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Tony Hicks: Don t forget the bear necessities of a family vacation

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Contra Costa Times

Posted: 06/01/2010 01:00:00 AM PDT

Updated: 06/01/2010 10:08:17 AM PDT

Like many great nature writers before me (Muir, Thoreau, Ann Landers), I'm writing in the woods. Well, I'm sort of in the woods. Actually, I'm in the rec room at the Evergreen Lodge, which is in the woods, but has a great restaurant and an amazing sandbox.

I know the sandbox is amazing because my kids would rather be inside it than staring at the wonders of nature. Yesterday morning, when it was time to head to Yosemite, they moaned, in unison, "Awwwww, who wants to gaze in gap-mouthed wonder upon the majesty of Mother Earth's greatest works when we can roll around in this wet sand and throw some at this stupid boy we met last night?"

Growing pains

This a common parental mistake — expecting kids to appreciate things before they're 35. This is the second year we've come to the Evergreen Lodge, a bout eight miles outside the Yosemite gate. The first night, my family made s'mores in the fire pit, enjoyed first-rate food and played Battleship in the rec room. My mom and wife compared it to the camp in "Dirty Dancing," which, translated, meant they both wished for cha-cha lessons from Patrick

Swayze.

Our first day was very special — partly because of great weather and from having all four of my girls along, and partly because, in more than 50 years of living in California, my mom had never been to Yosemite. She was like a chattering squirrel on

Ecstasy. Not that I just called my mom a tree-dwelling rodent on drugs — it's just she was so giddy she climbed a tree when we let her out of the car.

By the next morning, the kids were already whining about the lodge. The grumbling ceased once we approached a meadow on the main road a few miles inside the park. Three rangers were directing traffic, while onlookers peered into the meadow. Great, I thought. A horrific car wreck is about to ruin the kids' day.

Furry encounter

Then someone in the car screamed "BEEEEAAAAARRRRRRRRR!"

About a hundred yards from the road, a small black bear was eating grass or bear kibble or something. A ranger screamed for us to keep moving or park the vehicle. Being an idiot from the city, I had no choice. We parked and took approximately 700 pictures of a bear munching on grass and thinking to himself, "I can't believe animals this stupid run the planet." The ranger was quite nice as I asked him a few questions.

"Yeah, that bear is about KEEP MOVING KEEP YOUR EYES ON THE ROAD a year old and is here every KEEP MOVING EYES ON THE ROAD day. He's probably just weaned I SAID MOVE MOVE MOVE from

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his mother. We think she's the larger bear who DON'T STOP YOU'RE CREATING A HAZARD shows up each day and chases him I SAID PARK IT IF YOU WANT TO STOP away."

The traffic was terrible in the valley, so I decided to head to Glacier Point, but when we got to the turnoff, it was closed. The ranger explained there was a line at the top and the wait was two hours. But then the road miraculously opened, like that scene in "Cannonball Run" where the road opened and all the racers jostled for their cars (it had closed because Burt Reynolds' mustache fell off and blocked it).

Naturally, when we arrived, the girls were far more interested in chasing chipmunks than enjoying the view. But my mom seemed awed by the experience, which made everything fine. I just had to remind myself that someday those girls will be her age and will likely have years of forcing children to look at beautiful things under their belts.

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