

Temescal Canyon's Peaceful Path

By JOHN MCKINNEY

Temescal Canyon, "cradle of the Palisades" and gateway to many miles of Santa Monica Mountains trails, is a tranquil retreat within the city limits of Los Angeles. During the 1920s the canyon was the site of yearly Chautauquas—a mixed bag of lectures, sermons, recreational and cultural events—sponsored by the Methodist founders of Pacific Palisades. Half a century has passed since the last Chautauqua, but the canyon is still a popular retreat, both for visitors to the Presbyterian Conference Center and for hikers.

Temescal Canyon Trail travels the canyon floor, then joins steep Temescal Fire Road and climbs to scenic overlooks amid the highest summits (more than 2,000 feet) in the Santa Monicas. From the overlooks you can see Santa Ynez, Temescal and Rustic canyons, as well as the Los Angeles Basin and the great blue Pacific.

Directions to trailhead: From Sunset Boulevard in Pacific Palisades, turn north on Temescal Canyon Road. Proceed for half a mile and park in a lot, just before

the gated entrance to the Presbyterian Conference Center. Hikers must sign in and out at the gate. Respect the quiet and privacy of the center.

In coming months, the trailhead for this hike may change. The Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy is completing development of a 20-acre park just down the canyon from the conference grounds. This park, with additional short trails, parking and restrooms, will likely become the jump-off place for canyon excursions.

The Hike: Walk into the canyon on the paved road, passing a number of meeting halls and residences. Signs direct you to the trail, which is shaded by oaks, willows and sycamores and follows Temescal Creek.

The trail climbs through the narrow gorge of the canyon and, 1½ miles from the trailhead, crosses to the left (west) side of the canyon. You might want to stop and cool off at the small waterfall here at the creek crossing.

At the crossing stands an old burned bridge, which fell victim to the 1978 Mandeville fire that blackened the upper reaches of Temescal Canyon. Few other signs of the fire are in evidence; nature's regenerative powers in a chaparral community are truly amazing.

Scramble up the steep slopes to the other side of the canyon and begin switchbacking up the mountainside on a pathway that soon widens into a fire road. Temescal Fire Road levels out atop a northwest-trending ridge. The view to the southwest down at the housing developments isn't too inspiring, but the view of the rough, unaltered northern part of the canyon is.

Proceed along the ridge; you'll see some rock outcroppings. A short side trip off the fire road will bring you to Skull Rock, where you can climb inside the wind-formed (aeolian) caves to cool off or picnic. Return the same way or continue on the fire road.

If you want to stretch your legs and get better and better views of the Santa Monicas, continue up Temescal Fire Road. Joining the fire road from the left are Split Rock Road and, a mile farther north, Trailer Canyon Road. A microwave tower, atop what locals have dubbed "Radio Peak," stands halfway between the two points.

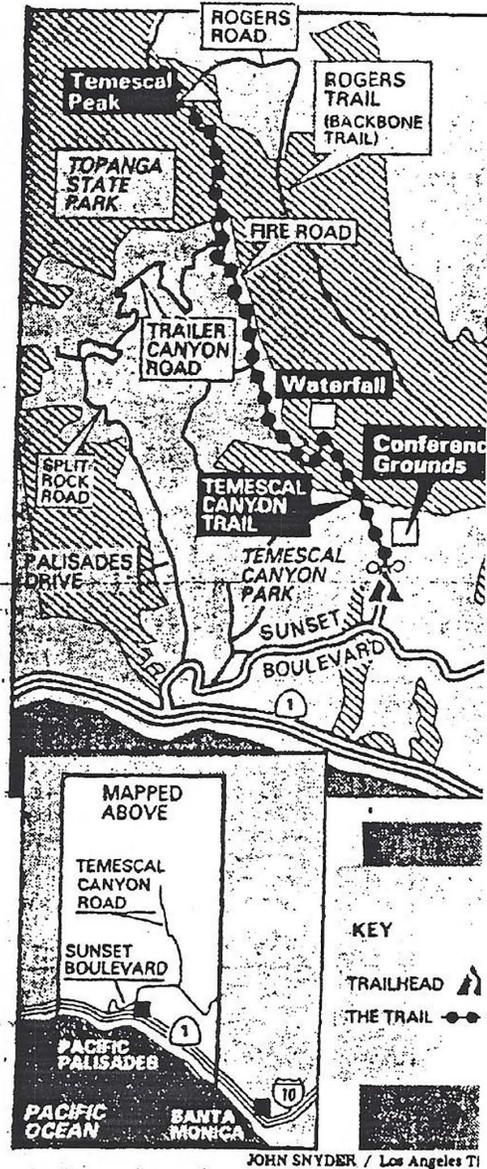
One and a half miles of mostly level walking beyond the Trailer Canyon intersection brings you to Rogers Road. Near the intersection is Temescal Peak (2,126 feet), highest peak in Topanga State Park. If you wish, scramble up a short and steep fire break to the top for a fine view.

Rogers Road, a segment of the Backbone Trail, leads six miles rightward to Will Rogers State Historic Park and leftward to intersections with both loops of the Eagle Spring Trail, which in turn leads to Topanga State Park headquarters. These extensions suggest a car shuttle or a very long day of hiking. Otherwise, return the same way via Temescal Fire Road to the trailhead.

George Z. Thomas

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Temescal Canyon Trail

Conference Grounds to Waterfall: 3 miles round trip; 200-foot elevation gain.

Conference Grounds to Ridge Overlook: 5½ miles round trip; 700-foot elevation gain.

Conference Grounds to Rogers Road: 12½ miles round trip; 1,600-foot elevation gain.