

Santa Rosa Mountains

HIKES 97 – 103

The mountainous Santa Rosa Wilderness area is a world apart from the desert surrounding it. This is a land of high chaparral, pinyon pine, yucca, juniper, agave, manzanita, ribbonwood, and prickly pear. The southern horizon is dominated by the twin massifs of Santa Rosa and Toro peaks, 8,000 and 8,700 feet high, while the full length of the San Jacinto Mountains extends along the western horizon.

Hikes 97 – 103

Trailhead Locations in the Santa Rosa Mountains



97

Horsethief Creek via Cactus Spring Trail

(see map on page 194)

LENGTH: 5 miles

SEASON: October to May

HIKING TIME: 4 hours

INFORMATION: USDA Forest

ELEVATION GAIN: 900 feet

Service, Idyllwild, (909) 382-2922

DIFFICULTY: Easy/Moderate

or (951) 659-2117

A favorite and easy way to explore this wild country is to hike the length of the Cactus Spring Trail, which penetrates deep into this wilderness area. The first segment of this hike is the beautiful Horsethief Creek section.

DIRECTIONS

TO REACH THE TRAILHEAD, turn south from Hwy. 111 in Palm Desert onto Hwy. 74. Proceed up the mountain for almost 16 miles to where a sign on Hwy. 74 indicates the Cactus Spring Trailhead. Turn left and go 0.25 mile, then turn left into the large parking area. Park in the flat area north of the trash disposal. From Hemet, the trailhead is 8 miles east of the junction of Hwy. 371 and Hwy. 74.

After parking, hike east down the dirt road, then right (south) when you come to the larger dirt road heading up the mountain. After 100 yards you will see the Cactus Spring Trail sign to the left. Begin down the trail and be careful to turn, as it veers right after 0.25 mile. You will begin making your way through a thicket of vegetation, cacti, and pinyon pine. Within minutes, the trail opens onto the remains of an abandoned dolomite mine. Continue east. The trail is a roller-coaster up-and-down journey with a bias toward the down side. Be careful of fine loose rock when heading downhill. Sturdy hiking boots will help cushion this rocky trail.

As you head east, Martinez Mountain will fill the horizon. The trail is often washed by several streams, so you should be cautious of slippery rocks. By April, though, most of the streams have dried up. Hikers are often amazed by the large size of plants due to the abundant runoff during winter.

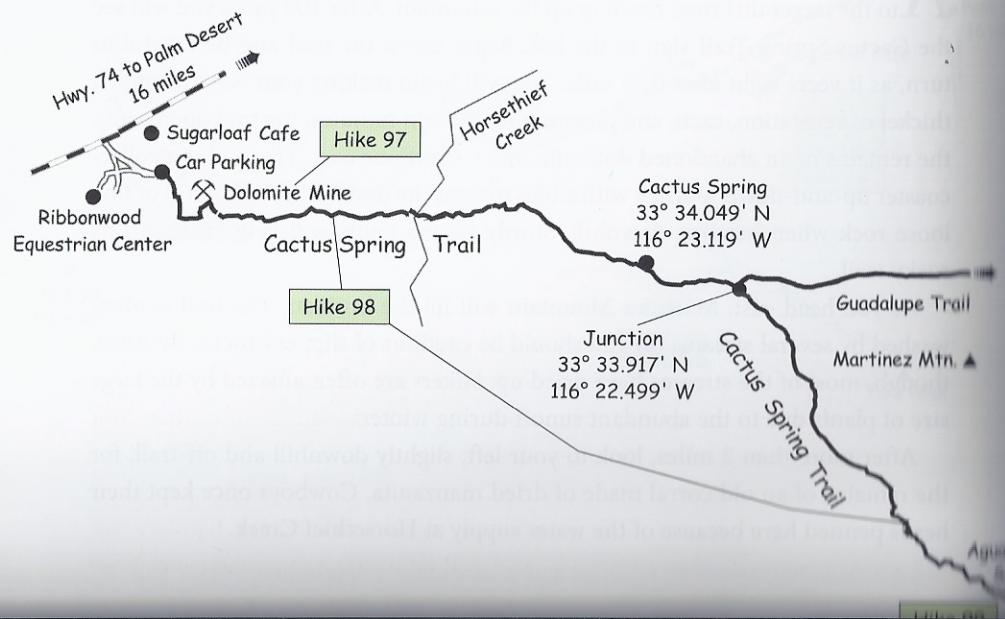
After more than 2 miles, look to your left, slightly downhill and off-trail, for the remains of an old corral made of dried manzanita. Cowboys once kept their herds penned here because of the water supply at Horsethief Creek.



