

The Mercury News

MercuryNews.com

Wanderlust: Biking the salt ponds of Alviso

By Lisa M. Krieger

lkrieger@mercurynews.com

Posted: 04/20/2011 12:00:00 PM PDT

Updated: 04/20/2011 04:30:56 PM PDT

To reach the loneliest spot in the South Bay, go to Alviso. Then keep going.

Windswept and sun-drenched, the nine-mile-long Alviso Slough Loop Trail follows the periphery of seven salt ponds that once defined this landscape, and which are slowly turning wild.

Perched at the bottom of the bay, "you are out there in the middle of nowhere, with a gorgeous view," says Santa Clara Valley Water District's Al Gurevich, who is manager for the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Study. "You can't even believe you're in the Bay Area."

Once, this setting was a bustling scene, full of commerce and devoid of wildlife. In the mid-19th century, Alviso Slough was the toxic drainage channel for the mercury-rich New Almaden

Mining District. The town served as the Port of San Jose, the transportation hub for the state capital and the entire Santa Clara Valley, offering daily transport, via steamboat, to San Francisco.

Then the mines closed, the state capital moved to Sacramento and the completion of the Southern Pacific Railroad made the port nearly irrelevant. Its waterfront was subdivided into salt ponds, becoming a valuable Cargill Salt Co. commodity.

Now nature is reclaiming this site at today's Alviso Marina County Park. The flotsam and jetsam of abandoned industry -- rusty pipes, splintered wood, decaying piers -- are scattered on either side of the trail. The dikes and levees are aging and deteriorating, although still bike-worthy.

Alviso's

identity has shifted to its new role as a managed wetland, providing critical habitat for migratory

birds. Nearby, excavators are punching holes, taking down dirt walls and letting waters flood the landscape.

For now, these remnant salt ponds are still important: Not only do they provide a feeding and resting habitat for birds, but they also protect Alviso from flooding. Someday, when new levees are constructed to shield the community, holes will be notched in these ponds, as well, part of the \$100 million deal by the government to create the largest tidal wetland restoration project on the west coast.

Many of the salt ponds in the South Bay are inaccessible to the public. But these

ponds, now part of the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge, offer an energetic loop on top of the rutted but flat dikes.

This is a route that appeals to both bicyclists and birders -- binoculars, cameras and water bottles are encouraged. For walkers, there's a shorter route along a boardwalk, with benches and interpretive panels. Nearby is a seasonal impoundment that often has interesting birds and is close enough to the parking lot for a quick check. Hungry? There are picnic tables.

If you travel the route on your own, maps are strongly recommended and are available at the entrance to the park.

Here are some highlights, traveling clockwise:

Look across Alviso Slough, fed by the Guadalupe



DIRECTV has more of what you want to watch!

Switch today!

1-888-778-0985

**NO EQUIPMENT TO BUY!
NO STARTUP COSTS!**

Offer ends 2/29/11. Credit card required (except in MA & PA). New approved customers only. (lease required). \$19.95 Handling & Delivery fee may apply. Applicable use tax adjustment may apply on the retail value of the installation. Call for details.

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

The Mercury News

MercuryNews.com

River, to see what was once the salt-encrusted pond A6. Excavators breached its levee last December; biologists say a new 330-acre marsh could be established here within five to 10 years.

Nearby pond A8 was also recently opened to tidal flow through a notched levee, connecting 1,400 acres of ponds to the bay. To their surprise, construction workers have uncovered an old barge in the slough pilot channel. Ultimately, this pond will provide a deep water habitat for pelicans, cormorants and ducks.

In the distance, you can see the landfill hills of Sunnyside Baylands Park, as well as the hangars of Moffett Field and the tents of Shoreline Amphitheatre.

At A11, note the entry pipe on the Alviso Slough side. Dismembered fish, caught in the pumps, can be attractive to birds when the water is flowing. Within several miles, you'll reach the tip of A9, at the confluence of Coyote Slough and Alviso Slough. This is a scenic and remote point, almost halfway along your route.

Originally, these ponds were numbered in order of increasing salinity, although the flow is managed somewhat differently now. There remains an inflow pipe at pond A9; ponds further east, like A16 and 17, are more saline.

While you're here, enjoy the cacophony of birds, especially at dusk. The conventional wisdom is that the best birding is done at ponds A9 and A14, adjacent to each other.

Peddle on, enjoying a view of the Dumbarton Bridge.

