



COWBOY UP!

The Backyard Adventurer

by Chelley Kitzmiller

ACTON, CA—For 18 years, I've been driving Highway 14 back and forth between L.A. and Tehachapi. I've always wondered about those roads weaving through the foothills. Where do they go? From the freeway they just seem to disappear.

Yep, I'm one of those curious souls who want to know what's on the other side of the mountain, but have never had time to find out. One day I decided 18 years of not knowing what was in my own backyard was long enough.

I enlisted two other curious souls, Nancy Anderson and Lauraine Snelling, and at 9 AM, off we went to tour Acton. You would have thought we were going on safari; we wore our "sturdy" shoes, and took our cameras and bottles of ice water in a cooler.

A nature call took us off Highway 14 at Santiago Road. We considered the gas station and the fast-food restaurant, and THEN...we spied an antique shop and told nature she would have to wait. Eager for any chance to add a new treasure to our collections, the three of us made a bee-line for the Posh Pomegranate, an antique mall with 35 dealers. From the outside the store looked small, but once inside we were pleasantly surprised at the size, the stock, and the reasonable prices. We spent a good hour looking at the merchandise, and spent a good amount of money before leaving.

Getting back on Santiago Road, we crossed the freeway and began meandering through the residential section. Unlike the flat terrain of Lancaster and Palmdale, Acton is gentle rolling hills, so the roads climb, dip, curve, and wind. We saw everything from modest ranch homes to palatial estates. Few properties were under 1/2 acre, and most were considerably larger. It is definitely a community geared toward horse lovers. One notable thing was the fencing. Almost every home sported white vinyl fencing, which gave the residential area a feeling of continuity. The drive reminded me of the Sunday drives my parents insisted I accompany them on. Funny how I hated it then...and love it now.

We turned onto Aliso Canyon Road, a two-lane road that disappears into the foothills. The residences thinned out and gave way to juniper and manzanita. A lone orchard on the left preceded the sign for Blum Ranch, whose history dates back over 100 years. Swiss immigrants, George and Magdalena Gruetman, were married in 1889 in Chicago. The couple settled for a while in Los Angeles, and then set out by train to find a place to keep bees, farm, and raise a family. George debarked the train in Acton and filed homestead papers in 1911.

Today, the Blum Ranch has approximately sixty planted acres: 1000 pear trees, 5500 peach trees, (3000 of those Blum's Beauty), and 3 acres of lilacs. They grow four varieties of freestone peaches and Bartlett pears. Honey and almonds are available all year.

After a short visit, we continued on Aliso Canyon Road for several miles, and pulled into a turn-out near a sign that let us know we were in the Angeles National Forest. I took pictures of the valley below and was surprised to see just how high we had climbed. There wasn't another car in sight; it seemed we were all alone on a lonely little-used road. "There's nothing out here," Nancy said, hinting that she wanted to turn around. I begged her to go a little farther. I couldn't bear the thought of not knowing where the road ended. We had come so far.

Aliso Road intersects with what is known as Angeles Forest Highway, also known as County Road N-3, FH-59, and the Palmdale cut-off. (A lot of names for one road, if you ask me.) If you turn left, it's 13 miles to Palmdale. If you turn right, you'll wind up on the Angeles Crest Highway heading for the Los Angeles basin. But that's a whole other backward adventure. "Ok, you can turn around," I said, my curiosity satisfied.

In need of a map to find the various sites I had dug up on the Internet, we found our way to Acton's hub, an Old West, false-fronted shopping center on Smith Ave.. The people at the Century 21 office there were only too happy to give us one for free.

Lauraine, our mapper, guided us to the Shambala Preserve, owned by actress Tippi (The Birds) Hedren, which houses rescued African lions, Bengal and Siberian tigers, black leopards, servals, a cheetah, a jungle cat, snow leopards, mountain lions, a Florida panther and an African elephant. The preserve is located in a deep ravine between the Soledad Canyon Road and Highway 14. Not having reservations, we didn't go into the preserve, (but have put our names on the list to visit in the future).

Our search for Acton's historical sites took us to the old Soledad school house located at the end of Cory Ave. Built in 1890 and now a private residence, it looked to be in a state of renovation. We couldn't find the "Little White School" mentioned on the Internet site. Next stop was the "'49er Saloon" which was opened in 1889 by Gustav Kruger. Unable to find directions to the '49er, we asked a local who pointed us back to the shopping center area. We found the restaurant on the back side, and discovered it had a new name, "Sutter's Mill".

We felt right at home in the Old West interior. Antiques covered the walls and shotguns hung above the old stone fireplace. Saloon chairs sat in front of wooden tables set with a kaleidoscope of cloth napkins. We ordered iced tea and cooled off while we sat and talked.