The trail takes you to a rise above Horsethief Creek in a dramatic fashion. From this vantage point, you can view the beautiful cottonwood and sycamore trees lining the creek bed for the better part of a mile. In late October, the canyon creek area is ablaze with bright yellow—a scene one might expect more in Pennsylvania than California. Drop down into the creek and you can explore upstream for a mile, although there is no trail to lead you; just follow the water through thickets of vines, trees, and bushes. Many hikers come to Horsethief Creek for a reprieve from the sweltering desert heat below, and are well rewarded.

A multitude of vegetation thrives along Horsethief Creek.

Hikes 97 – 99



98

Cactus Spring Trail

(see map opposite)

LENGTH: 9 miles

HIKING TIME: 5 hours

ELEVATION GAIN: 1,200 feet

DIFFICULTY: Moderate

SEASON: October to May

INFORMATION: USDA Forest Service, Idyllwild, (909) 382-2922 or (951) 659-2117

The trail to Cactus Spring brings the hiker into even closer contact with the Santa Rosa Wilderness. This is a continuation hike from Horsethief Creek, traveling an additional 2 miles to a spring that, unfortunately, is often dry. Still, this trail provides some scenic vistas of Martinez Mountain and chaparral-covered slopes of the vast watershed known as Horsethief Creek. If the winter rains have been abundant, then the hiker is treated to a scattering of mini-waterfalls cascading from the northern face of the Santa Rosa Mountains which form the hiker's southern horizon.

DIRECTIONS

Follow the directions for Hike 97.

The trail continues on the eastern side of the creek with a steep climb up a sometimes slippery slope. You reach the top after climbing 400 feet and can then see the wide mountain vistas of the Horsethief Creek basin. After hiking 0.25 mile at the top, you drop down into a delightful small canyon that slowly winds ever higher and deeper into the wilderness. Sometimes a stream runs the length of this wash and helps nurture the abundant plant life.

The trail emerges from the canyon through a dense thicket of juniper and pinyon pine. It follows the wooden-post trail markers onto a level plateau. Here, the spacious views allow you to see the wilderness area, hidden from the desert dwellers below by the cover of the lower foothills. Martinez Mountain grows ever larger as you approach Cactus Spring. You will know you're there when to your



Aerial view of Whitewater Canyon looking toward Mt. San Gorgonio

left you see a dense cover of grasses flowing down into the wash. Other than that, in the dry season Cactus Spring is only a name.

I am especially fond of this hike because of the clean, crisp air, heavily scented with juniper and pine mixed with the aroma of the more arid desert plants. Along the final mile, the hike feels energizing and wild. The wilderness shows no sign of human presence and the sprawl of the Coachella Valley below is completely hidden from view. Weather-wise, October and March seem to be the best times to visit, with early spring offering hikers plenty of blooming cacti and wildflowers.

