

Bay Area Boomer :: Out and About

Finding Fresh Air | Kicking up some dust—and good conversation—in East Bay parks. | *By Mike Rosen-Molina*

Josephine Lee, 75, moved to El Cerrito from New Jersey 10 years ago and immediately fell in love with the area. The mild summers and warm winters were a big change from the East Coast extremes she was used to, and it made her want to spend all her time outside. So she joined the Over-the-Hills Gang—a group of hikers age 55 and over who explore city, county, and state parks around the East Bay.

“The region is so beautiful and there’s nothing like the parks in the East Bay,” she says. “I wanted to find a way to take advantage of the good outdoors weather.”

The Over-the-Hills Gang is just one of many hiking clubs in the East Bay. For older adults looking to enjoy the outdoors, group hiking is one of the most popular local pursuits. [Bayareaolderadults.com](#), a website devoted to cataloging recreational opportunities for adults over age 55, receives more requests for information on group walks than any other activity, according to founder Anne Ferguson of Sunnyvale. The East Bay Regional Park District is made up of 55 parks, and there are dozens of hiking clubs—from Tri-Valley Trekkers in Dublin to Mike’s Hikes in Pinole—dedicated to exploring them.

Besides the chance to enjoy fresh air and new sights, group hikes also provide good company. And while the groups welcome people of all ages, the hikes mostly appeal to adults over 50.

“People work and drive by these parks without ever really knowing what’s in there,” says Richard Guarienti, 75, of Dublin, founder of Tri-Valley Trekkers. “Most people are too busy with life—working,



New perspective: (top) Members of Mike’s Hikes in Las Trampas Regional Wilderness. (bottom) Members of Mike’s Hikes (leader Mike Branning points in the center) take in the view from Wildcat

raising a family, cooking, cleaning, going to soccer games—to notice. When people retire, they have more time to get out and explore. That’s when a lot of people start to see how we in the Bay Area are truly blessed with so much natural beauty.”

Guarienti started the Trekkers 11 years ago after he retired, and he made it his goal to visit every park in the East Bay Regional system. As a volunteer for the district, he often talked to older hikers he met on the trails, who asked him if he knew of any hiking groups they could join—either for safety or companionship.

Seeing a need, he posted notices at the local senior center in Dublin to start a hiking group.

“I looked at it as something that wasn’t being offered,” says Guarienti of his decision to start the trail group through the Dublin Senior Center. “We don’t all go in just to play bingo. We’re still active people. Today’s senior centers have younger people coming in. And this is a way to keep them young.”

After three months with few sign-ups, Guarienti started to think that the word “hike” put off older adults envisioning adventures into remote wilderness or along steep terrain. A name change to “Trekkers” immediately prompted 20 people to sign up. The group started with members from Dublin. Today, it pulls in people from as far away as Hayward and Walnut Creek.

As with the Trekkers, hiking groups for older adults are geared to people of all fitness levels. For instance, they generally avoid routes with tough climbs that would appeal to people interested in conquering summits but would turn off less ambitious hikers. Still, members expect to get good exercise.

One mile of hiking can burn up to 100 calories, depending on a person’s size and weight, according to the American Hiking Society. Hiking also offers all the health benefits of aerobic exercise, including strengthening the heart, improving circulation, and fighting hypertension and diabetes.

But people come mostly for the chance to get out into nature, see beautiful local scenery, make new friends, and enjoy the company of people with similar interests in the outdoors.

“[If you’re] quite shy, it’s easy to talk to fellow hikers as you walk along, enjoying nature at the same time,” says Mike Branning, 69, of Pinole. Branning hikes regularly with the Contra Costa Hills Club and also founded his own group, Mike’s Hikes, in 2005. He and a

Canyon Regional Park in Richmond. Photos courtesy Mike’s Hikes.



Ardenwood Historic Farm in Fremont. Photo by David Ball.

A grand day out

And if you find yourself home with the grandkids, there’s no need to stay indoors. The East Bay Regional Parks also are filled with many opportunities for older adults to enjoy time with their grandchildren.

One such place is the Ardenwood Historic Farm in Fremont, one of the most kid- and senior-friendly destinations in the entire East Bay parks systems, says Emily Hopkins, public information supervisor.

