

## **Picacho Peak**

During World War II, the Civil Aeronautics Administration employed men to climb mountains across America and do the maintenance on aircraft signal lights. Each man was responsible for up to 25 beacons spaced about 20 miles apart on remote mountain tops. From coast to coast, these mountain-top lighthouses were like road maps for pilots flying at night. The men who maintained them were paid to climb mountains.

Picacho (pee ká cho) Peak forty-five miles north of Tucson, Arizona had a forty-foot tower at the top of the mountain with a platform where a 500 watt beacon light was mounted. The maintenance technician, A.H. Lee, who serviced the light at least once a month, had his work cut out for him just reaching the summit\*. To help the technician accomplish his task, young men from the Civilian Conservation Corps built via ferrata (Italian for iron road) on some of the more difficult sections of the trail.

Via ferrata or kletterstig (German for climbing path) consist of cables, catwalks, handrails, ladders, or other enhancements that allow a person to climb a dangerous route without as much risk and without the need for climbing equipment. Due to litigation laws, there are only a few via ferrata in the US; however, some countries have many. For example, Italy has over 400.



At the end of WW2, the application of radar to air traffic control made mountain top beacons less important. Also, at the end of WW2, pilots stationed at Davis Monthon Air Base in Tucson were sometimes flown to different air bases in the Southwest and given a plane to fly back to Davis Monthon to be stored at the Boneyard.

My father, Lt. Paul B. Parker, a P-51 Mustang flight instructor with the Army Air Corps, told me that these planes had usually been stripped of instruments, radios, and gauges, so the pilots would fly by pilotage whereby the pilot would look out of the cockpit and follow a road, river or other landmark. Picacho Peak was such a landmark. When pilots saw Picacho sticking up out of the desert, they knew that Tucson was forty-five miles south. On a clear day, they could see downtown Tucson when flying over Picacho Peak.

Picacho was first recorded as a prominent landmark by the Anza Expedition of 1774 today it is part of the 3,747 acre Picacho Peak State Park.

**Picacho Peak, Tucson, Arizona (N 32 37.867, W 111 24.933)**

There are two trails to the top of Picacho Peak, and each employs via ferrata. The Hunter Trail is two miles one way and described as “difficult”. The Sunset Vista Trail is 3.1 miles one way and described as “moderate” for the first two miles. I took the Sunset Vista Trail which for the first two miles just loafed along through the beautiful Saguaro-studded desert. I lost the trail for a while on the way up but found it again where the Hunter Trail joined it near the peak. The catwalks and cables of the via ferrata made the trail more fun. I found myself looking forward to them and wishing there were more. From the peak (3,374 feet), the view was as rewarding as music or art.

I stopped at the Ranger Station on the way out of the park and talked with a Park Ranger who told me that some people make it to the top in a little over an hour. It had taken me two hours and forty-five minutes. Granted, I had lollygagged, taken pictures, and enjoyed the morning, but still... two hours and forty-five minutes?

I went back two weeks later, took the Hunter Trail as an extracurricular hike, and made it to the top in an hour and thirty minutes. This time, while at the peak, I noticed some steel rods sticking up out of the rock, probably all that is left of the signal tower that was taken down in 1964.

Later, while researching Picacho, I learned there are six Picachos in four western states. Why did so many places get named Picacho? Perhaps 19<sup>th</sup> Century American surveyors and map makers in the Southwest would point to the biggest mountain around, and ask local people, “What do you call that mountain over there?” To which the locals may have responded, “Llamamos a eso Picacho.”

Picacho means, “Big Peak”. The English-speaking map makers recorded, “Picacho Peak” not knowing they were being redundant.

When I first said, “Picacho” to my cousin Bobbie, she said “Gesundheit”. She’s funny that way.