99 Agua Alta Spring

(see map on page 194)

LENGTH: 22 miles

HIKING TIME: 11 hours

ELEVATION GAIN: 2,400 feet

DIFFICULTY: Strenuous

SEASON: October to April

INFORMATION: USDA Forest Service, Idyllwild, (909) 382-2922 or (951) 659-2117

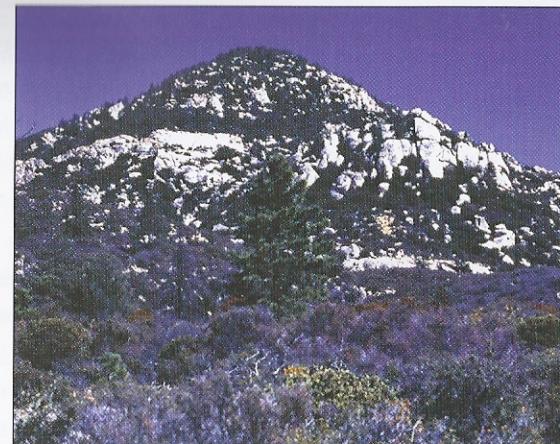
The trail to Agua Alta Spring is the last part of the Cactus Spring Trail that can be hiked in a day, and it is a strenuous, long one. This segment takes the hiker into the farthest reaches of the Santa Rosa Wilderness. It conjures up images and feelings of a forgotten past, when the Cahuilla Indians roamed the canyons and slopes surrounding Martinez Mountain, gathering pinyon pine nuts and edible cacti to survive the harsh Sonoran desert. The views in the recesses of upper Martinez Canyon are ones of desolate slopes and sheer rocky canyon walls, with the searing desert floor in the distance. It is a journey worth taking, challenging the hiker's inner spirit to make peace with the empty stillness of this unique wilderness environment.

DIRECTIONS

Follow the directions for Hike 97.

You will continue from Cactus Spring, heading left into the large wash and following the wooden-post trail markers. After more than 1 mile, the trail turns slowly right and winds its way up toward the saddle that separates Martinez Mountain from Horsethief Creek basin.

The trail continues down through several dry washes. Magnificent views of the surrounding canyons will awe the hiker, as will 6,500-foot Martinez Mountain to the left. At any rate, in the vicinity of the southern side of this mountain, you can choose to climb to its top, but there is no trail and the rock scrambling can exhaust even the hardiest hiker. If you continue past Martinez Mountain, you will reach Agua Alta Spring at a point 8 miles from Horsethief Creek. This trail section is faint in places and requires some bushwhacking. The hike back to the trailhead is long and hot in the late spring, so I suggest you carry at least 4 quarts of water.



San Jacinto Mountains near Pine Mountain Loop

100

Santa Rosa Peak/Mountain Road Traverse

(see map on page 198)

