

Bill Townsend's Hike for 6 October 2002, Ref Hike 545 and Anneliese last April.

Temescal Canyon Trails Open Gateway to Nature

WHERE: Temescal Gateway Park, Topanga State Park.

DISTANCE: Canyon loop to the towers is 7.0 miles round trip with 1100-foot elevation gain; to Skull Rock is only 5.4 miles round trip.

Park agencies in the Santa Monica Mountains have combined forces to open several gateways to the mountains. For hikers, particularly those accustomed to beginning hikes at the end of dirt roads greeted by trail signs nailed to trees, these gateways are deluxe: restrooms, picnic grounds, water fountains, native plant gardens and more.

I am particularly fond of Temescal Gateway Park in Pacific Palisades. Not only does this park have it all, but park pathways also quickly leave it all behind.

Temescal Canyon is an ideal Santa Monica Mountains sampler. You get an oak- and sycamore-shaded canyon, a seasonal waterfall and terrific views from the ridge crest.

Temescal has long been a canyon that inspired nature lovers and enlightenment seekers. During the 1920s and 1930s, the canyon hosted Chautauqua assemblies, large educational and recreational gatherings that featured lectures, concerts and stage performances. The canyon was purchased by the Presbyterian Synod in 1943 and used as a retreat center until 1995, when the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy bought the property.

Directions to the trailhead:

From Los Angeles, head west on the Santa Monica Freeway (1-10) to its end and continue north on Pacific Coast Highway. Turn north (right) on Temescal Canyon Road and drive 1.1 miles. Just after the intersection with Sunset Boulevard, turn left into the parking area for Temescal Gateway Park. Sometimes we park at the lower end parking area because that is where we will do the after hike snacks.

The hike:

Walk up the canyon on the landscaped path past the restrooms. The footpath takes on a wilder appearance and soon crosses a branch of Temescal Creek by way of a wood footbridge.

At a signed junction, continue through the canyon on Temescal Canyon Trail, saving Temescal Ridge Trail for your return route. Travel among graceful old oaks, maples and sycamores to the "doggy turnaround" (no dogs beyond this point) and enter Topanga State Park.

The path ascends moderately to another footbridge and a close-up view of a small waterfall tumbling over some large boulders. Leaving the canyon behind, the path steepens and climbs westward up Temescal Ridge to a signed junction with Temescal Ridge Trail.

I always enjoy going uphill on this trail a half-mile or so to the distinctly shaped Skull Rock. The rock is a good place to rest, cool off and admire the view.

As you return to the trail, head down Temescal Ridge Trail and you'll get excellent views of Santa Monica Bay, Palos Verdes Peninsula, Catalina Island and down-town Los Angeles. The view to the southwest down at the housing developments isn't inspiring, but the view of the rough unaltered northern part of Temescal Canyon is.

After those fine views, the path descends steeply and tunnels into tall chaparral. Continue past junctions with Bienvenida and Leacock trails and follow the narrow ridgeline back to a junction with Temescal Canyon Trail. Retrace your steps on Sunset Trail back to the trailhead.