**Picacho Peak, Beaver, Utah** (N 38 18.748, W 113 11.297)

From Las Vegas, Nevada to Beaver, Utah, it is a three hour drive northeast on I-15 taking you through the beautiful Virgin River Gorge in the Arizona Strip. Instead of following the old US Hwy. 91, the Federal Highway Administration insisted that the new highway, Interstate 15, go through the previously roadless gorge because it was so breathtakingly beautiful. About half way through the Gorge, the Cedar Pockets exit is home to the Virgin River Canyon Recreation Area where there is a campground that includes a trailhead for a fifteen-mile one-way trail.

After regaining my breath, I exited I-15 in Beaver and drove past the house where outlaw Butch Cassidy was born and spent his first nine years. At birth, his name was Robert Leroy Parker.

Before reaching Beaver’s lone traffic light, I stopped at the National Forest Service office and asked Forest Service employees Cory Norman and McCall Davis about Picacho Peak. They were very friendly and went out of their way to be helpful by going online and printing out maps for me. They were interested in my quest and told me what to expect as I drove the 45 miles from Beaver to the base of Picacho Peak.

One of the things they told me to expect was pig farms. I had never experienced a pig farm, and the gravity of their warning was lost on me. An hour later, while driving down Thermo Road, I saw several long, low metal buildings in the distance, and a smell that is usually only encountered in Troll caves began to etch the paint off my Jeep. Imagine how bad a pig farm must smell, okay, now double it. Bacon should be much more expensive. The stench is so bad that the farmers don’t live on the farms. There are no farm houses on the pig farms; the farmers live in nearby communities like Minersville, Millford, or Beaver, and then commute.

I soon left the pork plains and their gut-wrenching stench and turned off on a dirt road. The next twelve miles were easy, single-track dirt with side roads branching off and heading up into the

mountains. There were abandoned mines scattered around with names like Red Warrior Mine, Gold Crown Mine, Lucky Find Mine, and Velvet Silver Mine. It was hard to stay focused on my goal because the explorability factor in the foothills was so high.

When the road ended, I checked my GPS, and it pointed to Picacho Peak. There was a lesser ridge between where I was and the Peak that would have to be negotiated, and there were no trails. I prefer hiking where there are no trails, where I can wander. As the bumper sticker says, “Not all who wander are lost.”

Although this was National Forest land, the mountains were almost treeless, there was a scattering of Piñon Pine, more than a scattering of sagebrush, and scree. I dread scree, but I love sagebrush. Every few minutes I would crush some between my fingers and breathe it in. The scent was wonderful; it almost made me forget about the pig farms.

The higher I climbed the windier it got until eventually I had to tighten the chin strap on my Indiana Jones hat, and we all know how dorky that looks. Of course, no one could see me, no one except the spirits of long-departed prospectors who still surveil hidden recesses in obscure mountain and desert regions. And they don't care.

An hour and a half later, after gaining over 1,000 feet in altitude, I stopped at a rock face and looked up at what looked like a cliff rising for a hundred yards above me. The cliff appeared unassailable, and I thought this might be as far as I was going. I drank from the Camelback and moseyed around. I picked my way around a boulder, then another. I used my trekking pole for balance and slowly worked my way up while thinking that I was probably the only person who had ever been here. It felt like I was exploring unexplored territory, and I love that feeling.

When I achieved the peak (6,871 feet), I found that someone long ago had built a five-foot tall rock wall to serve as a wind break around what looked like a mine shaft going straight down into the top of the mountain.

The view was stupefying. I felt as if I could see all the way back to Arizona and Nevada. This place was so remote there were no planes flying over; no contrails. I took a few pictures and reveled.



On the way up, I thought that from the top I would probably be able to see an easier way back down, but alas, that wasn't the case. I couldn't even see the route I had taken to get up there.

Coming down the mountain sideways like a crab, trying not to scree out of control, I was thinking that I had slid, slipped, staggered, and stumbled, but I hadn't actually fallen. Two steps later I fell, and right when my butt hit the ground, my cell phone rang. I thought the fall had made my phone ring, but when I looked at my cell, it was my wife, Michelle, calling to check on me. Way to go Verizon!

