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WILD WEST

Beyond the gates, a public gateway

■ An agency that advocates for public land access lies at the end of a private road in Malibu.

JENNY PRICE

THE first time I drove up to Ramirez Canyon Park in Malibu — the former Barbra Streisand ranch — was for a journalism conference. The private gated road winds up Ramirez Canyon along a year-round stream flanked by gargantuan live oaks and sycamores. The park lies beyond a locked gate at the very end and most scenic stretch of the road, where the baby chaparral hills rise and narrow to form a steep gorge. I've been through the gates four times — three invited, even — and doubt that any of the gated canyons I have never seen in Malibu could be prettier, or any property within them more enchanting.

The Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy has occupied the ranch as its headquarters since the actress donated it to the organization in 1993. The offices are scattered through three of Streisand's five houses — the former main residence (the Barn, with more aged wood than an average barn, and a bit more stained glass), the pink Mediterranean-style Peach House, and the lodge-like Barwood, named after her production company. Cactuses bloom under magnolia trees outside the unoccupied Art Deco House. Palm trees share the hillsides with pine trees and a citrus and avocado orchard. The 22-acre landscape also boasts a rose garden, bougainvillea, a redwood grove, *copa de oro* vines, the oaks by the creek, and a grand central meadow.

Like an über-version of many estates throughout L.A.'s mountains, this Compound of Paradise combines touches of a Spanish villa, a backwoods cabin, Tahiti and a desert ashram, all exuding the virtually irresistible hybrid spirit of Thoreau's Walden and Louis XIV's Versailles.

On my third entry into the park, I attended a reception for Coastwalk, a nonprofit group that works to create a continuous walking trail along the entire California coast. The conservancy allows the public in only for scheduled events because the road is private. To establish this limited use, they had to fight the standard battle in Malibu for public access to public lands that are blocked by private access routes. Out came the neighbors' lawsuits, the city of Malibu's lawsuits, the paeans to private property and bitter denunciations of the state in the Malibu Times. The conservancy won, but only sort of. It has to adhere to daily quotas on vehicles and visitors.

If you want to go, you can get married, since the conservancy uses its quotas to rent the park for weddings, conferences and retreats — which they need to do to pay for the upkeep. The conservancy also offers semiweekly \$35 garden tours, the one regular event that anyone can sign up for. And it has established regular free outreach programs for groups from special-education schools, senior homes, housing projects and battered women's shelters.

True, the conservancy's primary use of the park for its own offices feels a bit like the leaders of the revolution commandeering the palace. Yet I love that this powerful parks agency, which has other headquarters, has moved its major acquisition and planning operations to this one. And that these caretakers generally allow public agencies as well as nonprofit groups to use the site for free. The National Park Service has held meetings here. So has the Trust for Public Land, a key nonprofit advocate for parks in L.A. and across the continent. The conservancy has met here with the Coastal Conservancy and the six other state conservancies that purchase and manage public lands throughout California.

The public may not be able to drop in, but here, buried deeply up a private road in Malibu — a notoriously privatized

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enclave in the Los Angeles area that suffers so notoriously from a shortage of public spaces — the state operates a nerve center for public lands advocacy.

And this, too, I find irresistibly enchanting.

I got through the gates on my last and fourth visit to write this piece, but my favorite visit to the park was without doubt my second, before I realized that you can't go without an invitation. A couple of friends and I headed up the road on a rainy Sunday and found the gates open at both ends and the park entirely empty and unstaffed.

The landscape is not exactly the same under its new ownership. The conservancy maintains the estate wonderfully. But it manages it according to collective benefit more than individual desire, which has inevitably brought changes. A new drip irrigation system cuts back dramatically on water use. The nonnative pines, which are highly flammable, are being removed.

Streisand's staff of gardeners has been replaced by a staff of park planners who do not have the time, resources or inclination to manicure the landscape daily — which has also led to changes, both intentional and not. The annual flower species have been replaced with perennials. When native oak, sycamore and walnut trees sprout voluntarily among the palms and gardens, they are left to grow. The waterfall that Streisand built runs only during garden tours. Leaves can cover the meadow. The tennis court has no net — and may be slated eventually to become a wetland. The hot tub is cold. Mallards use the pool.

We roamed the entire place at will that day — under the doomed pine trees, by the dry waterfall and past an empty rickety pavilion off the cracked tennis court. The hillside orchard was littered with fallen grapefruit, and a couple of the plaster flamingos behind the Art Deco House were tipping precariously forward. We followed a path along Ramirez Creek to the back of the property, where the canyon opens gloriously into a wild swath of the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. We wandered past beds of ivy sprouting with native oak and walnut saplings, and to the edge of a washed-out pink footbridge over the creek. We felt as if we were exploring a slightly shaggy Shangri-La that, like a ruin, felt ever more romantic because it had opened its secrets to us.

Which is what I find ultimately most beguiling of all about the place. One day, I hope the conservancy makes good on its long-term goal to build a public trail through the Recreation Area, which would allow the public to use the park freely.

For now, the park reads as its own metaphor. It lies locked up at the end of a private road, and it is a gateway to public lands.

Jenny Price is the author of "Flight Maps: Adventures With Nature in Modern America."



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