

## THINGS TO DO

# A simple stroll around the Bernardo Bay Natural Area

Hikers can explore a section of the San Dieguito River Park, including Lake Hodges and Bernardo Bay, on this 2.8-mile loop



The view from a mountain in the Bernardo Bay Natural Area.  
(Maura Fox / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

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The San Diego Union-Tribune

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A build-your-own adventure awaits on the trails surrounding Lake Hodges and the Bernardo Bay in Rancho Bernardo.

The advertisement features a background image of a football player in a white jersey with "ERS" visible, holding a football. Overlaid on the image is a large white sign-in modal. The modal contains the following text and elements:

- FOX** logo at the top left.
- BIG SATURDAY** logo in the center left.
- A "Sign in with Google" button with the Google logo.
- A notification bubble on the right: "We'd like to send you notifications. Notifications can be turned off in your settings."
- Main text: "Use your Google Account to sign in to sandiegouniontribune.com"
- Subtext: "No more passwords to remember. Signing in is fast, simple and secure."
- A "Continue" button at the bottom right.
- A decorative graphic of colorful circles and a key icon on the right side of the modal.
- A back arrow icon on the left side of the modal.

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The Bernardo Bay Trail and Piedras Pintadas Trail are part of a vast network within the Bernardo Bay Natural Area. Water levels were low in both the lake and bay during my visit in late November, but the hike still offered an excellent way to see changing fall leaves and a variety of birds. (The Audubon Society declared Lake Hodges a [globally Important Bird Area](#) in 1999.)

Beyond the sights, this hiking area — which is also open to cyclists — is ideal for visitors who want to meander instead of following a strict path. I ultimately completed an easy 2.8-mile loop primarily on the Bernardo Bay Trail, though I also took an unmarked trail up to a mountaintop that overlooked the bay.



The trailhead can be accessed from the southwestern side of the parking lot. (Maura Fox / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

The Bernardo Bay Natural Area is part of the greater San Dieguito River Park, which is home to more than 65 miles of trails, including the Coast to Crest Trail. Once completed, the long distance trail will extend from the ocean at Del Mar to Volcan Mountain in Julian. I hiked [along one section](#) this summer.

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To begin this hike, park at the Piedras Pintadas Trailhead parking lot on West Bernardo Drive. The lot is marked with signs for the trails and the Bernardo Bay Natural Area, and there is a portable toilet at the trailhead.

Begin on the trail on the southern side of the lot, where there is also an information kiosk.



After the Soroptimist Grove, hikers reach another intersection. (Maura Fox / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

The trail travels southwest. Immediately, hikers will reach an intersection. To reach the Piedras Pintadas Trail, keep heading southwest, or turn to the north to reach the Bernardo Bay trails. I chose the second option.

Hikers will pass by a Soroptimist Grove of oak trees — which was [one of the first planting projects](#) in the San Dieguito River Park's development in the 1990s — before reaching another intersection with a sign marking the Bernardo Bay Trail.

I followed this path for 0.2 miles before reaching yet another intersection. Here, I turned toward the Piedras Pintadas Trail. The flat, wide path was peaceful, even with the sight of Interstate 15 in the distance ahead.

At the 0.5-mile point, I followed a trail up a mountain for about 0.4 miles before reaching a dead end with an impressive view.



The trail leading to the mountaintop near the center of the Bernardo Bay Natural Area. (Maura Fox / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

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From there, I retraced my steps to the base of the mountain, where I saw a narrow trail heading west. This trail ultimately merged with the Bernardo Bay Trail, which I continued on for a mile.

Around 2.3 miles, hikers have the choice to continue on the trail that lines Lake Hodges, or take a 0.3-mile path that connects with the original trail where they began.



The Bernardo Bay Trail follows the edge of the bay and Lake Hodges. (Maura Fox / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

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