LENGTH: 10 miles

HIKING TIME: 5 hours

ELEVATION GAIN: 1,000 feet

DIFFICULTY: Moderate

SEASON: September to May

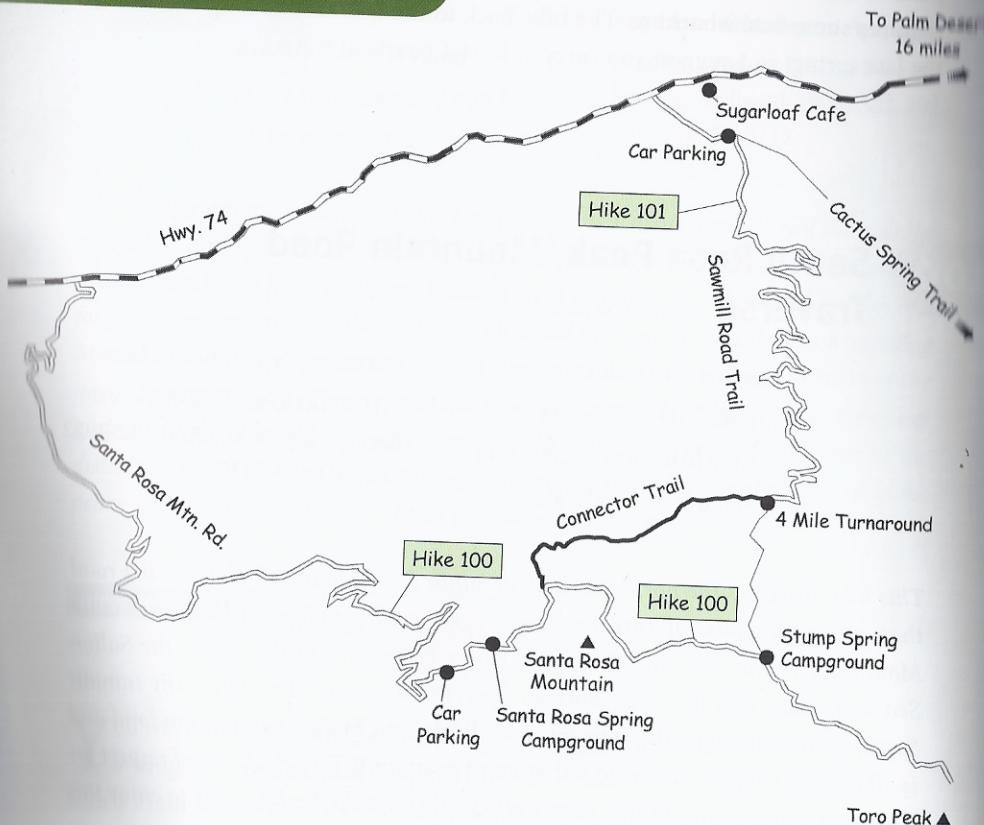
INFORMATION: USDA Forest Service, Idyllwild, (909) 382-2922 or (951) 659-2117

This hike traverses the northern flank of Santa Rosa Mountain along a dirt road that ends at the base of Toro Peak, offering incredible views of the San Jacinto Mountains to the west, the Coachella Valley below and to the north, the Salton Sea to the east, and the Anza-Borrego Desert to the south. You can easily summit Santa Rosa Peak along the way, but Toro Peak is on Indian Reservation land and is off limits to hikers. Please do not attempt to summit Toro Peak out of respect for the privacy of the land. April, May, and October are the best months to enjoy this scenic hike.

DIRECTIONS

TO REACH THE BEGINNING OF THIS HIKE, turn south off of Hwy. 111 in Palm Desert onto Hwy. 74. Continue up the scenic, steep, winding grade for 20 miles, and look to your left for a green sign for Santa Rosa Mountain at the beginning of the dirt road. Head up this road (be careful of the rocks and potholes) for almost 9 miles. The road will eventually enter a dense forest area just after treating you to vistas of the Anza-Borrego Desert south of Santa Rosa Mountain. Park in the first convenient area to the left of the road. The road is your trail for this hike.

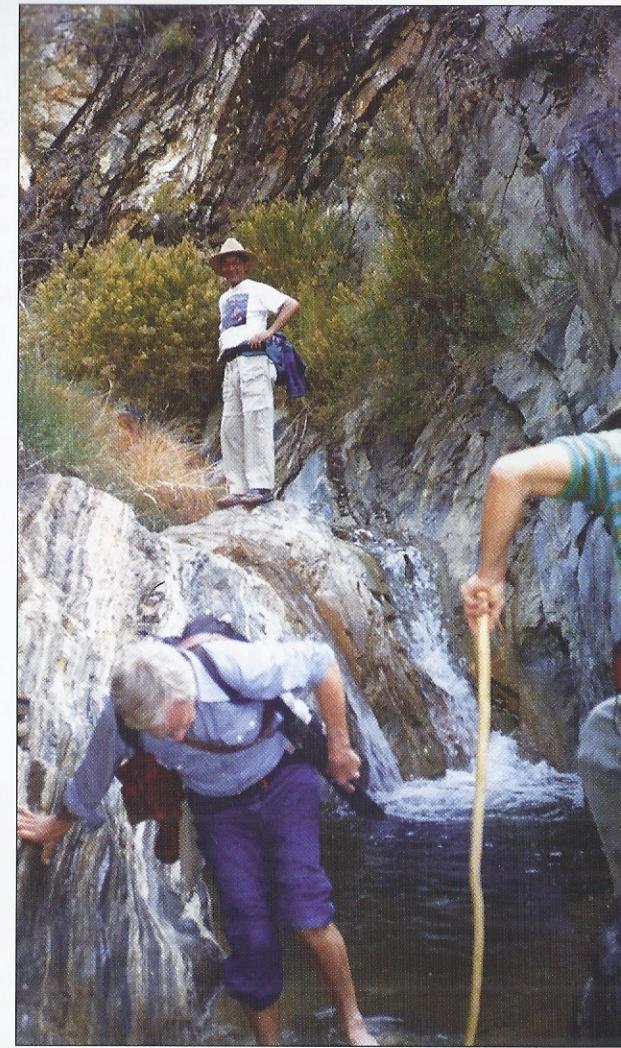
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As you walk up the wide dirt road, you will be treated to vistas of the San Jacinto Mountains to the west, and when the trail bends to the east, the entire Coachella Valley will come into view. The forest is cool, green and a welcome relief from the warmer desert below.

