

Santa Cruz Peak 06G- Star Emblem Peak

Lat/Lon 34.6691548,-119.8123604
UTM 11S 242302E 3839954N

Elevation: 5570'

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Location: Santa Barbara County, about 18 miles north of Goleta, 135 miles from Los Angeles

Nearby peaks: McKinley Mountain, San Rafael Mountain

Land Manager: Los Padres National Forest, Santa Barbara Ranger District (805) 967-3481

USE AT YOUR OWN RISK. CONDITIONS MAY CHANGE, AND UNEXPECTED HAZARDS MAY BE PRESENT.

About the peak

Santa Cruz Peak, with its neighbors San Rafael and McKinley Mountains, constitute the well-known "Big Three", deep in the heart of wild and beautiful Los Padres National Forest. It is a long hike, backpack or mountain bike trip from the nearest trailhead, unless you are on one of the periodic HPS-sponsored trail maintenance trips. Further trip planning information is in the notes below. The peaks in the area can be quite hot in summer.

Like the other Big Three peaks it is approached via a long and scenic, but still tedious, road hike to McKinley Saddle. One can stop along the way at McKinley Spring and campground for water that is generally available year around and some shade, or camp if done as a backpack. From the saddle the trail continues along ridges on an old fire road to the base of the summit ridge, where the road turns slightly left and continues around the mountain. From here route finding is challenging through the dense brush, and one must find and stay on the narrow use trail to have any hope of reaching the peak. If you persevere you will be awed by the magnificent view, and may be surprised to find how close you are to the ocean that appears only a few miles beyond the dense forest at your feet.

McKinley Mountain, Santa Cruz Peak, and San Rafael Mountain are together known as "The Big Three". They are normally done as a two-day backpack, camping overnight at McKinley Spring.

CAMPING

Year-round water is usually available from the large pipe-fed container at the camp (avoid using water from the horse trough) but should be treated because the water is obtained from storage. Bears frequent the area, so bear-proofing food and other perishables is also advisable.

MOUNTAIN BIKING

8N08 is well graded and maintained as far as McKinley Saddle. These 8 road miles are suitable for mountain biking.

TRIP PLANNING

Round trip excursions from McKinley Saddle:

Santa Cruz Peak is 11 miles, 1800' gain, plus 2000' gain on the return (7-9 hours).

McKinley Mountain is 1 mile, 400' gain (1 hour).

San Rafael Mountain is 5 miles, 1100' gain (2 hours).

Add 1 mile, 200' gain if the trip begins from camp. Round trip for the Big Three as a day hike is 33 miles, 8600' gain. Camping is recommended.

NATURAL HISTORY NOTE

This area experienced a major fire in 1994. The routes to McKinley and San Rafael were not affected, but the fire dramatically changed the vegetation on Santa Cruz Peak. The last portion of the climbing route to this peak has been permanently changed, with very dense stands of brush replacing the the relatively open slopes that used to be found there.

Santa Cruz Peak has 1 official HPS route:

Santa Cruz Peak Route 1

Distance: 27 miles round trip on dirt road and cross-country Gain: 7100
Time: 16-18 hours round trip
Difficulty rating: Class 2 near summit, very strenuous Navigation difficulty: Difficult
Trailhead location on [Google Maps](#) Road type: Dirt
Adventure Pass may be required

Driving directions:

- Take US 101 to just west of Santa Barbara. Turn north on SR 154.
- Continue north and then west about 22 miles past Lake Cachuma, to Armour Ranch Road on the right. Turn right, note your odometer and go as follows:
- At 1.3 miles, fork with Happy Canyon Road (paved) on the right. Turn right.
- At 12.9 miles Cachuma Campground.
- At 15.3 miles Cachuma Saddle and a ranger station on the left. Park in the large parking lot south of the ranger station.

Hiking directions:

- From the parking area (3100'), cross the highway and take a short left (north) to the gate marking the beginning of 8N08. Pass the gate and twist easterly up the dirt road for 7 1/2 miles to a good camping spot and water source at 5600', easily visible down the slope on the left about 100 yards past a pair of roadside water tanks. (The tanks mark McKinley Spring, named Cold Spring on the USGS topo map.)
- Hike 1/2 mile farther east on 8N08 to McKinley Saddle (5800'-) between McKinley Mountain and San Rafael Mountain, the turnoffs for side trips to these two peaks.
- To continue straight for Santa Cruz Peak, locate the unmaintained jeep road on the east side of this broad saddle, just south of a sign that marks the boundary of the San Rafael Wilderness and the beginning of Mission Pine Trail 21W08.
- Turn south on this poor road (in places little more than a track and occasionally washed out) which drops 600' as it gradually contours around the southwest side of San Rafael Mountain and then up to the main north-south ridge (5800'+), some 1 1/2 miles from McKinley Saddle.
- Take the right (south) road fork at the main ridge. Proceed south over a number of bumps. The track eventually takes aim at bump 5484' and becomes obliterated in spots by excess brush. Persevere through this zone, gaining 200' to the foot of the steep northern slope of bump 5484', where the road becomes more obvious as it contours left around the bump.
- Leave the road here on a use trail that contours around the right (west) side of bump 5484' to the saddle on the east flank of Santa Cruz Peak.

- From this saddle, continue up hill for about 15 meters. You will see a ridge on your left (south) and trees. There is a use trail that goes up through the trees following the ridge on its north side for about 100 meters.
- The use trail then turns to your right and traverses the slope until you reach some rocks.
- Follow the rocks back up to the ridge and follow the ridge over one false summit to Santa Cruz.

Additional Route 1 notes:

