

It's easy to fall for Dunsmuir

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PUBLISHED: SUNDAY, SEP. 21, 2014 - 12:00 AM



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Mossbrae Falls is one of the most beautiful waterfalls in California. Access is currently restricted due to unsafe access.

DUNSMUIR – The train is bearing down on me. I hear its piercing

whistle, feel its rumble, before I ever see it, of course.

I am stuck on the tracks. Specifically, I have just started crossing the final narrow bridge back from the trek along the Union Pacific railroad tracks that's the only way – and, these days, an illegal way – to get to the sublime Mossbrae Falls.

I am not panicking. Yet.



Thing is, I'm banking on completing the 2.4-mile out-and-back trip to ogle this gorgeous waterfall, off-limits for several years now because of safety concerns, without either getting a ticket, my car towed or my corpus flattened. I am only 30 feet, 40 tops, from safety – the intersection with Scarlett Way, where my car awaits. I'm so close that I can see the front fender. But I also see that the train, pulling so many cars it stretches beyond my vision, will reach the bridge before I finish crossing. There is, maybe, a foot of sloping gravel between the tracks in

front of me heading over the bridge and a fence that leads to a deep

ravine.

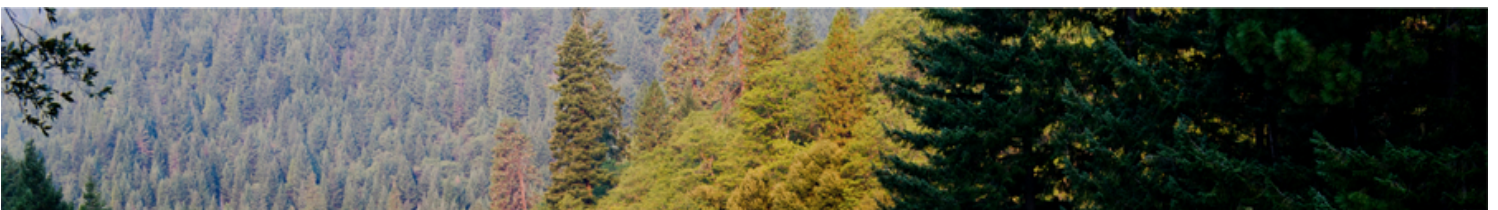
I am, essentially, engaged in a game of chicken with the train.