After almost 2 miles, you will see a signed trail to your right, leading up a modest grade towards Santa Rosa Peak. You can summit the peak in less than 0.5 mile, enjoying great views of Toro Peak to the east and expansive vistas to the south. Return to the main trail and continue heading east along the northern face of the mountain. In a few more miles, the trail heads up and to the right (avoid smaller trails coming off the main road, going left). Higher up, you will see Martinez Mountain beneath you to the north/northeast. It seems as if you could reach out and touch it on a clear day!

As the trail continues higher, you will see the Salton Sea and eventually the Anza-Borrego Desert area to the south/southeast. This hike ends just below Toro Peak at the fence. Your return route west and down the mountain rewards you with additional vistas. A definite 5-star hike—one gets the feel of the old west and high-country adventure on this trail!



• Spring runoff in the Santa Rosa Mountains.

101

Sawmill Road Trail

(see map on page 198)

LENGTH: 10–18 miles

HIKING TIME: 4–8 hours

ELEVATION GAIN: 2,500–4,500 feet

DIFFICULTY: Strenuous

SEASON: March to November

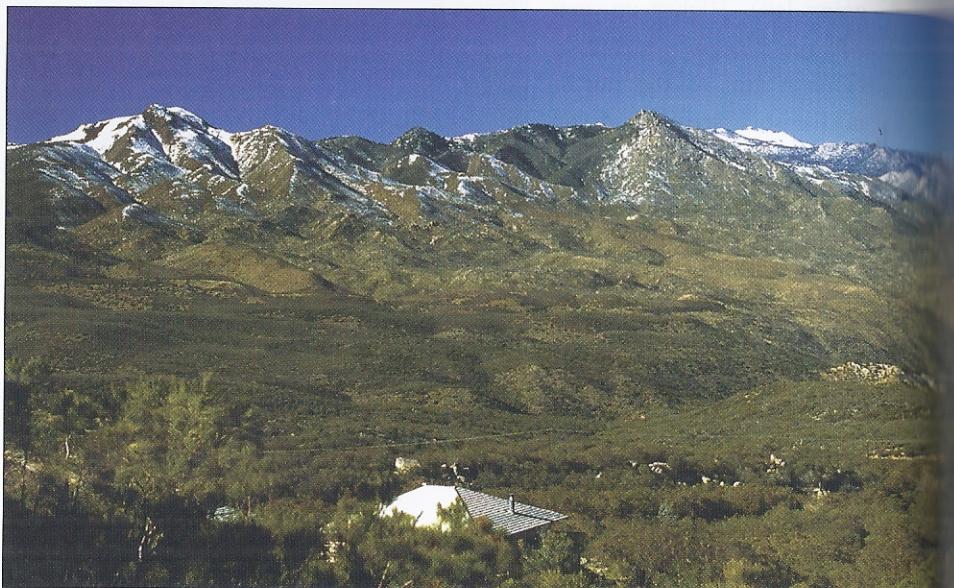
INFORMATION: USDA Forest Service, Idyllwild, (909) 382-2922 or (951) 659-2117