Heading east, you may glimpse Amtrak as it races along nearby tracks. Look closer -- see the sunken wet hollow between the railroad grade and a levee? Even this forgettable spot is a habitat: It is called "The Weep" and is a study site for UC biologists.

An ephemeral place, its life cycles are controlled by water: brackish during winter rains, it can become 10 times saltier than seawater in the summer. Against a backdrop of white salt and black iron sulfide soil, a mosaic of colorful microbial communities of diatoms, dinoflagellates, protozoa and bacteria call this home.

The wind at your back, the trail now follows the

Coyote Creek upstream. Very little freshwater flows down the creek in the summer, but freshwater discharges from nearby San Jose water treatment plant keep this water brackish. You'll note the vegetation here is different from in the saltier marshes.

Wooden power poles cross the trail, which once served a pumping station in the middle of the ponds. "Station Island" stands on your left, the location of the ghost town of Drawbridge. The rooftops of about a dozen decaying buildings can sometimes be seen poking up here. Access to Drawbridge is restricted to guided tours only.

Continuing on, you'll see ponds A16 and A17. Soon these will hold 50 nesting islands for migrating shorebirds. This project will also include a viewing platform and interpretive station. When the project is complete, a new spur trail will go out to the edge of Coyote Creek.

You've finished the loop -- gaining both a view of the past, and a glimpse of the future.

Contact Lisa M. Krieger at 408-920-5565.

- **The Alviso Slough Loop Trail, the largest network of trails, is accessible from the Alviso Marina County Park at the corner of Mill and Hope streets. For directions, see www.parkhere.org.**

Three guided tours are available this spring, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on upcoming Saturdays -- April 30, May 14 and May 28. Bring your bike and join docent Steve Dill on

Get a FREE ADT-Monitored Home Security System.*

(With \$99 customer installation and purchase of ADT alarm monitoring services. See important terms and conditions below.)

Call Now! 1-877-835-8373




*\$99.00 Customer Installation Charge. 36-Month Monitoring Agreement required at \$35.99 per month (\$1,295.64). Form of payment must be by credit card or electronic charge to your checking or savings account. Offer applies to homeowners only. Local permit fees may be required. Satisfactory credit history required. Certain restrictions apply. Offer valid for new Security Choice - An ADT Authorized Dealer customers only and not on purchases from ADT Security Services, Inc. Other rate plans available. Cannot be combined with any other offer. **\$100 VISA® Gift Card Offer: \$100 VISA Gift Card is provided by Security Choice and is not sponsored by ADT Security Services. Requires mail-in redemption. Call 1-888-407-2338 for complete restrictions and redemption requirements.

Print Powered By 

The Mercury News

MercuryNews.com

the loop to learn about the history, biology and restoration of the refuge's salt pond landscape. Helmets are required. Make reservations at 408-262-5513, ext. 106.

- The Mallard Slough Trail Loop, to the east of the Alviso Slough Trail, is shorter. It is used less frequently, and access is more restricted. It follows Mallard Slough to its junction with the Coyote River, and then follows the Coyote River west. The Mallard Slough Trail takes you to the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge Environmental Education Center, run by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. It is open to the public on weekends from 10 a.m. to 5 p. m., with classrooms, maps, educational displays and an enclosed observation tower. Access to Mallard Slough Trail is available in two places. One of them is at the railroad crossing on the Alviso Slough Loop Trail. The shortest way to reach the crossing is to take the east side Alviso Slough Trail Loop north from the Alviso Marina. The crossing is 1.7 miles north from the trailhead at the marina. The other access point, and the easiest for walkers, is from the Environmental Education Center, located at the end of Grand Boulevard in Alviso.
- For a glimpse of local history, see the old Bayside Canning Company building on Hope Street, just south of the marina. It is covered by murals depicting scenes from the history of Alviso. The cannery was started in 1907 by Sai Yen Chew, then passed onto his son, Thomas Foon Chew, who canned asparagus; it closed in 1936, a victim of the Depression and the death of Thomas Chew. The Victorian Tilden-Laine house on Elizabeth Street was built in 1887 and is one of the best examples of Victorian architecture in town. The blue wooden building housing the historic South Bay Yacht Club is further down on the left. The yacht club traces its origins to the late 1880s. The clubhouse was built in 1903, but was moved to its current location in 1985 to protect it from flooding. For more information, go to www.alviso.com/history.

Send flowers
for any occasion

Bouquets
from **\$19⁹⁹**_{+s/h}



ProFlowers
Offer ONLY available at:
proflowers.com/happy
or call 1.877.804.1133

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™