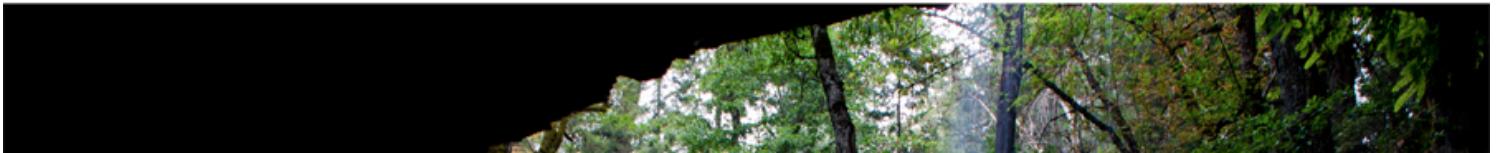
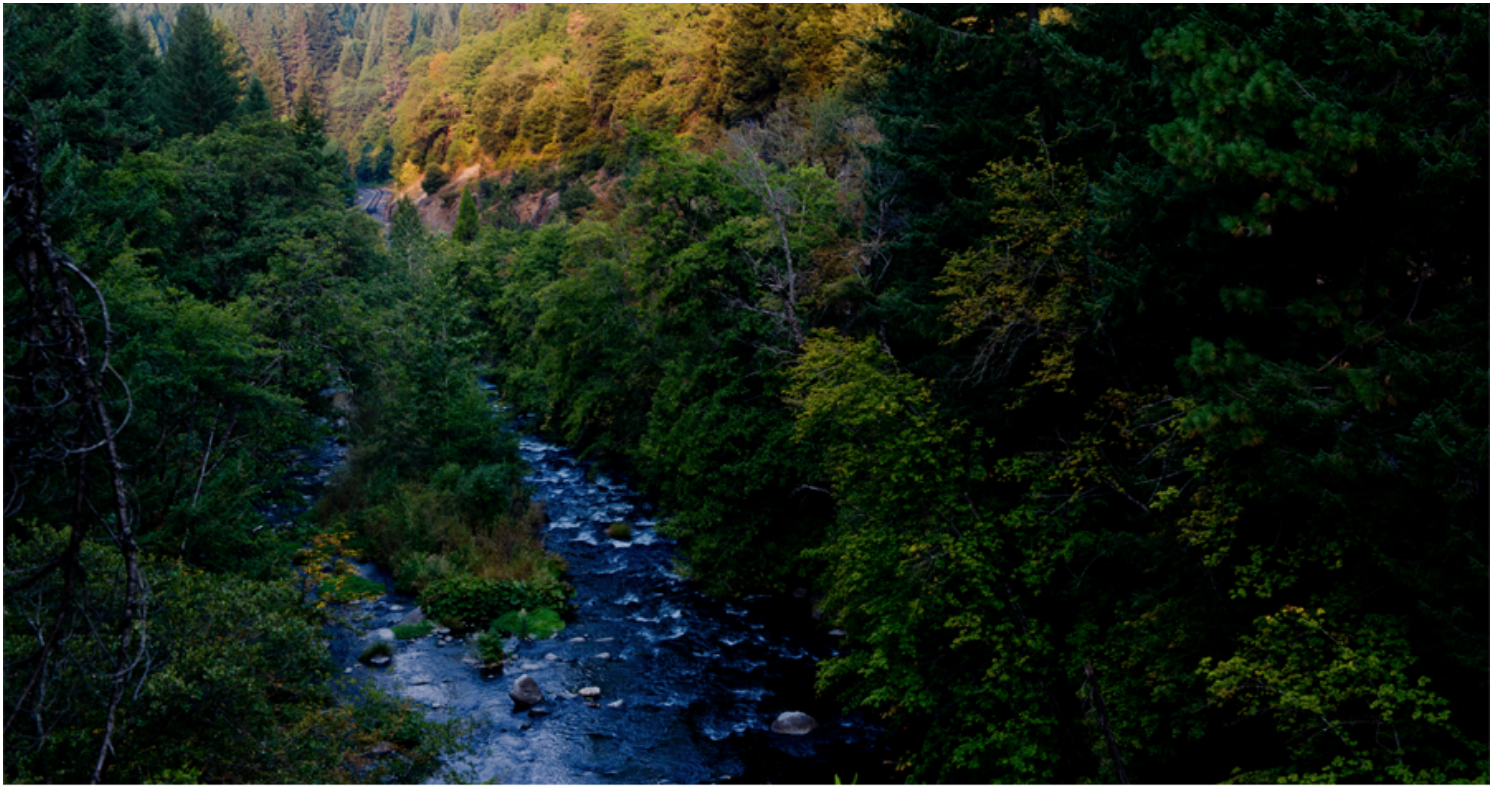
Could I dash across, hugging the fence line and hoping for the best? I mean, the train's only moving at about 20 mph; I could do this, right? Then again, it's a long way to jump if my spatial calculations should prove unreliable. Indecision dogs me. He who hesitates is ... oh, never mind.

Two long, visceral blasts of its horn decide for me. I hasten a retreat, duck back down to the shoulder about 3 feet from the tracks, find a stump to rest upon and spend the next five minutes watching wheels grind and boxcars sway creakily.

It's the Union Pacific, number 5681, in bright yellow with a unfurling flag and the slogan "Building America" emblazoned on the side, making its morning run to the north. Boxcars roll by, most graffiti-tagged, but the coal-black oil cars remain unscathed. Crouched in my hovel, I ponder train-hoppers who think nothing of running and jumping onto moving behemoths like this. I, however, learn I'm not cut out for the hobo life. I give the train a wide berth, much respect.

Once back at my car, unticketed and unscathed, I reflect that this was the perfect way to end a weekend getaway to Dunsmuir, an old railroad town steeped in history.







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Sights along the Hedge Creek Fall trail.

I'm not expressly advocating breaking Civil Code 10.04.010, which prohibits people from parking near the tracks and walking parallel to the tracks to get to Mossbrae Falls. But, c'mon, nearly every local I encountered in town has done it at least once. That includes City Manager Brenda Bains, whom I called to get the low-down on why the "trail" is closed and the timetable for a proposed new trail to be blazed on the river's east bank, away from the tracks.



MOSSBRAE FALLS

“Oh, isn’t it something?” she said of the falls, 50 feet high and 100 feet wide and seemingly emerging from the hillside before settling into the Sacramento River. “I did that (illegal hike) myself, only because I had to become familiar with it. Of course, I also had to swim in it, too. Just to become familiar with it, of course.”

The city and the nonprofit Mount Shasta Trail Association have received grants, as well as a donation from Union Pacific, to move forward and build a trail that does not include walking on tracks. But 5 acres of the land is owned by the St. Germain Foundation, a religious organization, and so far St. Germain has not agreed to sell, Bains said. St. Germain general manager Barbara Schrock did not return phone calls.