The Sawmill Road Trail currently provides the only access up the north-facing slope of Toro Peak and the Santa Rosa Mountains. Hikers enjoy spectacular views by looking west toward the San Jacinto Mountains, northeast down Deep Canyon, and east toward Martinez Mountain.

DIRECTIONS

TO REACH THE TRAILHEAD, follow the directions in Hike 97. After parking and heading east down the dirt trail, the hiker connects to a larger dirt road heading up the mountain. This is Sawmill Road Trail.

The trail winds relentlessly up the mountain. As it does, it gives the hiker magnificent views of the Coachella Valley and perhaps the only good view of the impressive Deep Canyon that borders Hwy. 74 to the east all the way down to



The San Jacinto Mountains from upper Highway 74

Palm Desert Mountain. Sawmill Road presents a quick ascent into the cooler pine forests near Santa Rosa Mountain and provides a great exercise/cardiovascular workout.

After almost 5 miles straight up, you will arrive at the treeline and encounter the stone remains of a kiln-like structure. At this point, hikers can turn around, satisfied with a good 10-mile round-trip jaunt. A more strenuous hike continues just right and beyond the kiln and picks up the newly constructed “connector trail,” which will take you to the top of Santa Rosa Mountain, connecting you to the Santa Rosa Road after a 2-plus mile hike. From here, turn left and continue east along the road for roughly 4 miles to the Toro Peak area. Please do not summit Toro Peak, as it is on private Indian Reservation land and the structures atop the peak are off limits. The views from beneath the peak are spectacular, with the Salton Sea Basin to the east and the Anza-Borrego Desert to the south.

Should you for some reason fail to find the connector trail, hike 0.1 mile farther past the kiln and bear left until you see an old sign indicating a trail up to the top of Santa Rosa Road. Upon connecting to the road, turn left and continue several miles until reaching the Toro Peak area.

102

Palm Canyon Pines-to-Palms Trail

(see map on page 203)

LENGTH: 16 miles

HIKING TIME: 8 hours

ELEVATION LOSS: 3,200 feet

DIFFICULTY: Strenuous

SEASON: October to April

INFORMATION: USDA Forest Service, Idyllwild, (909) 382-2922 or (951) 659-2117

This is a five-star hike, a must for serious hikers wanting to visit, in one day, flora and fauna ranging from piñon pine to Mexico's Sonoran deserts. The time of year is critical for doing this hike. It may start out cool if not cold at the top (4,000 feet), but end in blistering heat of 90-plus degrees in the lower reaches of Palm Canyon's desert area (800 feet). This hike is also best taken with hikers who have done the trail before, and should not be attempted alone. This is because the trail follows much of Palm Canyon's sandy bottom, exits at places easy to miss, and can be washed out or seriously eroded if the winter rains have been heavy. In 1994, a fire ravaged the entire area, burning almost 5 miles of this 16-mile hike. This further eroded what was once a well-maintained trail used by both hikers and mountain bikers.

DIRECTIONS

TO REACH THE TRAILHEAD, turn south onto Hwy. 74 from Hwy. 111 in Palm Desert. After 18 miles, you will reach the Ribbonwood area. Turn to your right at Pine View Dr. and proceed to its end, 0.1 mile from the highway. The Forest Service has another trailhead that originates in Pinyon Flats Campground. I prefer this trailhead, however.