Back onto Highway 14, we headed for Barnyard Antiques, which has only been open once in all the times I have stopped there over the years in spite of the posted hours: Wed.-Sat. 10 AM to 5 PM. We drooled at the acre and a half assortment of Old West collectibles: wagons, carriages, fiberglass animals, wagon wheels, iron yard ornaments, etc. If you're really interested in seeing the merchandise, I recommend you call and make sure they're open(!)

Heading toward home on Sierra Highway, we turned onto Mountain Springs Road and made our way to the Peaceful Valley Donkey Rescue. Again, you should call before you go, and Mark or Amy, his wife, will be happy to show you around. This was the highlight

of the tour and worth the 3 miles of dirt road to get there. At the entrance a sign reads, "Peaceful Valley Donkey Rescue. The Ass You Save Could Be Your Own". After calming our laughter and taking pictures of the sign, we drove up the side of the rescue.

There were donkeys everywhere, all colors, all sizes, and all physical conditions. Mark introduced us to Binny, who had a touchy-feely kind of personality and followed us everywhere, content to be near you. Mark gave his little histories of a number of the donkeys, and we found ourselves tearing up at the abuse and neglect so many of them had suffered.

"All the mares we rescue are pregnant," he said, taking us to another corral where there were several adorable newborns. Most of the moms were wild and scared of us, but the babies were extremely lovable and touchable.

Mark is an amazing man who devotes himself and his whole family to the welfare of donkeys. He and Amy follow-up leads of donkey abuse and neglect, going to the owner and offering to buy the donkey from them to save the abuser face. The Peaceful Valley Donkey Rescue is a non-profit organization, so please, if you visit, leave a donation. The donkeys are available for adoption with a fee, and after a thorough investigation into your facilities and circumstances. Donkeys make excellent companions for lonely horses. They also make wonderful pets. I know because I have two.

By this time we had worked up an appetite and decided we would make a food stop. I had always been intrigued by that collection of old railroad cabooses near the Pearblossom Highway exit, but had never visited the "Vincent Hill Station" restaurant. Before going in, we walked around the back to look at the half-dozen or so cabooses, wishing we had just one to use for either an office or a guesthouse.

The front of the restaurant resembles an old train station, complete with a length of track on which sits a railroad cart. A stone fireplace welcomes visitors to a richly decorated interior. Tables are set with white linen tablecloths and napkins. Nancy and I ordered Scallone at \$17.95. Scallone is made of thin patties of scallops and abalone, sautéed and served with lemon butter and a special brown sauce. It was out of this world. Lauraine ordered their Ribeye steak special with brown sauce and said, "It's almost as good as a Midwest steak," which translated meant that it was really good. Entrees ranged from \$13.95 to \$26.95. Children 12 and under have a choice of three meals for \$7.95.



On the drive home to Tehachapi, we talked about what we'd seen, what we hadn't seen, namely Shambala, and decided that for all its small size, Acton has a variety of interesting things to see and do. We arrived home at 9:30 PM. Acton was a 12 1/2-hour tour!

If you decide to go..

GETTING THERE: To begin your day tour as we did, take Hwy. 58 East, through Mojave to Hwy 14, and exit at Santiago Road. Turn right and go to the Santiago Square.

PLACES TO VISIT: Post Pomegranate (Antiques) 33315 Santiago Road, Santiago Square (661) 269-1720 Open Daily

Barnyard Antiques 3534 Sierra Highway (661) 269-5267 www.barnyardwagons.com Hours: Wed. - Sat. 10 AM. - 5 PM.

Blum Ranch: 31880 Aliso Canyon Road. (Off Santiago Road) Peaches, pears, and apples are available now through mid-October. Honey and almonds available all year. Ranch hours: 8 AM. to 6 PM. For more information: (661) 947-2796 www.cityofacton.org/blum/htm

Peaceful Valley Donkey Rescue 34515 Peaceful Valley Road (661) 273-0402 www.donkeyrescue.org

Shambala Preserve 6867 Soledad Canyon Road (661) 268-0380 Guided tours one weekend a month. 3 hours. Overnight experiences—May through Oct. www.shambala.org/safari2.htm

DINING: Sutter's Mill 31908 Crown Valley Road (661) 269-1360 Lunch, dinner, cocktails, entertainment Open Mon-Sat 11:30 AM. Sunday Brunch 9:30 AM.

Vincent Hill Station Restaurant & Saloon 553 West Sierra Highway (661) 272-4799



Acton School House privately owned & under renovation