Back at the Jeep, while changing out of my hiking boots I looked up at the Peak, and thought that I probably could not have reached that summit without those boots, the trekking pole, the GPS, and...

Backpacking connoisseurs collect secret niche hiking areas known only to the most dedicated hikeistas. Yes, hikeistas, those who have been struck down by hiking mania, hardened by years of exploration, with the titanium tip of their trekking pole worn to a nub, with enhanced vision as a result of looking at distant horizons, with the wardrobe and gear to survive, no *thrive*, anywhere, anytime, under any conditions.

### **Picacho Peak, Las Cruces, New Mexico (N 32 19.976, W 106 52.919)**

For most of these hikes you don't need an Expedition Planner, you need to know which exit to take. In this case, it is Picacho Avenue exit 135, off Interstate 10 west of Las Cruces. And you don't need to be an adrenalin-stoked, youthful athlete; most of the Picachos are user-friendly.

To access the Picacho Peak trailhead, you get to drive through a beautiful, planned community called Picacho Mountain, where the architecture is Desert Sublime.

To say the wind was blowing would be understatement. At the trail head, I got out of the Jeep and felt part of my molecular makeup blowing away in the wind. The rock group Kansas must have been thinking of this place when they wrote that song about being dust in the wind.

I put on goggles, pushed my hat down, and leaned into it. The trail starts by dropping down into a little ravine where, thankfully, the wind dissipated, and thereafter, the wind alternated between dead calm and hurricane strength.

There are over fifteen miles of trails in the Picacho Peak Recreation Area, and they are open year round. The one and a half mile Peak Trail that I was on offers amazing views of Mesilla Valley, Las Cruces, the Dona Ana, Organ, and Robledo Mountains. Mescalero Apache once roamed this

area, and Billy the Kid may have ascended this peak to look back and see if a posse was following him.

The rocky path to the top took forty-five minutes and included a 683 foot gain in altitude. This Picacho Peak is treeless (the wind probably blew the trees away), but it has a certain colorful, rocky charm. It's a masculine trail, a brute; it makes you glad you're wearing heavy-duty hiking boots, and sunscreen. At the peak (4,990 feet), there is a five-foot tall rock cairn, and a view that is unencompassable.

### **Picacho Peak, Santa Fe, New Mexico (N 35 40.714, W 105 53.191)**

To reach this trailhead, take Canyon Road from Santa Fe Plaza into the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. The very narrow Canyon Road becomes Upper Canyon Road and changes to a dirt road at the trailhead parking area.

This 3.6 mile round trip trail gains 1,246 feet in altitude and can be hiked in less than two hours, although you may want to take longer. This is a pine-scented, trendy trail with a striking personality; polished and refined. It looks as if aesthetic improvements have been made on the trail; however, the improvements are so in accord with nature it isn't clear whether they have been made by the hand of man or the hand of God.

Most of the trail is tree shaded and hugs the side of the mountain, so you are looking down on Santa Fe and out at distant mountain ranges. There are photo ops around every bend, and the view at the top (8,585 feet) is the stuff of post cards.

If there were a Center for Hiking Excellence, it would rate this trail a Benchmark Trail and bestow upon it four (out of a possible five) gold trekking poles.

All these hikes were taken on week days, so I usually had them all to myself; however, on the way down on this trail, I was confronted by a large unleashed dog. There were two signs



between the parking lot and the trail informing people that dogs had to be leashed. The dog's owner was about ten yards behind the dog, and he wasn't carrying a leash.

Also, I hiked all but one of these peaks alone, not that I recommend hiking alone, but it does give a person an opportunity for long thoughts. While on a solitary trek, I often find myself in deep introspection concerning... my knees. That occasional twinge of pain makes me wonder if I should carry one of those slip-on, stretchy, knee supports in my backpack just in case. It couldn't hurt, they don't weight much.

Hikeistas know that traileed and un-traileed wilderness gives them access to other worlds. Worlds where they are in control, where they can explore, and where they can subject everything in their path, i.e., rocks, foliage, scents, sounds, light, weather... all while indulging Wanderlust.

