

A Journey to the Top of the City of Los Angeles

A Center for Land Use Interpretation Walking Tour

This tour is a 10.6 mile round trip hike or bike ride with 2,800 feet of elevation gain on a fire road. The journey begins in Haines Canyon and concludes at an antenna farm, atop the highest point in the City of Los Angeles, 5,074 foot Mt. Lukens. Along the way you will see evidence of the interaction of the built landscape with the precipitous mountains that surround the urban fringe of Los Angeles. The trip is strenuous, so bring plenty of water. This trail can be very hot during the summer months, and the summit can be cold and windy.

The Trailhead

N 34° 15.35' W 118° 16.37'

The trail begins 11 miles northwest of Pasadena. By car: Take the 210 freeway to Lowell Ave.; head north on Lowell Ave.; at the end of Lowell Ave. take the left fork, which is Day St.; make a right on Haines Canyon Ave. (Make sure that you park south of the no-parking signs.) Proceed to the end of the street and past the locked gate. The trailhead begins at the end of Haines Canyon Ave. By bus: Take the #90 or #91 bus to Haines Canyon Ave. and Foothill Blvd., walk north on Haines Canyon Ave. to Day St.; continue directions as above.

The San Gabriel Mountains are part of the Transverse Ranges and run east-west, unlike the majority of mountain ranges in California such as the Sierras, which run North-South. The Transverse Ranges include the San Gabriels as well as the Santa Monica Mountains, the San Bernardinos, and the Santa Inez range near Santa Barbara. All of the Transverse Ranges owe their height to the San Andreas Fault, which takes a detour towards the east in Southern California. The San Andreas, in fact, forces the San Gabriel mountains up at a higher rate than their erosion. The San Gabriel Mountains, of which Mt. Lukens is a part, are also a nexus of Southern California's other two other notorious hazards, fire and flood.

Abutting Los Angeles, the San Gabriels have always been a destination for recreational activities, but the San Gabriels have also seen many other uses.

Human activity in the San Gabriels includes flood control structures, ski lifts, roads, mines, utility corridors, observatories, and the many electronic sites that broadcast radio and television signals to the metropolis below. Between 1922 and 1927, physicist Albert Michelson determined the speed of light by bouncing a beam of light between the highest point in the San Gabriels, 10,064 foot Mt. San Antonio and Mt. Wilson.

The peak you will be ascending, Mount Lukens, was once known as Sister Elsie peak, named after a nun who ran a orphanage for Indians in the area. No record of Sister Elsie has ever been found and some say that the whole story is a legend. Renamed for early Angeles Forest supervisor and mayor of Pasadena Theodore Lukens, Mt. Lukens hosts an impressive array of antennas at the top and an excellent example of flood control structures at its base. This particular trail was chosen because along the way you will see a condensed version of two of the primary ways the City of Los Angeles interacts with the mountains that surround it: flood control and communications.

Haines Canyon Debris Basin

N 34° 15.41' W 118° 16.36'

The Haines Canyon Debris Basin lies just inside the boundary of the Angeles National Forest and is part of a vast system of flood control structures that form a protective barrier against the often cataclysmic forces of rain and erosion that characterize this intersection of wilderness and suburbia. There is a special significance to this particular debris basin that author Jared Orsi explores in his book 'Hazardous Metropolis.' According to Orsi, in the early 20th century the water filled depression you are looking at was once a gravel pit. After the notorious flood of New Year Eve 1934, it was noticed that, while the check dams that you will see up the fire road ahead failed, the gravel pit successfully caught much of the debris that came down the canyon. While debris basins had been constructed before in other places around the world, this former gravel pit showed the effectiveness of using debris basins as a flood control strategy in the Los Angeles area. While most debris basins are fenced

off from public use, this one is open and is even stocked with fish.

Check Dams

N 34° 15.44' W 118° 16.17'

In 1915, an experimental set of check dams was constructed, to test the effectiveness of this flood control method here in Haines Canyon, though the ones you will see today date from the 1970s. The purpose of check dams is to slow down the flow of debris as it comes down the canyon. This is accomplished by the dams themselves as well as the vegetation that grows behind them.

