

18 Switzer Picnic Area to Commodore Switzer Trail Camp, Bear Canyon, Bear Canyon Trail Camp

8 miles round trip; 1000' elevation gain

Classification: Moderate

Season: November-June

Topo maps: Condor Peak, Pasadena

FEATURES

Rugged Bear Canyon, the largest tributary of the Arroyo Seco, is as near to being wilderness as any place in the front range of the San Gabriels. A beautiful stream, with mirror-like pools, cascades, and small waterfalls, graces the canyon bottom. Stately big-cone spruces keep much of the creek in near-perpetual shade. By a fortunate accident of geography, Bear Canyon is isolated from man's frenetic activity even though it lies smack in the middle of the much-abused front range. Although highways and fire roads virtually circle the chasm, none comes quite close enough to violate its sanctity.

This trip descends the Arroyo Seco to its junction with Bear Canyon, then ascends the latter to lonely Bear Canyon Trail Camp, set on a spruce-shaded streamside bench about halfway up the canyon. You will be tempted to stay the night here, where nature retains a small foothold, and civilization—just over the ridge—seems far away.

Wear lug-soled boots; the old Tom Sloan Trail that once traveled the length of the canyon is in poor shape, and you must scramble and boulder-hop much of the way.

DESCRIPTION

Drive up the Angeles Crest Highway 10½ miles from La Canada to the side road down to Switzer Picnic Area, ½ mile past the junction of the Angeles Crest and Angeles Forest highways. Turn right and descend to the parking area outside the campground, ¼ mile.

Cross the bridge and follow the trail down-canyon, past Commodore Switzer Trail Camp, and down into the gorge of the Arroyo Seco below Switzer Falls (see Trip 17 for details). Continue down the Arroyo Seco gorge another ¾ mile to the junction with Bear Canyon (2 miles from the start). The trail turns east up Bear Canyon, skipping from

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side to side. Frequently it disappears; continue along the creek and you will find it again. About 2 miles up the canyon, the trail climbs onto a forested bench on the south slope, about 20' above the stream. Here is Bear Canyon Trail Camp, with tables and stoves. Be on the lookout for this spot; it is easy to miss the trail leading up the slope.

This trip returns the same way. You also have the option of continuing up the canyon trail another 2 miles, then steeply up to Tom Sloan Saddle and the Mt. Lowe fire road (see Trip 33), or dropping from the saddle into Millard Canyon (see Trip 19). Either of these options requires a car shuttle.

DESCRIPTION

Drive up the Angeles Crest Highway 10½ miles from La Canada to the side road down to Switzer Picnic Area, ½ mile past the junction of the Angeles Crest and Angeles Forest highways. Turn right and descend to the parking area outside the picnic area, ¼ mile.

Cross the bridge and follow the trail down-canyon. It is a mile to Commodore Switzer Trail Camp; part of the distance you must boulder-hop, where the trail is washed out. From the trail camp, cross the stream and follow the trail as it climbs and then contours along the west slope above the falls. *Do not* follow the creek below camp; it abruptly drops fifty feet at the falls. About ¼ mile beyond camp is an unmarked junction: the right (southwest) fork is the main Arroyo Seco Trail, down to Oakwilde and Pasadena (see Trips 15 and 16). Go left (southeast), dropping into the gorge of the Arroyo Seco below the falls. When you reach the creek, turn upstream ¼ mile to Switzer Falls. Remember, don't climb the sheer rock sidewalls of the falls. Then turn back downstream and follow the woody gorge past numerous sparkling pools and miniature cascades, about a mile to the Bear Canyon junction.

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George Z. Thomas