### **Cerro Picacho, Los Alamos, New Mexico (N 35 44.444,W 106 22.797)**

Cerro (therro) Picacho is not a Picacho Peak , but it is a Picacho (Cerro means hill in Spanish). From Los Alamos, I took Hwy. 4 west past the Bandelier National Monument Welcome Center to Forest Road 289 and turned left. After about seven miles, I came to a sign that read "Dome Trail 4". I followed the sign, drove a couple of miles to a locked gate, parked the Jeep, and started hiking up to the St. Peters Dome fire tower lookout.

From the lookout, I could see Cerro Picacho about a mile away to the south. I screed down from the Dome, intersected the St. Peter's Dome Trail, and followed it for a few hundred yards and then blazed up the side of Picacho. There are other ways to reach Cerro Picacho; I think I chose the hardest.



For miles around, the mountains had been burned to the ground in the 2011 Los Conchos fire that started when a tree fell on a power line.

It was a barren landscape accented by the occasional dead tree trunk sticking up like a black exclamation point. This area bridges the gap between nature and desolation, with a leitmotif of “Rocks don’t burn”. Since the fire, the audience for this area has been small; I didn’t see any one, and I could see over eight miles to Cochiti Lake and beyond.

On the way up, I thought that if there were no cairn at the peak I would stack up a few rocks to show I had been there. Near the top, there was some kind of scrubby, hateful, bushes I had to fight my way through; I was glad I don’t wear short pants. Then, after struggling over two false peaks I finally reached the top (8,113 feet); which turned out to be a huge jumble of boulders. Stack up a few rocks indeed.

## **Picacho Peak, Blyth, California (N 32 58.370, W 114 39.840)**

After researching yet another Picacho Peak, I realized that this one called for mappery skills and mountain climbing techniques that I haven't mastered. This area is so remote that just getting to the Peak would be a challenge. While considering this climb, I learned of Friends4Picacho, a non-profit charitable organization of over 300 volunteers who came together after California announced it would be closing seventy state parks including Picacho State Recreation Area. There is now a moratorium on park closures until 2014; however, F4P continues to do volunteer work, raise funds for improvements, and to insure the park remains open. One hundred percent of monies raised goes back into the park. At Friends4Picacho.org one can sign up for the monthly email newsletter to learn more about Picacho.

It was through F4P that I met Joshua Collier a F4P volunteer and supporter who has been climbing Picacho for twenty years. After exchanging emails and phone calls, he agreed to meet me at the old Yuma Territorial Prison, and to be my mountain guide.

From Las Vegas, I drove south on Hwy. 95 through Needles and past the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge to the vast farm lands north of Yuma. Agriculture is so huge in this area, with over 175 different crops, that agritourism is becoming a big draw.

Yuma, Arizona looked just as it should, a perfect little dusty desert town bordering California and Mexico. The downtown historic district has streets lined with two-story buildings looking just like they did decades ago. I'd like to retire there, hang out at a downtown café, and talk about the weather.

Picacho Peak is thirty-five miles north of Yuma, across the Arizona/California state line in California, and can be seen from Yuma. From a distance, it looks as if it would be hard to climb – and it is! It was an hour and a half drive to reach the base of the mountain; the last few miles were in four wheel drive.

When I stopped at the end of the “road”, the temperature was 104 degrees. It was April. It was so hot and dry that instead of sweat dripping, the moisture was being sucked from my skin leaving behind a tiny grain of salt.

This isn't a friendly little trail full of foliage and merry turnings; this is a landscape for giants, and there is no real trail. Later, when I asked Joshua how he found our way up he said, “Well, you aim for that boulder up there, and then you aim for that boulder up there, and then...”

Desert Bighorn Sheep and Wild Burros frequent this area, but we didn't see any. We did, however, see lots of sign.

There were two ladders and some rope at different points to help with our ascent. I don't remember the details; I was in a heat-induced daze just trying to keep up with Joshua who bounded ahead like a mountain goat.

