

Hike #526

HIKING: SANTA MONICA MOUNTAINS

ALTERNATE HIKES AVAILABLE

Get Off Road for Views in Unspoiled Zuma Canyon

By JOHN MCKINNEY

At first, when you turn inland off Pacific Coast Highway onto Bonsall Drive and enter Zuma Canyon, it looks like many other canyons in the Santa Monica Mountains: huge haciendas perched precipitously on slopes, accompanied by lots of lots for sale.

But the road ends, and only footpaths enter Zuma Canyon. And therein lies the difference between Zuma and other canyons; no paved road violates its sanctity.

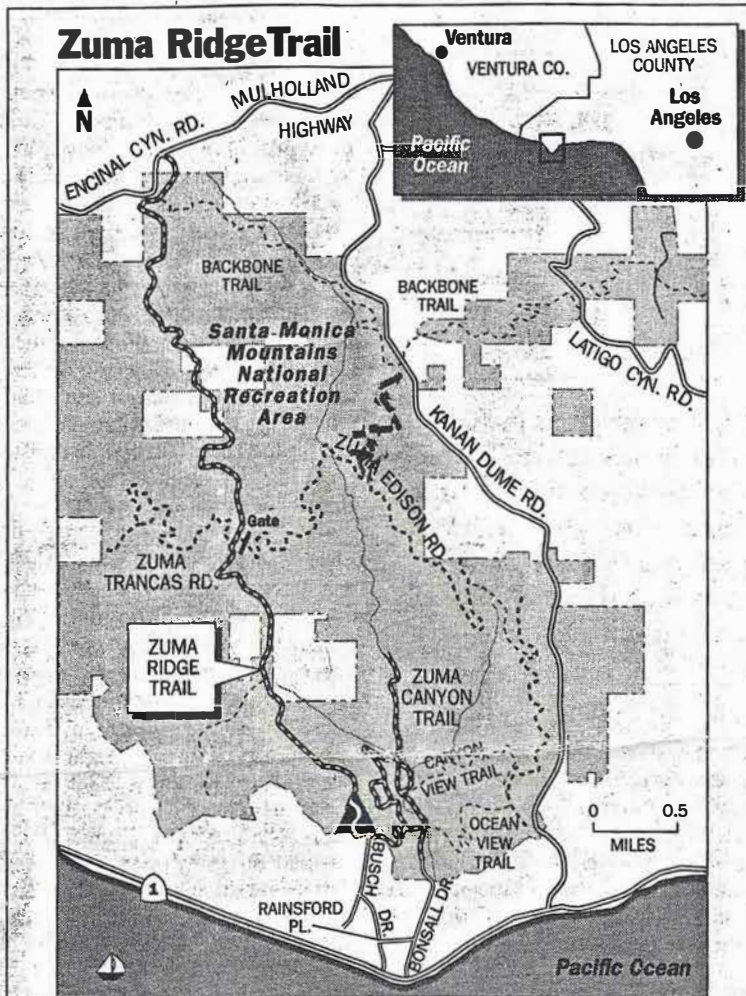
Malibu, Topanga, Temescal and Santa Ynez—perhaps these canyons and others in the Santa Monica Mountains looked like Zuma a century ago: a creek cascading over magnificent sandstone boulders, a jungle of willow and lush stream-side flora, fern-fringed pools and towering rock walls.

Zuma Canyon, which opened to public use in 1989, is one of the gems, if not the scenic gem, of the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. Ten years of National Park Service stewardship has brought improved trails, better access and signage to the canyon; however, the agency wisely left well enough alone, preserving the wild and remote flavor of this rugged country.

Hikers can partake of Zuma Canyon's grandeur via three routes. For an easy family walk, join the two-mile Zuma Loop Trail, which explores the canyon mouth. Hardy hikers will relish the challenge of the gorge—two miles of trail-less creek-crossing and boulder-hopping, one of the most difficult hikes in the Santa Monicas.

Zuma Ridge Trail, today's featured route, lives up to the promise of its name. Hikers ascend Zuma Canyon's west ridge for grand ocean and mountain views, then follow a series of fire roads and footpaths to circle back to the trail head.

This loop around Zuma Canyon's walls is a great winter workout and conditioning hike. Two major ascents and descents en route are sure to burn off plenty of



WHERE: Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area.

DISTANCE: 9.8-mile loop with 4,700-foot elevation gain.

TERRAIN: Steep, chaparral-cloaked ridges, lush canyon.

HIGHLIGHTS: One of the most pristine canyons in the Santa Monica Mountains.

DEGREE OF DIFFICULTY: Strenuous.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, 401 W. Hillcrest Drive, Thousand Oaks, CA 91360; tel. (805) 370-2301.

DISTANCE 11 TO 11.5 (ELEV. 2800-2870)

HELENE WEBB / For The Times

calories.

Bring lots of water. Water is available at the Bonsall Drive trail head but nowhere else on the hike. A water spout is located about midway along the Zuma Ridge route, but it's for horses only. At the conclusion of this thirst-inducing trek, I like to reward myself with a giant healthy drink from the juice bar just down the road from the trail head at Busch Drive and Pacific Coast Highway. Those seeking a pre-hike caffeine lift will find a coffeehouse next to the juice bar. Ah, Malibu!

Directions to trail head: From Pacific Coast Highway in Malibu, head north one mile past an intersection with Kanan Dume Road and turn right on Bonsall Drive. (This turn is just before the turnoff for Zuma Beach.) Drive a mile (the last 100 yards on dirt road) to road's end at a parking lot.

Those hikers intending to start their excursion on the Zuma Ridge Trail should continue very briefly up-coast past the Bonsall Drive turnoff on Pacific Coast Highway to the next major right turn—Busch Drive. Travel a little more

than a mile to the small dirt parking lot and signed trail.

The hike: Just before you join Zuma Ridge Trail (a dirt road, gated to prevent vehicle entry), note the signed footpath (Ridge Canyon Access Trail) just to the east. This path will return you to the trail head on the last leg of your long loop.

Begin your shadeless ascent, following the dirt road below some water tanks. Up, up, up you go along the ridge between Zuma Canyon on your right and Trancas Canyon on your left. Pause frequently to catch your breath and to look behind you at the sparkling blue Pacific and the Malibu Riviera.

Three miles of vigorous ascent bring you to a junction with the right-forking Zuma Edison Road. What goes up must come down, and down east you go toward the floor of Zuma Canyon. After a mile's descent, you'll pass a water spout for horses, then continue the steep descent another mile or so to the sycamore-shaded canyon bottom. By all means take a break here and marshal your energy for this hike's second major climb.

The road climbs southeasterly out of the canyon. Far below is Kanan Dume Road, about a mile to the east. Zuma Edison Road bends north for 0.25 mile to intersect Zuma Canyon Connector Trail, a footpath that turns south to travel along a knife-edge ridge. This engaging path takes you 0.7 mile down to meet Kanan Edison Road. Coast coastward as you descend this dirt fire road 1.3 miles to a junction with Canyon View Trail, a path that descends into the heart of Zuma Canyon. You could branch off on this pleasant trail, but in keeping with the ridge-route theme of this walk, I prefer to continue on Kanan Edison Road just 0.1 mile more to meet Ocean View Trail. This path descends westward 1.1 miles to the canyon bottom while serving up fine ocean views.

When you meet Zuma Canyon Trail, go left about 100 feet to meet Ridge-Canyon Access Trail. Join this 0.7-mile-long footpath on a climb from the canyon bottom up and over a low hill to return to the Busch Drive trail head.

John McKinney is the author of "Day Hiker's Guide to California's State Parks" (Olympus Press, \$14.95).