

D I V E R S I O N S

Dancing on the Ceiling: Santa Cruz's Mystery Spot

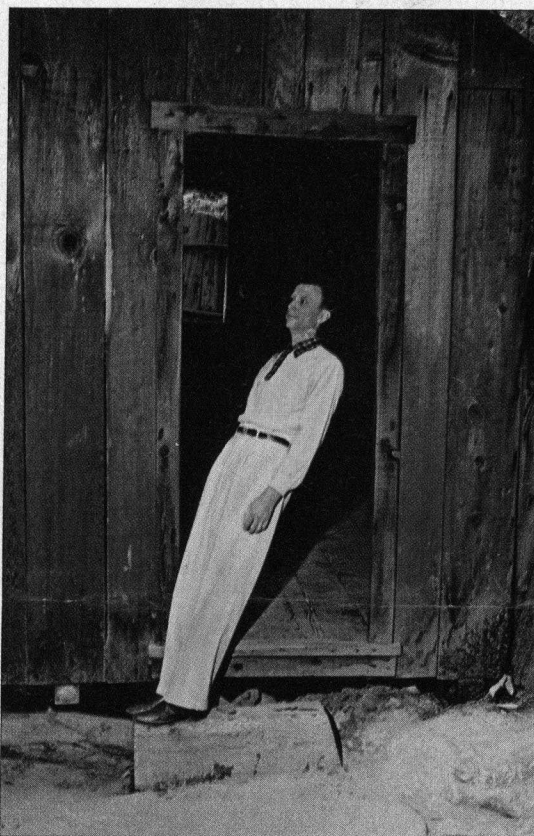
Before science began solving the mysteries of the universe, people who needed a fix of awesomeness could simply gaze up at the heavens or out at the horizon. But science has forced us to seek out new phenomena to boggle the mind. Hence the Bermuda Triangle. Images of the Holy Virgin on the sides of water tanks. Ring around the collar. And mystery spots.

The Santa Cruz Mystery Spot has been stupifying the masses since its discovery in 1940. What is a mystery spot? A spot where, as the brochure explains, "every law of gravitation has gone haywire." Why? No one knows. Some say a meteorite; others say clouds of carbon dioxide. If they knew, after all, it wouldn't be a mystery.

Like most roadside attractions, the Santa Cruz Mystery Spot has a guided tour. As my friends and I wait for the tour to begin, our guide, Alf, gives us a rundown of the spot's vital statistics: a 17,000-square-foot zone that's about 150 feet in diameter. In the artist's rendering on the signs it looks like your basic round, black spot—rather like the ones that appear on your shirt pocket when you forget to cap a felt-tipped pen.

Before we actually cross the "line of force," Alf spends a few minutes setting the mood. He calls our attention to a couple of crooked eucalyptus trees in the distance. "They're growing all screwy against the force," he explains. "When airplanes fly over, their gauges go all wacko. Birds fly in, and they fly right back out." A jay screeches above our heads, presumably letting out the initial scream of terror that precedes the retreat. "I've even seen squirrels jump from tree to tree and miss," Alf tells us solemnly.

Onward into the vortex. We make our way past the ominous "No smoking beyond this point" signs to a small wooden shack built into the side of a steep hill. Time for Mysterious Phenomenon Number One. Alf rolls a golf ball down a plank protruding from one of the shack's windows. The ball stops in mid-roll and heads back up. We are all dutifully mystified. All except Norm, a jovial sort in a porkpie hat, who leans over to me and confides, "I've seen Mr. Wizard do



The mystery spot: stupifying the masses since 1940.

that on television."

We step inside the shack, into the eye of the vortex. "Whoa man, trip me out," says a kid in a Surf It! T-shirt. As they say in the movies, something funny's going on in there. The original discoverers of the spot claimed it made them feel lightheaded or top-heavy. How about just plain nauseous? I begin to regret the three and a half Winchell's chocolate-covered donuts I'd thoroughly enjoyed just an hour before.

People wearing smooth-soled shoes are particularly susceptible to the influence of the force. Fortunately for me and my loafers, there are rubber safety runners along the floor. All the same, I decline to participate in Mysterious Phenomenon Number Two, which involves standing on a table that's in a corner inside the shack. I watch while a little girl in sure-grip Reeboks clambers up. She leans out away from the table at an alarming angle and smiles serenely, like a tiny figurehead without a ship.

Alf turns us loose to play with the other gravity-defying gewgaws inside the shack.

Chaos reigns. Kids are literally climbing the walls. An adolescent boy hangs from a pull-up bar, holding himself absolutely rigid at a 45-degree angle like an overnight gold medal gymnast. A frail, bespectacled woman wearing a blue hat grapples with a heavy steel pendulum, trying to push it against the force. Norm leans over to me as I take a turn at the pendulum. "I'm going to bring Mr. Wizard up here," he mutters. "He'll solve it."

After ten minutes of mayhem, Alf calls us out to the back porch for the "visible difference of height" demonstration. For some reason, the person who stands on the uphill side of what appears to be a level plank in the back yard looks markedly shorter than the person on the downhill side, no matter who starts out taller. I think I'm impressed, but I'm not sure. I was never any good at physics. My mind wanders, and I scan the treetops for errant squirrels. Norm is causing trouble; he wants to bring out the golf ball again and see which way it will roll.

The last demonstration over, we follow Alf down the hill and out of the zone. Just as the brochure describes it, we "stagger out to regain our sense of balance and perspective"—and to check

out the gift shop. I'm obviously not quite free of the force; the endless rows of Mystery Spot spoon rests and ashtrays in the shop overwhelm me. Will it be the Mystery Spot lipstick caddy or a Mystery Spot shot glass? The mind reels.

By the way, you're welcome to try to solve the mystery. Spot personnel allow visitors to bring in carpenter levels, compasses, cameras, magnetic dashboard figurines—whatever they happen to have on hand. If you figure it out, though, I don't want to hear about it. As far as I'm concerned, not even Mr. Wizard should try to take the mystery out of the Mystery Spot.

The Santa Cruz Mystery Spot is located at 1953 Branciforte Drive in Santa Cruz. From downtown Santa Cruz follow Market Street north about three miles until it turns into Branciforte Drive. The Mystery Spot is open every day from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.; tours start every half-hour. Admission is \$3 for adults and \$1.50 for children. For information, call (408) 423-8897.

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