Lack of access to Mossbrae Falls – “one of the most memorable waterfalls you will see in California,” according to “The Waterfall

Lover's Guide,” by Matt and Krissi Danielsson – should not dissuade you from making a stop in this town of 1,650 a few miles south of Mount Shasta.



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Trains have defined and shaped Dunsmuir's history. The town still serves as a major thoroughfare for freight and passenger trains.

Dunsmuir's highlights are many. In fact, I was mentally compiling a checklist as I sat and watched the Union Pacific pass:

- Its history as a railroad town, which includes a museum at the Amtrak station, vintage boxcars placed around town as other cities would erect statues, and the thoroughly retro-charming Railroad Park Resort, where you can sleep in a caboose

and dine in a Pullman car.

- Its status as a Northern California fly-fishing mecca in summer and, especially, fall along the banks of the upper Sacramento and the nearby McCloud rivers.



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Flags decorate the train station.

- Its inviting, if small, downtown, which has retained much of its look in the 1920s and '30s, when this was a major tourist stop because of the railroad and cars in pre-Interstate 5 days.

- Its resistance to chain fast-food restaurants and budget corporate hotels, and its insistence that the 13 dining establishments be family-owned.



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A statue pays homage to the train's importance in Dunsmuir.

- Its pride in boasting about having the “cleanest water in the world,” coming from Shasta’s snow melt and its quaint idea of keeping a water fountain running continuously downtown.

- Its strategic location between two peak experiences for climbers, hikers and campers – Mount Shasta and Castle Crags State Park.

- And its falls, the aforementioned Mossbrae and the easily accessible

Hedge Creek Falls, a quarter-mile woodsy hike down to a 30-foot waterfall that literally is right off the freeway.

But the re-opening of Mossbrae Falls certainly would enhance Dunsmuir's chances when competing for the tourist dollar.

Anyone who traversed the 1.2 miles of train tracks – in sturdy shoes; those rocks are sharp – and clambered down a steep, tree-studded ravine would have found a lush tropical locale. Water flows, some place in a thin stream, others in a torrent, from a hillside covered year-round in moss and other verdant foliage. It settles in a pool in the Sacramento River. From the west side, on a sand bar, it's an easy wade out to partake in nature's shower. Locals say fall is a pretty time to visit, because the leaves are turning and the flow, though diminished somewhat so late in the year, never dries up because the falls serve as an outlet for an underground aquifer. Word in town is that former President George H.W. Bush made the Mossbrae pilgrimage once.

But, caveat emptor: You risk as much as a \$300 fine and having your car towed by the Siskiyou County Sheriff's Department. Then there's the very real train risk. In November 2011, a woman hiking along the tracks to the falls with her husband and two children was struck by a train and suffered major head injuries.



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The Railroad Park Resort offers rooms which are converted train cabooses.

In Dunsmuir, though, trains are something to be celebrated, not feared.

One recent weekend, the Railroad Park Resort, one freeway exit south of downtown, was booked with tourists either steeped in railroad lore or just looking for off-beat sleeping accommodations. Railroad buffs cherish the chance to explore the cab of a rare 1927 Willamette Shay steam engine. But what draws most visitors are the rooms fashioned out of old Southern Pacific, Santa Fe, Great Northern or Erie cabooses that encircle the tree-studded property, near Little Castle Creek and dwarfed by the jutting spires of Castle Crag.

A pool and hot tub is a nod to modernity, but the site really does feel as if you've chosen to hole up in a railroad yard for the night.

The modern conveniences are there inside the caboose – queen bed, mini-fridge, closet and bathroom with shower – but you feel cocooned within the varnished wooden walls and low ceiling, with iron braces hanging down, on which passengers of yore clung during rocky rides. The upstairs berth allows for a fine view of the crags beyond.

“It’s something unusual,” said guest Jennifer Gonzalez, of Oroville, staying with husband Jeremiah. “It’s our anniversary, and we looked up unusual places in California, and we wound up here. The rooms are a lot nicer than I expected. I especially like that little perch at the top. You can go up there and drink coffee. The view is really great with those peaks, the dark against the gray rock, is unbelievable.”

“It’s good enough,” Jeremiah added, “to bring our kids back someday.”

Children today, even with more sophisticated means of travel available, still seem drawn to old-time locomotives.

“I do love trains,” said Ben Gripman, 11, from El Cerrito, staying with mom Jen and dad Stewart. “I hit my really big train phase when I was 8. But this is still fun.”

His parents relented. And they were won over once they actually bedded down in their caboose.

“I thought we’d be cramped,” Jen said. “But it’s totally OK for three.”



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Railroad Park Resort in Dunsmuir features train cars that have been converted into motel rooms. A caboose suite includes a mini-fridge. There's also a pool and hot tub at the offbeat site.

