

BUCKETTRIPPER<[HTTP://WWW.BUCKETTRIPPER.COM/](http://www.buckettripper.com/)>*Adventure is our state of mind***Wandering The Tufa Towers Of Mono Lake**By *Yvette Cardozo* <<http://www.buckettripper.com/author/yecardozo/>>

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Tufa towers form when calcium rich fresh spring water combines with the carbonate rich, salty water of California's Mono Lake. These towers look like mounds of mud but are rock hard and can grow 30 or 40 feet tall, or higher. The level of Mono Lake has is protected by law so that it will not drop below 6,392 feet above sea level. Photo by Yvette Cardozo.

Years ago, I stopped at California's Mono Lake on a bike trip. I was hot, tired and ready for the day to end. I briefly looked at the lake's famous tufa mounds, felt the greasy, salt-laden water and left.

I've always wanted to go back. And finally, this April, got my chance.

Mono Lake is an ecological wonder and also a ecological rescue. The guide with our group told us the history, which also involves a toe dip into California's water wars.

But first, the lake. To begin with, it's pronounced like "oh no," rather than like the kissing virus. So, it's "mow no," not "mah no."

Though guided hikes happen daily in summer, they are held sporadically off season, by reservation. And so, my group of friends pretty much had the South Tufa entrance to ourselves.

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In Your Bucket Because...

This is one of nature's wonders and it really isn't to be missed.

- It's easy to see, even if you aren't particularly fit.
- It's great for the family, especially kids who like science.
- If you come in summer, there are all those birds and in mid winter, it's like some science fiction landscape.

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The South Tufa is the most dramatic of the four entrances, with huge tufa towers, like misshapen sand castles, built by the interaction of calcium rich fresh spring water contacting carbonate rich lake water.



*Photographing tufa towers at Mono Lake.
Photo by Yvette Cardozo.*

Well, honestly, I managed to wiggle my way out of any kind of chemistry class in high school, so it was all magic to me when our guide Bartshe Miller built us our very own tufas in a glass beaker at water's edge. But it was seriously cool, nevertheless.

First, though, we hiked the boardwalk from the parking lot to water's edge while Miller explained the water here is about three times saltier than the ocean. That's not quite as pucker-worthy as the Dead Sea, which is more than eight times saltier than the ocean, but it's salty enough. You can feel the salt. The water is a bit slick to the touch.

The lake is nine miles long and 13 miles wide with two volcanic islands in the middle. A quarter million people visit a year, which sounds like a lot, but not nearly the four million that go to nearby Yosemite. People canoe and kayak here. They can also swim, as they do in the Dead Sea.



*Woman photographs a tufa tower at the shoreline of Mono Lake.
Photo by Yvette Cardozo.*

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Wildlife and Ecology at Mono Lake

And there's incredible wild life: 95 birds on the reserve's checklist. During fall migration, nearly two million eared grebes have been seen on the lake at one time, the largest concentration in the world. We didn't see many birds but the brine shrimp went through the water like a pink cloud and the alkali flies rose and changed direction en masse at our feet, hardly a breath off the water's surface.

What's important, Miller said, is how nearly Mono nearly came to extinction.

The lake is fed by fresh water streams and for decades, this water was siphoned off by Los Angeles. The lake level slowly fell, eventually losing half its volume in 40 years. The ecology changed. The life here was dying.

Coyotes were walking a new land bridge to devour nesting birds on the islands and not far away, another lake bed lay absolutely bone dry as testament to where Mono was heading.



*Beautiful sunset scene at Mono lake. Photo
Courtesy Mono Lake Committee*

But groups of people fought for the lake. The area was declared Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area and a target level of 6,392 feet was decreed, meaning there's a limit to how much water can be siphoned off.

"The lake is about two thirds back to its original level ... one of the great environmental success stories for California," Miller said.

That left a good balance between giving Los Angeles some water and giving visitors some tufas to see. And boy, are they neat to see. They rise, some 20 or 30 feet tall, along the lake shore and make for some seriously wonderful scenic shots.

For a bit, we wandered the shore, marveling at how the beige/orange



*Making mini tufa towers in a glass beaker at Mono Lake in California. Here, visitors get to mix spring and lake water in a beaker and watch the chemical process make tufa particles. Tufa towers form when calcium rich fresh spring water combines with the carbonate rich, salty water of Mono Lake.
Photo by Yvette Cardozo.*

tufa mounds contrasted with the blue water, the even bluer sky and the white snow of far off mountains. Then Miller called us to water's edge and brought out a glass beaker.

Holding the beaker with fresh spring water in one hand, he added the salty lake water and, yes, like magic, the liquid swirled, turned milky and started to solidify into thousands, maybe millions of tiny particles. Microscopic tufas.

There they were. Our very own mini tufa towers.

Practicalities

- There are four access points: County Park, Old Marina (closest to Hwy 395), South Tufa (which has the most dramatic tufas but requests a donation) and Navy Beach (best for canoes and kayaks since it's closest to the water)
- Guided walking tours of [Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area](#) are held daily in the summer. There are also guided canoe tours in summer. Check with the park.
- Canoeing and kayaking should be done as early as possible. By 10 am the water can get seriously rough.
- Don't dismiss visiting in mid winter (December/January) when ice fog and frost transform the lake into a winter wonderland.

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Yvette Cardozo (Yvette Cardozo)

Yvette Cardozo has been roaming the globe looking for adventure for ... a while. This has included heli skiing, week long dogsled trips above the Arctic Circle, scuba diving in Antarctica and more mundane stuff, usually involving bicycles. She has written thousands of print articles and is now branching out into online media. She also does pro quality photography and is under contract with Getty Images. Oh yes, and she loves adventurous food ... bring on the fried tarantulas!

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