

USE AT YOUR OWN RISK

San Mateo Peak

3,591'

Location: Santa Ana Mountains
Maps: Cleveland National Forest
Topo: Alberhill 7.5, Sitton Peak 7.5

Primary Route: 3 miles, 900' gain one way

Driving Instruction:

Exit I-5 in San Juan Capistrano on Hwy. 74 East (Ortega Hwy.) and drive 23 miles to El Cariso Ranger Station. (Also reached from Elsinore by driving 8 miles West on Hwy. 74 from Grand Ave.) Past the Ranger Station, turn right (or, coming from Elsinore, just before the RS turn left) on the South Main Divide Truck Trail, marked 'Killen Trail', for 2.5 miles to the wide parking area on the right which is the Morgan Trail trailhead. Park here.

Hiking Instructions:

Take the Morgan Trail (sign) from the parking lot. About 75 steps BEFORE passing a wooden sign-in box turn sharp left on a narrow trail, which follows a creek bed. Continue along this trail up the usually dry creek, crossing it 5 times. Very soon, with the creek bed on your left, take a trail that turns very sharply right (the main trail continues straight ahead). The first few steps of this trail are indistinct, but there is a rock pile and a wooden sign pointing the way to go. After a few steps the trail is more visible, leads uphill and is easy to follow. The trail climbs a ridge and contours around a hill. A flagpole is located on the top of this hill; hang gliders sometimes have flags here. Continue on the ridge, heading towards a bump with a large rock with a duck on it. This is NOT the peak. Just below the pitch to the large ducked rock the trail takes a sharp left going steeply downhill into a gully. The trail continues, going uphill to a second ridge and turns to a southerly direction, continues past several bumps with rock outcrops to the last rock outcrop, the highest point on this ridge, where the register is located.

Notes:

No reliable water on trail, except in the creek after rain. Adventure Pass required.
Past the peak the trail continues ¼ miles to a wooden sign. From here you could hike 5 miles to Tenaja Falls, or 1.6 miles east to the Rancho Capistrano, a settlement on the Main Divide Road, 2.5 miles up the road from the Morgan Trail trailhead. We assume that the Rancho Capistrano equestrians maintain the trail. They also put up several posts with dinosaurs along the trail.

Special Notes:

The peak was named by Ken Croker who maintained trails in the Santa Ana Mountains for 20 years with Sierra Club volunteers. El Cariso is the settlement to the northwest. On a clear day the Channel Islands, Mt. Baldy, San Geronio, San Jacinto and Palomar Observatory are just some of the sights. This peak is the high point in the San Mateo Wilderness and thus allows you to see much of it.

Nearby Peaks: Elsinore Peak with towers, a drive-up and not on the Lower Peaks List.

Original: Ken Croker 1990, rev. 2004
Update: David Comerzan, 2017