After eating breakfast at a picnic table across from their caboose and before exploring Castle Crag, Zac Held and Jaime Lau, parents of two toddlers from Los Altos, let the kids frolic. They kicked a ball between cabooses, eyed the pool.

“It’s a pretty cute place to have,” Zac said. “It’s an attraction for old men and little kids. It’s a strange mix. You see kids running around and train enthusiasts, too. It’s funny how that age range is, like, 2 to 70s.”

This cabal of cabooses was built in 1968 by Dunsmuir natives Bill and Delberta Murphy, whose parents worked for the railroad in the boomtown days.

“They brought in three (caboosees) at first and just kept adding when it caught on,” said Dottie Nelson, park manager. “Boy, do we ever get our share of (avid) railroaders. They’ll come up to me checking in and say, ‘My dad used to do this,’ or ‘My grandpa worked for Southern Pacific.’ It’s fun to hear the old stories.”

More than a few cars parked in front of caboosees had fly rods on hoods or sticking out of windows.



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Dunsmuir is a major destination for fly fishing. Redding resident Jerry Rainock makes his way to the Sacramento River to fish for trout.

Dunsmuir is almost as well known for fishing as the railroad. One of the busiest places downtown in summer is the Ted Fay Fly Shop, where

anglers get supplies and advice for thigh-deep forays on the upper Sacramento River.

Ted has passed on – there’s a photo of Fay, inventor of the two-fly system, above the checkout counter – but current owner Bob Grace has carried on the tradition of pointing fly fishermen and women in the right direction. Even during these days of drought, with the



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Although the water levels are low due to the drought, the river is still an excellent place to fish.

river calf-, not thigh-, deep, “there’s still a lot that’s fishable,” he said, along the river from Box Canyon at Mount Shasta down to Pollard Flat and Shasta Lake.

“Dunsmuir’s a favorite jump-off spot for (the) McCloud (River), too,” Grace said. “The prime seasons are June and October. A lot of that has to do with weather. June, the insects are very active. In the fall, the reverse is the case. The water’s getting colder now, and the days are getting shorter. It’s the mechanisms of survival that force the fish to be a little greedier. And the weather’s spectacular in October. I love this river. It’s 37 miles of public water. A real treasure.”

Dunsmuir depends on tourism, be it from anglers, railroaders or motorists seeking a respite from I-5. Like other north-state towns, it has its share of empty storefronts. But, for the most part, the city has weathered the volatile economic times better than most.



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The California Theater, first opened in 1926, shows vintage movies during the week.

The historic California Theater (1926) has reopened and, this past summer, started showing “vintage” movies at \$2 a head. Breakfast spots such as the Cornerstone Bakery (in the historic downtown) and Yaks on the 5 (near Hedge Creek Falls) are crowded even on weekdays.

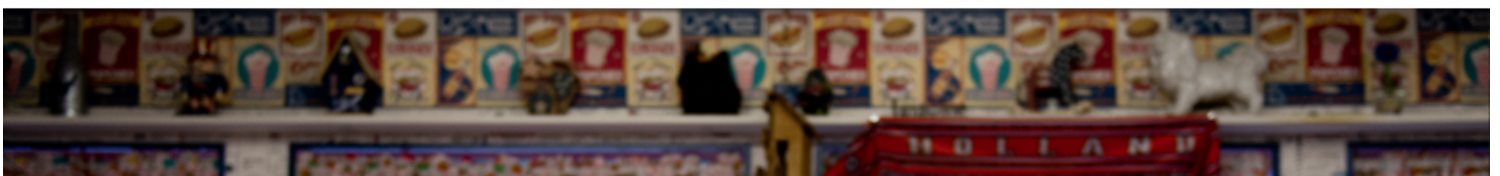
The dinner options are surprisingly varied, both in price and ambition. You can settle into classic comfort food at the Dogwood Diner, go high-end with Italian and Southern France cuisine at Cafe Maddelena or find Vietnamese offerings at Sengthong.

One traditional stopping place for many travelers is the homely, down-

scale Burger Barn, a fixture since the 1970s, where the walls are decorated with photos of locals holding up prize trout.

How popular is the Burger Barn? Constance Scott, of Berkeley, was driving back home on I-5 and, as is her custom, planned to stop at Burger Barn for lunch.

She and her companion got there early, though, well before its 10:30 a.m. opening. Instead of driving on, Scott stuck around so she could get her burger. She almost – almost – had enough time to make the trek to Mossbrae Falls, if she dared.





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The Burger Barn is an institution among locals and Interstate 5 travelers, with multiple generations stopping by for a bite. Its walls are decorated with photos of locals holding up prize trout.

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