

California

Mystery Spot

Through the looking glass for real—
a mind-bending visit to an earth anomaly

By Richard Giannone

Photos by Joe and Rich Giannone

Mystery Spot origins

"Stranger than fiction. Nature's mysterious phenomenon. The eeriest spot in any area."

These are just some of the claims made by the proprietors of the Mystery Spot, located near Santa Cruz, Calif. About 30 miles west of San Jose, Santa Cruz is a small town that sits between a forested mountain range and the Pacific ocean. The tourists who visit the town regularly come for the sun and the amusement park located on the wooden, planked boardwalk that sits on the beach 300 feet from the ocean.

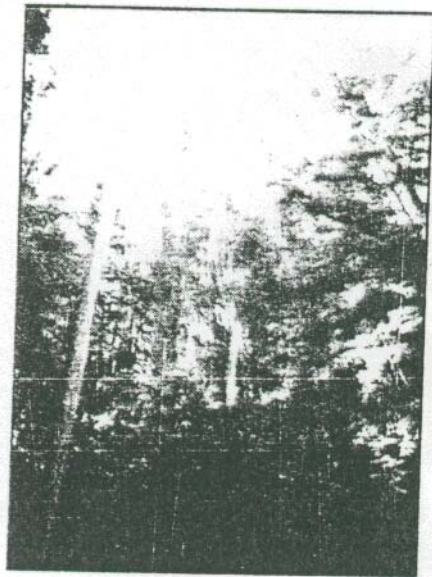
Three miles north of the beach, up a winding road, and deep into the redwood-covered hills, sits a plot of land that has perplexed visi-

tors for over 50 years. The "Mystery Spot," as it is called by its owners, is an area about 150 feet in diameter, located on a gradually steepening hill. Believers claim that all manner of physical anomalies occur in the area, while skeptics are left scratching their heads.

The origin of the Mystery Spot can be traced to 1939, when the owner of the land tried unsuccessfully to build a house on the hill containing the "spot." Reportedly, the surveyor's compass was so disturbed by the area that he was unable to get an accurate reading.

Other problems arose, and the owner of the land soon came to realize that something very strange was going on.

that has magnetic and gravitational powers. Rain, it is said, falls to the left in the Mystery Spot, and the trees in this force field turn and curve counterclockwise.



The tree in the center of the shot curls counterclockwise as it stretches into the sky. According to the guide, this should only happen in the Southern Hemisphere.

According to the tour guide, trees in the Northern Hemisphere, when they turn, turn clockwise. But in the Mystery Spot, the trees defy this natural law and turn as if they were in the Southern Hemisphere. I did see many trees growing in a counterclockwise curl, but was this really unusual? I called the botany department at California State University, Sacramento, and talked to

three botanists, experts in the field. They all agreed that while there wasn't enough evidence to prove or disprove this claim made by the Mystery Spot owners, there is some evidence that trees do swirl differently in the Northern Hemisphere than they do below the equator.

Deeper inside

Trees aside, we continued to walk up the hill, deeper into the middle of the Mystery Spot. A winding path led to a decrepit, wooden cabin supported by walls that met the cabin roof at about a 35 degree angle. Here, the guide pulled out a worn, ordinary-looking wooden plank and a cue ball. The plank was placed on the windowsill of the cabin and shown to be level. The white cue ball was then placed in the middle of the wooden board. When the guide let go of the ball, it should have rested quietly on the board. Instead, it rolled quickly to one side.

While I was shown that the board was level, it actually looked like it was tilted down to one side, and this was not the side that the ball rolled toward! Amazingly, the ball appeared to roll up the board. This was demonstrated several times, and it had to be one of the strangest things I have ever seen. The cue ball seemed to be defying gravity as it continually rolled in the "wrong" (uphill) direction.

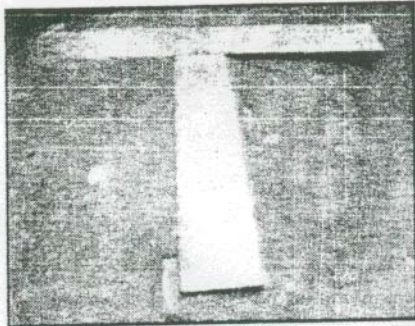
Was this some kind of optical illu-

sion? I was inclined to automatically conclude that this was a magic trick. Someone standing near me said, "That must be done with magnets." But, at the speed the heavy cue ball was rolling, the magnet would have had to have been the size of a car, and hidden in a nearby tree.

The other explanation was that it was some kind of optical illusion, but again, I could find no evidence. The guide's level could have been phony (but this was not the case, as I later discovered).

I found myself trying to see if I was off balance somehow, or if the slant of the cabin could be the source of the illusion. The cabin was drastically slanted, leading me to believe that this aided in some kind of trickery, but the board was shown to be level, and the bubble in the guide's carpenter level seemed to behave normally.

After this demonstration, we walked through the cabin and outside again to two more areas containing cement slabs. One area had a cement "T" shape which was five and one-half feet by seven feet. Volunteers were once again asked to stand on the ends of the T. By this time, nothing was going to surprise me, so I didn't bat an eye when the heights of the volunteers seemed to change as they switched positions on the T. My only explanation was that the cement rectangles were not level, and that the guide possessed a trick carpenter's level.



Deep inside the Mystery Spot is the cement "T" shape (five by seven feet).

Sophisticated level

I pulled out my expensive Tamaya compass/level, the type used by geologists working in the field. I carefully checked the entire cement structure—the ends, the middle and everywhere in between. The entire cement T was perfectly level. With a level surface to stand on, I could think of no other explanation for the apparent change in height of the people who stood on it. The fence behind the T was slanted, but this seemed inadequate to create such a powerful illusion.

Other skeptics standing nearby saw my level and asked if they could check out the slabs for themselves. Suspicious of the guide's tool, they carefully measured the area and were amazed when they realized that the cement T was level.

After reinspecting the area, I remembered being told something about magnetic disturbances there. I asked the tour guide about this and



Two volunteers appear to change height as they switch position on the cement "T." Woman on left appears to be shorter.



They have changed places, and the same woman (who is now standing on right) now appears taller.

he referred me to an area where compasses are supposed to turn 180 degrees from magnetic north.

With compass in hand, I went to the area described by the guide but, despite spending considerable time walking around with my eyes glued to my compass, I was unable to find any change, let alone a 180-degree jump in the needle of the compass. This doesn't mean that there couldn't be magnetic anomalies in the area, but if they are there, they're not prevalent or easily located.

The feeling of being off balance was prevalent. It was hard to discern exactly why I felt so "off kilter," but I was not alone. Many of the visitors felt exactly as I did, whether they were skeptics or not.

What is the Mystery Spot? I still don't know. It could be a masterful job of optical illusion, although that explanation seems to fall short of what I experienced.

The reality of the Mystery Spot is in the way it makes you feel. There

aren't many places on earth where you can experience anomalies that will make you think long and hard.

Some of the visitors whom I talked to were so disturbed by what they saw that they didn't want to leave. They weren't going to walk away until they could explain what they were seeing. As I was returning to my car, I saw a man and woman walking to the parking lot shaking their heads in frustration. "Pretty interesting, isn't it?" I said.

"We still haven't cracked the secret," the man said. He smiled as he opened the door to his car, but I could tell by the look on his face that he would have been a lot happier if he could have explained the whole thing away. Instead, he had to leave, mystified.

Maybe that's how it should be. After all, it is the Mystery Spot.

The Mystery Spot is located on Branciforte Dr., three miles north of Santa Cruz, Calif., and is open year round. Admittance is \$3.00. ■