After parking, begin hiking down the road and veer right (after approximately 100 yards) when you see the small metal sign. Even if you miss this, the trail is an obvious downgrade along the ridge of the mountain. For the next several miles you will encounter mesquite, sage, yucca, and pinyon and juniper pines. The views are fantastic, looking north, west, and east. A "valley" of mountains sprawls before you in all directions, and you get a clear vantage of the Palm Canyon watershed plunging into the long, deepening form of the canyon itself.

After 1.5 miles, you will be on a ridge above Palm Canyon on your left. Here you will see a sign indicating a ridge route. Take this ridge route for another 2 miles to avoid dropping into the canyon too early. Once in the canyon, follow the wash to the left where it joins up with the main canyon.

When you reach the main body of Palm Canyon, turn right and follow the combination wash and trail. Always stay on the right side of the canyon. Over the next several miles you will do several 10- to 20-foot climbs above the canyon. This



Prickly pear cactus

trail continues through washes and up the canyon side for several more miles until you reach the sign indicating Live Oak Spring. The trail then continues up the right side of the canyon. You can measure your distance easily enough by noting the mile markers that tell how far you are from Hwy. 74. After the marker says 6 miles, and you continue for another 2 miles or so, look for the mountains to the west to begin forming some steep drops into Palm Canyon. In this section of the hike, the canyon narrows and deepens. Water in late winter rushes through the rocky gorges, and several waterfalls grace the slopes above the canyon. This area is known as Upper Paradise and makes a good lunch stop. Trees and pools of water are abundant, with the first fan palms now beginning to appear. From this point, the Indian Trading Post in Palm Canyon (the northern end of this spectacular hike) is only three hours away.

As the trail continues toward Palm Springs, the San Jacinto Mountains increase in size and dominate the western view. You are literally hiking through a

Hike 102

valley of mountains. The trail connects with a wash that takes you several miles until you see a cairn on your right. You will know you are at this junction because the trail drops down from the right and continues across the wash and to the left. Take the trail up the right side of the hill and continue the last several miles until you finally drop down into the thick grove of washingtonia palms that gives Palm Canyon its name. You are now just a mile from the trading post. Wind your way to the left while staying to the right of the stream. The trail follows the stream, veers right, and passes a large side canyon on your left. Stay right, cross the stream where it's safe, and follow the trail to the trading post.

You have just finished an all-day adventure that, for many, opens up the natural wonders and beauty of this desert playground like nothing else can ever do. I suggest that any hiker unfamiliar with the trail contact the Coachella Valley Hiking Club at (760) 345-6234. This hiking group will gladly furnish you with any information you need. To make this hike in one day, have someone drop you off at the upper trailhead on Hwy. 74 and pick you up at the trading post in Palm Canyon (also known as Hermit's Bench). If you are a strong hiker and begin hiking at 7 a.m., you will reach the Indian Trading Post no later than 3–4 p.m.

103 South Fork of the Pacific Crest Trail

(see map opposite)