Originally founded by George Washington Patterson during the California Gold Rush, the farm was donated to the city of Fremont 1978; the East Bay parks district has operated the property as a fully functioning, turn-of-

group of 15 to 30 regulars hike every other Monday, ranging as far east as Round Valley Regional Preserve near Oakley and as far west as Mount Tamalpais in Marin County.

The Over-the-Hills Gang, led by Tilden Park supervising naturalist Dave Zuckermann, enjoys leisurely strolls through such parks as Redwood, Sibley, Briones, or Alvarado Park in Wildcat Canyon Regional Park. Zuckermann chooses routes that don't require participants to scramble over rocks or climb to the tops of ridges. To make the walks more interesting, he often chooses trails that have rich historical associations.

Zuckermann's favorite haunt is Point Pinole, where he can offer participants stellar views of San Pablo Bay, all the way to Angel Island on a clear day. This particular park is a good choice for Zuckermann's tours because its trails mostly follow along flat scrubby beach, with wide dirt paths winding through yellowed seagrass and occasional eucalyptus groves. But this quiet park has an unusual past: In the 1860s, gunpowder companies chose this isolated area to manufacture dynamite.

"It's a good balance between walking and talking," Zuckermann says. "People know I get excited about the history of the parks. Every park has a story like that. My job is to get them fired up and excited about those stories."

Hikers today still see reminders of the park's explosive past, both in the old dirt barricades erected in the 1860s to reduce the noise of dynamite blasts or in the rusting bits of railroad tracks still visible. Not even the iron skeletons remain of the old gunpowder factories themselves, but the wind-swept shoreline is laced with old tram pathways—now used by hikers and cyclists.

"It's a great opportunity to meet a really neat group of people," says Barbara Sacks, 70, of Hayward. Sacks is an Over-the-Hills gang regular who enjoys the group's visits to Point Pinole and Wildcat Creek. "Everyone moves at their own pace. No one feels like it's a race to see things as fast as possible."

Other popular hiking destinations, such as Tilden and Lake Chabot regional parks, offer other attractions, such as great opportunities for bird watching.

Ferguson of bayareaolderadults.com says Lake Chabot Regional Park is home to 40 species of birds. Last year, a nesting pair of bald eagles successfully hatched a chick. Local bird-watchers could see the nest from an observation point on the Columbine Trail, just below Lost Ridge group camp.

the-last-century farm since 1985. Today, the farm grows fruits and vegetables using farming techniques from the 19th century. Visitors can tour the farm's Victorian home, try their hand at farm chores, and learn what life was like in the early 1900s. The farm also has a petting zoo, with 20 new lambs joining the flock this spring.

But ultimately, what can be rewarding about these group hikes is that participants can enjoy them on their own terms. People in the Trail Trekkers often settle into distinct clusters as they stroll along, Guarienti says. The people who move into the front usually are interested in getting some exercise. Those in the middle come to drink in the scenery, pick flowers, or take photos. People taking up the rear come for camaraderie and conversation.

"You find the people who walk at the same pace are interested in the same things," says Guarienti. "It's about finding the place where you're comfortable."

People hike for three basic reasons, Guarienti says, to benefit the mind, body, and spirit.

"Hiking will help you learn more about your surroundings; it will increase your knowledge of trees, flowers, animals, and history," he says. "That helps the mind."

Hiking, of course, is great exercise, he adds. "Whole health is an issue for baby boomers, and you can see how park and trail use is exploding for this generation," he says. "Everyone wants to get out and do physical exercise now."

Finally, walking in nature, talking, and sharing the experience can be an emotionally and spiritually uplifting way to spend a few hours or a day.

"When [people] are enjoying one another's company, they don't realize how far they've walked," Guarienti says. "You become a bit like a family."

Mike Rosen-Molina is an East Bay writer and a longtime contributor to The Monthly.

TAKE A HIKE

Bay Area Orienteering Club, (650) 248-9595; baoc.org.

Berkeley Path Wanderers Association; berkeleypaths.org.

Contra Costa Hills Club; contracostahills.org.

East Bay Barefoot Hikers; unshod.org/ebbfhike.

Hayward Hiking Club; haywardhikers.weebly.com.

Montclair Hiking Club, (510) 482-7812;

montclairhikers.weebly.com.

Orinda Hiking Club, (925) 254-1465; orindahiking.org.

Over-the-Hills Gang, (888) 327-2757; ebparks.org/parks/tilden/tna.

Tri-Valley Trail Trekkers; (925) 829-8376;