



Roam-O-Rama

The most isolated stretch of the Pacific Crest Trail within San Diego County traverses the Caliente Wilderness Study Area.

By [Jerry Schad](#) | Published Thursday, April 15, 1999

San Diego County's 135-mile portion of the 2600-mile-long Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) starts at the Mexican border near Campo, zigs and zags from one rounded ridge to another, and passes into Riverside County near the town of Anza. Near the Riverside County line, the PCT barely comes in contact with civilization, intersecting only one barely traveled dirt road in the final 15 miles of travel northward to the county line. If you want to achieve true isolation from San Diego County's teeming masses, just spend a few hours (or a full day) hiking the PCT segment profiled here.

To reach the starting point, drive north on Lost Valley Road from mile 37.0 on Highway 79 near Warner Springs. After following 4.6 miles of narrow, winding roadway, you'll come to a road summit and the intersection of a gated, abandoned dirt road. Park in the limited space provided. (You'll need to post a National Forest Adventure Pass on your parked car. Call 619-673-6180 or 760-788-0250 for information.) Walk up the abandoned road 0.5 mile to a trail junction where the PCT joins from the right. Continue walking uphill on the old roadbed, somewhat monotonously, a mile farther to a point where the PCT tread diverges right. Make the right turn (by staying left you would descend to a seasonal spring).

The scenery improves with every step now. You're in a section of Cleveland National Forest that was designated some years ago as the Caliente Wilderness Study Area. Though it may never achieve statutory wilderness status, it remains today a wilderness in spirit. You wind up through scattered Coulter pines and picturesque granitic outcrops, with nice views of Lake Henshaw and the grassland surrounding it. From now through early May the slopes hereabouts are tinted pink with the blossoms of manzanita and blue and white with blooming ceanothus. A dozen exotic fragrances scent the air. Still higher on the winding path, the Coulter pines are joined by live oaks and an occasional black oak.

At a point nearly 6 miles from your starting point you may spot, below and to the east, a hidden glade filled with pines and oaks, and fringed by a small stream (which merely trickles in this year of little rainfall). Farther north, the PCT winds over a stretch of less interesting chaparral country. This hidden glade -- if you've had enough energy to reach it -- is a good place to visit before heading back to your car.

