuredly find its soulmate, mysticism.