

HIKE 73

El Capitan Open Space Preserve

Location	Near Lakeside
Highlights	Frequent vistas of coastal lowlands and ocean
Distance	11.0 miles round trip (to saddle)
Total Elevation Gain/Loss	4000'/4000'
Hiking Time	6 hours (round trip)
Optional Maps	USGS 7.5-min <i>San Vicente Reservoir, El Cajon Mtn.</i>
Best Times	November through April
Agency	SDCP
Difficulty	★★★★



As you walk along the granite-ribbed ridgeline, down the middle of the El Capitan Open Space Preserve, a binational panorama of ocean, islands, and innumerable mountain peaks lies in view. The broad San Diego River valley below curves beneath the sheer south face of El Cajon Mountain—the landmark informally known as “El Capitan.”

The 2800-acre preserve was pieced together out of former Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands adjacent to the Cleveland National Forest. If you have the determination to tackle some really severe uphill and downhill, and get the benefit of a serious cardiovascular workout, try following the main route into the preserve—an old, sometimes precariously steep road bulldozed by miners years ago. It twists and turns over a scrubby, boulder-punctuated landscape that in spring comes alive with a blue frosting of ceanothus (wild lilac) blossoms. Parts of this mining road are gradually being bypassed or improved and incorporated into the fledgling Trans-County Trail—a major multi-use pathway that will stretch east-west across San Diego County from Del Mar on the coast to Borrego Springs in the desert.

The statistics in the capsulized summary above do not include additional miles and time spent on three possible



Fire-following spring wildflowers

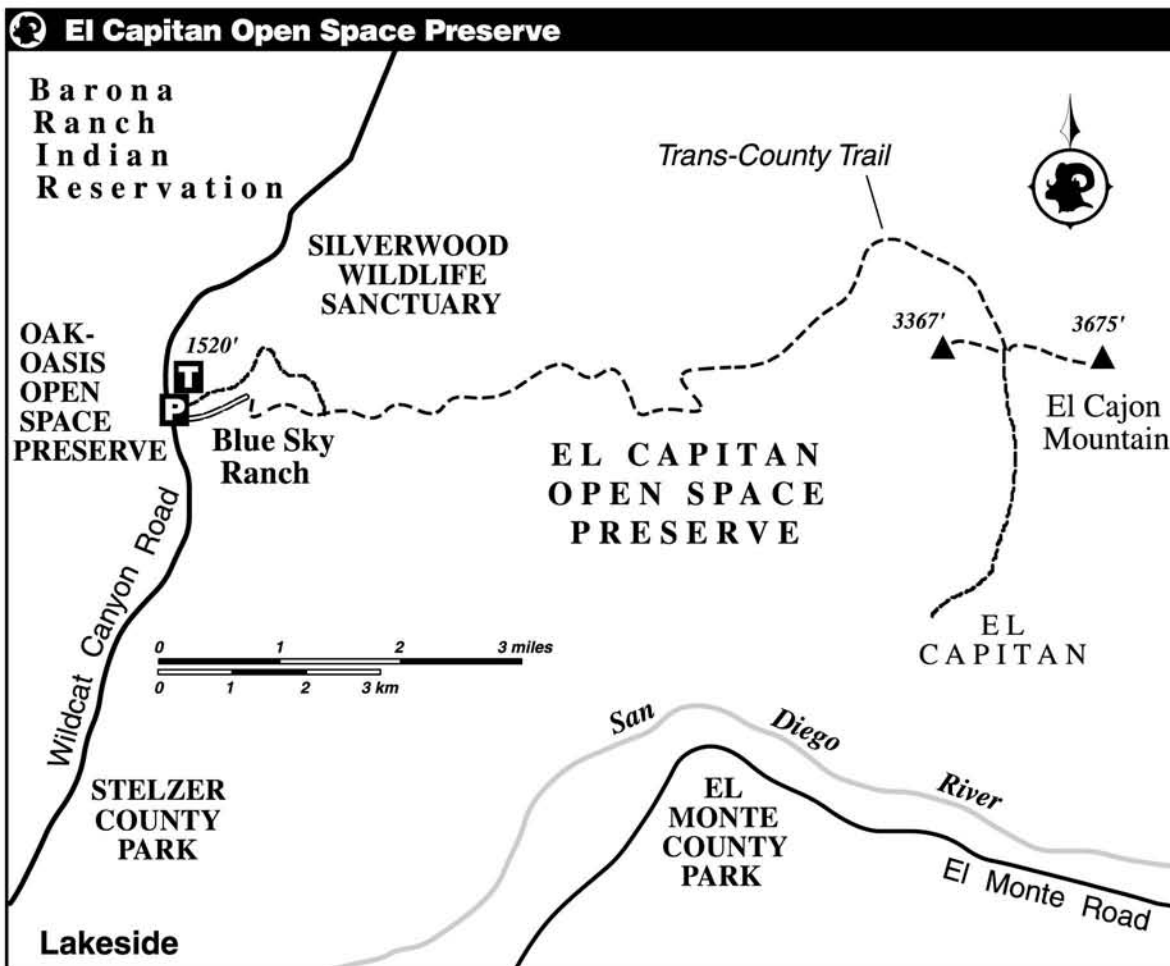
side trips, mentioned below. Even the main route, however, is surprisingly difficult, due to both the ups and downs, and a lack of abundant shade. Many hikers underestimate the amount of drinking water they will need. Bring more than you think you should. [El Capitan Open Space Preserve will likely be the last county-operated recreational facility to reopen after 2003's devastating Cedar Fire. As of this writing, no opening date has been announced.]