This was a rugged climb from the time we got out of the Jeep until we reached the ridge. At one point, we had level ground for about seven paces; it brought tears to my eyes.

We were over three-fourths of the way up, and I was starting to see and talk to imaginary hikers when I called out to Joshua, “Hey Josh, I've had it. They say you have to know your limit and I think I've reached mine.” A one mile hike with a 1,200 foot gain in elevation when it's over a hundred degrees can take a lot out of you.

He scrutinized my face, “Your colors okay, sit down, drink some water, eat a bar.” I sat, drank, ate and we talked about other things, he didn't pressure me to continue, and after about twenty minutes, I had recovered enough to press on.

From near the top, we could look down on the huge Picacho Mine, an active gold mine that we had passed when driving in. At the summit ridge, we walked up to the summit block where I sat down and watched as Joshua free climbed it. The summit block was the size of a semi-trailer

standing on end. The peak (1,920 feet) was just behind the summit block, I could have thrown a small pebble and hit it, but I felt like this was close enough for me.

I didn't quite make it to the peak, but I made it close enough to become enraptured by this otherworldly treeless landscape that resembled the surface of Mars. There was no green; a botanist would have nothing to do here. This timeless corner of the southwest is magical, and looks just as it did millions of years ago. I wouldn't have been surprised to see a dinosaur peeking from behind a volcanic plug. The desert and mountain vista seemed to stretch to the curve of the earth, and the stillness and drama of it exudes a quiet allure that can awaken your inner spirit.



If a music conductor climbed to this ridge and stood with long gray hair flying in the wind and with crazed eyes glaring at the heavens and then waved his trekking pole like a baton, Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries* would boom across the desert making rock monoliths vibrate like tuning forks.

Hikeistas hike different trails as often as possible and appreciate what they have to offer because each one is unique and has something special to teach us. When equilibrium between trail and hiker is reached, the creative intent of the trail is sometimes revealed.

**Picacho Butte Seligman, Arizona (N35.23001 W -112.741011)**

Picacho Butte can be seen on the south side of Interstate 40 as soon as you leave Ash Fork heading west toward Seligman. The gate to the ranch where the Butte is located is where I learned that this Picacho is on private property. I went there three times, talked to the owner twice, and the bottom line is - the rancher does not want anyone on his property. In the past, he let hunters and others access his fifty section ranch (yes, that's a fifty square mile ranch); however, inconsiderate people left gates open, littered, and roared around on ATV's scaring the cows so now no one is allowed in.

Hiking the Picacho's was fun. There was a narrative thread to these trails that seemed to say, follow me and I'll take you to hidden places.

Picacho Tucson slowly revealed more and more of itself like a meaningful relationship until I felt as if I really knew it and should give it a pet name.

Picacho Beaver was trail-less, and I sometimes felt like Sisyphus pushing a rock uphill, but the view from the top drove everything else from my head. Receding mountain ridges disappeared in the distance like the forward echo in "Whole Lotta Love".

Picacho Las Cruces was plain and simple with an abundance of mineral. It allowed me to hike with an open mind and be receptive to the trail within the trail.

Picacho Santa Fe had a lively arch charm that seemed to say, here's New Mexico made all plush and comfortable with Nature. It was a silk slip of a trail sheer and delicate.

The recent fire at Picacho Bandelier allowed me to see the shape of the thing as the mountains lie naked evoking a stillness not in the realm of ordinary reality. A dark and moody uncharm permeated the landscape.

Picacho Yuma was an experience not just a hike. It was a landscape vortexed and magnetized, radioactive, full of surges and drains where for a second there, while sitting under a rock shelf, I saw through time and space. I saw Shelley's vast and trunkless legs of stone standing in the desert; I felt what prospectors felt a hundred years ago tramping across this barren, hellish, fastness. It was horrible, and I loved it. I wanted to call all those other trails and tell them I'd met someone.

end

Joshua Collier may be reached through [friends4picacho.com](http://friends4picacho.com)

\*Popular Mechanics Magazine August 1949 pg. 132-134