

Almaden Lake Park and Los Alamitos Creek Trail

Gail Todd

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Los Alamitos Creek in San Jose looks gentle today, but it was often the scene of violent floods until the creek bed was widened in the 1970s. Today the 4.7-mile Los Alamitos Creek Trail winds peacefully along the creek, beginning at Almaden Lake Park, which is actually the creek's terminus. The lake itself was once a sandstone rock quarry, which produced the craters that then produced the lake bed. What was once a disfigured landscape is now open parkland.

The nearly 5-mile trail goes all the way to Santa Teresa County Park. This outing, however, only covers the first 2 miles and ends at the bridge at Camden Avenue.

The park

A beach in San Jose? Almaden Lake Park is the only sandy swimming beach in the South Bay. The 32-acre lake offers swimming, fishing and bird-watching opportunities. A wildlife island in the lake's center is home to herons and egrets. Canada geese and ducks swim in the waters. The 65-acre park surrounding the lake has large playgrounds, picnic facilities, horseshoe pits and bocce and volleyball courts.

The trail

This flat, paved trail leading from the park is perfect for easy hiking, cycling and roller skating. There is also a fitness course if you want more exercise. The trail is wheelchair accessible, and you can push a stroller on it. Bring water, as there are long stretches in full sunshine.

Beginning at the west parking lot, walk the path circling the lake, passing the swimming beach, some reserved picnic spots and lots of pepper trees. At the south end of the lake, you will see a bridge to your left. Cross it, turn right and you will be on the signed Los Alamitos Creek Trail. As you stroll, look at the broad creek on your right in a jumble of blackberry and fennel bushes. Hills to your left are covered with poppies, rock roses and wild mustard. Dirt equestrian trails split from the main road for brief distances, and you can take these if you tire of walking on asphalt. At times the path is shaded by eucalyptus and oak trees, and you will find picnic tables at strategic locations. Informational signs tell you about the creek's turbulent history.

As you approach Camden Avenue, look up the hillside at the large rocks that are remnants of a quarrying operation. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Graystone Quarry supplied sandstone from the Almaden Valley to much of the western United States, including the original buildings of Stanford



University. Continue across the scenic bridge, where you can sit on a bench, look at the creek and eat a picnic lunch. The trail continues for more than 2 additional miles, but this is a good place to turn around, walk back and perhaps have a quick swim in Almaden Lake.

Good to know

Almaden Lake Park is closed on Mondays. (The park will be open July 5.) Dogs are not permitted on the west side of the park as it is a wildlife sanctuary. They are permitted on the east side on leash. The swim area is open though Aug. 15 from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday, including the July Fourth weekend. It will also be open the last two weekends in August and the first weekend in September. A small fee (\$1-\$3) is charged for swimming. Boats are not allowed in the lake. Parking in the lots is \$6 when the attendant is on duty. However, street parking is available.

Getting there

From S.F., take Caltrain to Tamien Station. Transfer to the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority's No. 901 light-rail line toward Santa Teresa Station, and exit at the Ohlone/Chynoweth Station. The Almaden Shuttle (No. 900) goes from the Ohlone/Chynoweth Station to Almaden Station, close to the park. (408) 321-2300, www.vta.org. From the East Bay, take BART to Fremont and transfer to the VTA's No. 181 toward San Jose Diridon Station. Exit at Second and Santa Clara streets, and walk to Santa Clara Station. Board the VTA's No. 901 and continue as above.

By car from S.F., take Interstate 280 south to Highway 85 toward Gilroy. Exit at Almaden Expressway, taking a left at Plaza Way and a right onto Almaden Expressway. Continue to McAbee Road/Winfield Boulevard and make a U-turn. Parking in the west lot will be on your right. From the East Bay, take I-880 south, exiting onto Hwy. 101 south. Continue to I-280, then exit at Hwy. 87, drive to McAbee Road/Winfield Boulevard and make a U-turn. If you brought your dog, you will need to park in the east lot. From Almaden Expressway, turn left on Coleman Road, right on Winfield and then right into the east lot.

Urban Outings are presented by Greenbelt Alliance, the Bay Area's advocate for protecting open spaces and creating vibrant places. To suggest an Urban Outing, contact Gail Todd, tour leader for S.F. City Guides and author of "Lunchtime Walks in Downtown San Francisco." To find out more about Greenbelt Alliance's work, go to www.greenbelt.org.

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