To Reach the Trailhead: To reach the trailhead from the town of Lakeside (northeast of San Diego), turn east on Maplevue Street where the freeway portion of Highway 67 ends. After 0.3 mile on Maplevue, turn left (north) on Ashwood Street. Ashwood soon becomes Wildcat Canyon Road, Proceed north on the combined Ashwood/Wildcat Canyon road 4.2

miles to a signed parking lot and trailhead for the El Capitan preserve on the right. (You can use the green mile markers by the roadside as your guide; slow down after mile marker 4.0.)

Description: From the lot, walk east 0.4 mile on the entry road to the private Blue Sky Ranch, past that ranch, to where the trail starts a steep, zigzag ascent up a cool, north-facing slope. You soon hook up with the old mining road, and the going gets easier for a while. [NOTE: These directions will change once a planned bypass trail is completed between the trailhead and the old mining road.]

As you reach a small summit (about 1.2 miles from the start) and start descending on the old mining road, the round top and sheer south brow of El Cajon Mountain (El Capitan) becomes visible in the middle distance. A very steep



uphill pitch, commencing at about 3 miles, will surely reduce you to painfully slow uphill scrambling, if only for a few minutes. At just under 4 miles, you reach another significant summit. From this spot, a short side path leads north to some abandoned mines—shallow tunnels cut into a chalky hillside.

Like Sisyphus, your elevation gain is tragically interrupted just ahead. You sink 300 feet in less than a half mile on a slippery, decomposing granite surface, before once again resuming uphill progress. At 4.7 miles there's a rock-lined spring on the left, brimming with iron-rich, non-potable water, or possibly dry. At 5.5 miles, the road arrives on a saddle between El Cajon Mountain's summit on the left (east) and a smaller 3367-foot peak on the right (west). You'll be retracing your steps from this point to get back to your car. Ahead, though, you have three choices for further exploration.

By turning right (west) and walking 0.2 mile, you reach a 3367-foot summit, with evident remnants of a radio antenna installation. This rocky peaklet offers a nice panoramic view west and south.

By turning left (east) you can follow a narrow path threading 0.5 mile through thick chaparral and around jumbo-sized granitic boulders to El Cajon Mountain's summit. (The route is slated to be improved and incorporated into the Trans-County Trail.) Although the summit is rounded and clogged with boulders, the view from there is panoramic in all directions.

The third, most difficult alternative is a 1.4-mile-long trek straight ahead (south) from the saddle, using a severely eroded and partially overgrown roadbed. This route takes you to the sheer brow of El Capitan. Walk out to the edge, beyond the end of the old roadbed, and descend over boulders 50 or 100 yards for a pseudo-aerial view of the San Diego River Valley and El Capitan Reservoir, complete with toy-like boats floating on its blue surface.