Cabin Sites

N 34° 15.999' W 118° 16.012'

Just to the east and up a small hill from this grove of oak trees are the foundations and fireplaces of several cabins that were built in 1921 and severely damaged by a flood in 1929. This flood was caused in part by the Pavers Rock Company, which had left tons of rock at the mouth of the canyon, creating an unintentional dam. The cabins were finally destroyed by the 1934 flood. Also in the oak grove is an unidentified grave of a flood victim. Far enough from suburban Tujunga for privacy, the presence of discarded beer bongs and nitrous oxide canisters marks this oak grove as an informal recreational site typical of urban fringe areas.

View of Verdugo

N 34° 15.917' W 118° 15.667'

From here on, the trail gets steeper, as we depart the urban fringe and enter the wilderness. Continue up the trail and take the fork to the right passing a swinging metal gate. If you go to the left you will find a fenced area formerly used for beekeeping. Looking to the south you will see the Verdugo mountain range which separates the Sunland Tujunga area from Glendale and Burbank. On top of the Verdugo range you can see several transmission sites that are leased by a wide range of businesses and public agencies including American Medical Response, the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, the Cities of Burbank and Glendale, Motorola

portable radios, and KXTA FM's microwave link to Mt. Wilson to name just a few. The Verdugo range presents a large obstacle for some of the transmitters on Lukens and Mt. Wilson creating what is known as a *transmission shadow* affecting a large swath of the Los Angeles area.

Rim of the Valley Trail

N 34° 15.833' W 118° 15.267'

At this point is the Rim of the Valley trail which descends into the Deukmejian Wilderness Park and skirts the Dumsmore debris basin. Going down by this trail puts you at a considerable distance from where you began.

View of Hansen Dam

N 34° 16.033' W 118° 15.250'

To the west, just a mile from the confluence of the Big Tujunga and Little Tujunga washes you can see the Hansen Dam, which was built by the Army Corps of Engineers between 1939 and 1940 to hold mountain flood waters away from the City of Los Angeles and the lower portions of the San Fernando Valley. The dam serves a 147 square mile watershed area. Currently the Hansen Dam, like the Sepulveda Dam to the west and Whittier Narrows to the east is a large recreation area supporting a variety of recreational activities. Incidentally, California has the second largest horse population in the country after Texas, with over 100,000 horses in Los Angeles County. Most horse owners in urban areas of Los Angeles County live near watershed areas like the Hansen Dam and the Los Angeles and San Gabriel rivers, as these sacrificial zones provide open space for trails and equestrian facilities.

Water Tank

N 34° 16.250' W 118° 14.483'

The stone slab marked 'Pigpen' is an underground water cistern named for Pigpen Canyon and intended for fire fighting during the hot months of summer and fall. Many of the cisterns in the Angeles Forest have fallen into disrepair and are no longer used. Nevertheless, water cisterns such as this are part of a fire fighting infrastructure in the Angeles Forest that also includes fire roads, fuel-breaks, helispots, and a network of fire stations.

Top of Mt. Lukens

N 34° 16.133' W 118° 14.283'

You are now at 5,074 feet, at the highest point in the City of Los Angeles, and approximately 23 miles from the ocean, which, if conditions are right, you should be able to see. Named for Theodore Lukens, a close friend of John Muir, Mt. Lukens is one of twenty-seven communications sites designated by the Forest Service in the Angeles National Forest, and hosts a wide variety of non-broadcast transmitters including cell phone antennas, microwave, two-way radio and public safety frequencies. The antenna towers are leased by telephone companies, public safety agencies, and businesses including the Department of Water and Power, the American Red Cross, Aviation Spectrum Resources, Inc., which manages the Aeronautical Enroute VHF Spectrum, and many others – everything from taxi companies to cement truck fleets. Several of the towers are maintained by Mountain Union Telecom and American Tower Incorporated, companies that build the towers and lease space on them to tenants who provide commercial mobile radio service, cellular service, and microwave relays. Mobile Relay Associates operates a tower providing two way radio. The companies that maintain these towers also provide backup generators and lease rack space in the cinder block buildings that you see on the peak.

From here it's all downhill, to Los Angeles. . .

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