LENGTH: 11 miles

HIKING TIME: 6 hours

ELEVATION GAIN: 800 feet

DIFFICULTY: Strenuous

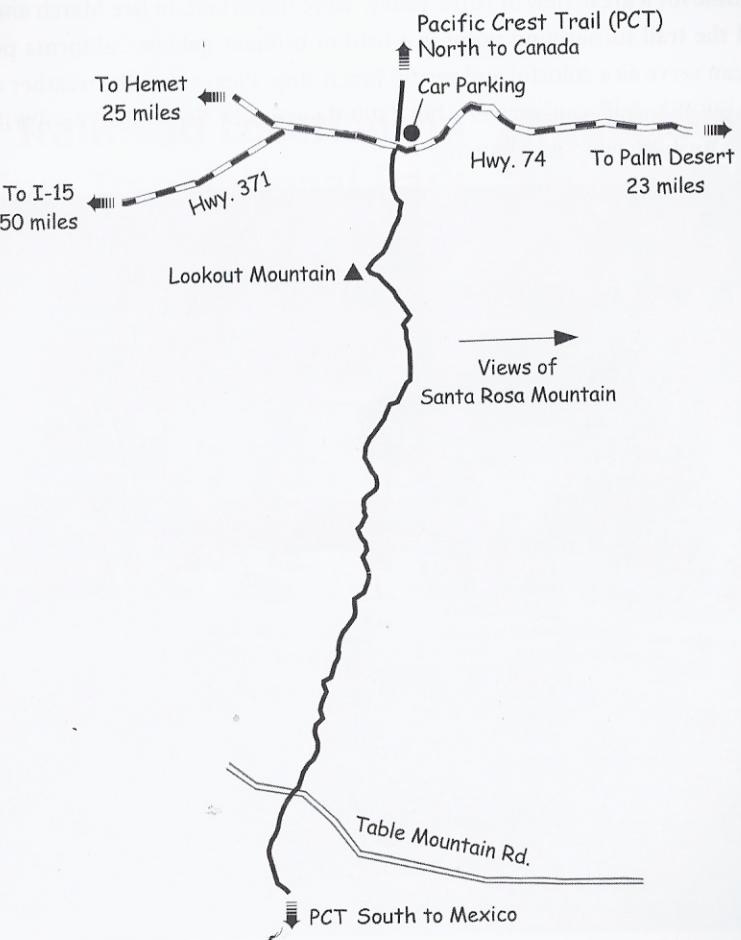
SEASON: September to May

INFORMATION: USDA Forest Service, Idyllwild, (909) 382-2922

DIRECTIONS

TO REACH THE TRAILHEAD for both the South and North Forks, take Hwy. 74 out of Palm Desert (south at the Hwy. 111 junction) and proceed 23 miles. Or, from Hemet, drive 0.5 mile east of the Hwy. 371 junction. There is a PCT sign on the right indicating a parking area. Park and cross the highway to the south, where you will come to a gate that opens onto the trail. The sign here indicates mileage south of this point. The South Fork described here goes 0.75 mile beyond Table Mountain Rd.

Hike 103



The Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) is the western answer to the eastern Appalachian Trail. Each runs south to north along the predominant mountain ranges found inland from both oceans. Both are over 2,000 miles in length. The PCT crosses near the Coachella Valley at the junction of Hwy. 74 and Hwy. 371 in Garner Valley. The trail reaches out and climbs to the ridge above the desert known as the Desert Divide, proceeds west along the ridge to the mountains above Idyllwild, and drops down the northwest side of San Jacinto Peak into Banning Pass, crossing over I-10 before heading north toward the Big Bear/Lake Arrowhead area. The South Fork is that section heading south toward Mexico, where the PCT meets Hwy. 74. It is a world apart from the North Fork, which is just across the highway and not nearly as warm and desertlike as its southern counterpart.

The trail first takes you through sage and low brush, up a mountainside and along a low ridge. From here, you can see the mountainous terrain that makes up the northern PCT route, and the magnificent vista of San Jacinto Peak. The trail swings alongside the mountain for 2 miles. To the left you will eventually see a steep canyon network that marks the northern watershed for the Anza-Borrego Desert, 20 miles to the southeast. You will also glimpse row after row of distant mountain ranges, while to the right rise low hills whose deep-green winter color suggests a hike in Wales. Passing through a flat meadow area, the trail begins a series of down-and-up wash crossings and alternating hill climbs. To the east, this hike shows you the best view of Santa Rosa Mountain's southwestern flank.

After 4.5 miles, the PCT reaches Table Mountain Road. Continue on for another 0.75 mile for a great view of Anza Valley. More important, in late March and early April the trail turnaround point is a field of brilliant golden California poppies that can serve as a colorful and restful lunch stop. Please note the weather conditions, as this trail can get very hot (100 degrees) in September or April if no Pacific onshore winds are blowing.



Ranch house at Mission Creek

Joshua Tree National Park

HIKES 104 – 113

Trailhead Locations in Joshua Tree National Park

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