



THE SOUTHERN PEAKS TOUR

Soledad Canyon to San Diego
Seven days, 470 miles
47,000' of elevation gain

Many people would be surprised at the notion of quality cycle-touring so near Southern California's twin monster metroplexes, Los Angeles and San Diego. But local riders know there are wonderful treasures buried up in the high hills surrounding the overdeveloped coastal basin...in the Angeles, San Bernardino, and Cleveland National Forests. A glance at the elevation numbers for this tour will reveal that this is one of the hilliest tours we offer, with many long, sustained climbs—some of them quite steep—as well as some of the sweetest downhills you'll ever do. As the tour's finish is at a lower elevation than its start, you actually do more descending than climbing, with the final day being almost entirely downhill. You won't have to wait that long for a payback on all the effort you put in on the climbs though, as there are large and small descents on every day, and also there are the rewards of all the breathtaking panoramas from the tops of the many hills you'll be working so hard to ascend.

The tour begins north of Los Angeles in Soledad Canyon and almost immediately begins climbing... and climbing...and climbing... If you're not familiar with this region, you're probably going to be amazed at how high and rugged and impressive these mountains are. (That makes this snow country, and limits the time for touring to Summer and early Fall.) You ride and camp atop the Angeles Crest amid the towering peaks of the San Gabriel Mountains (above), and then plunge madly down to Cajon Pass, where you begin the long climb into the San Bernardino Mountains. You visit Lake Gregory and Big Bear Lake and dance along the magnificent Rim of the World Drive before crossing Onyx Summit—at, 8443', the highest pass in Southern California—for a screaming run back downhill to a brief encounter with the ragged fringes of suburbia near Yucaipa. You avoid almost all of the sprawl by taking a lovely loop through the hilly apple orchard country around Oak Glen. Finally you have one, inevitable encounter with suburbia, as you slice through the small towns of Cherry Valley and Banning...not terrible cycling, but not a great backroad experience either.

Once past Banning, you return to lovely countryside...and begin climbing again...a long, steady, and very beautiful ascent into the San Jacinto Mountains toward the charming hill town of Idyllwild. Once over the first range of mountains, the route wiggles and squirms down into some very peaceful valleys, crossing pleasant, open, meadows that are half alpine and half desert in character, with more broadleaf trees, wildflowers, and ponds and lakes than you would expect to find this close to the Mexican border. Once again: if you're not

familiar with this area, you'll be very surprised at how remote and beautiful it is...and not always in the austere, rock-and-cactus manner you associate with the southwest. At times, you could almost imagine you were in the green hills of Oregon or New Hampshire.

In the final days of the tour, you visit the Hale Telescope atop Palomar Mountain and the quaint old gold mining town of Julian, surrounded by more apple orchards and leafy woods, all on some of the prettiest, sleepest little backroads you'll ever see. Beyond Julian, you follow the Sunrise Highway—a National Forest Service Scenic Byway—up to a high-mountain camp on Mount Laguna. Finally, on the last day, you descend almost constantly, from the pine and oak forests of the high country through zones of chaparral and bare rock and yucca, to the rural residential outskirts of San Diego.

Were it not for the occasional brief encounter with suburbia, you would never guess how close you are to several major urban centers, but they're out there. Because of this, there is some potential for heavier traffic on some of these roads, especially on summer weekends. On weekdays, you shouldn't be bothered at all. If you've come to do this tour from the northern part of the state, the shortness and ease of the final day may allow you enough time to simply rendezvous at the finish before getting a head start on the long drive home. Log a few hours in the car and camp—or hit a motel—at some point further north.

You might think this region would look its best in the spring, when the meadows are green and the wildflowers are blooming. It is a wonderful time to visit, for sure. But unfortunately, there is the possibility that some of the higher roads—Hwy 2 along the Angeles Crest, for one—may still be closed by snow as late as mid-June. Sometimes the roads stay open year-'round, but in other years, you could be blocked. However, this is a trip that I think can be planned with a relatively short lead time, as I don't see these campgrounds filling up quickly, except on weekends in mid-summer. (When I first surveyed this tour in early June, almost every campground was virtually deserted.) So if you want to try and schedule it for June or even May, you may be able to wait until mid-spring and check with Caltrans on the road closures before making your reservations.

Another nice time to visit is autumn, when the trees in some of the higher elevations are doing a passable imitation of a New England color extravaganza. However, the season closes out quickly in the high country. Winter is waiting none too patiently in the wings. Some of the camps close for the season as early as the beginning of October. At the same time, you can still be experiencing triple digit heat in the valleys. To trot out an old cliché: it is a land of extremes.

We took a group along this tour route in September of 2006, and it proved to be a wonderful adventure, but a real challenge logistically. It illustrates very well the old adage, "life is what happens while you're making plans." You would think that the landscape would be fairly static: that things would stay the same from year to year. Don't count on it! Campgrounds close; forests burn; roads wash out. Murphy's Law is fully enforced. We were confronted with all sorts of difficulties we didn't expect, but in the end, we muddled through, and you may benefit from what we learned along the way. But be prepared: this is not an easy tour. It is not easy to ride, nor is it easy to organize. But if you can manage the logistics and then manage the miles, you'll find your horizons greatly expanded.



Lake Henshaw, Stage 5



Day 1: Soledad Canyon to Jackson Flat

71 miles, 10,000' up, 4100' down

Ten thousand feet of climbing in 71 miles? Ouch! And yet none of it is really steep, nor particularly difficult. Having made that happy assertion, let me add a reality check: when we did this stage, everyone in our group felt it was a pretty dang hard ride, and a few people were thoroughly trashed. We all slept soundly that night! But we were all ready to rock and roll the following morning. We survived it.

Day 0: Arrive in Soledad Canyon

To get to Soledad Canyon, take I-5 to I-14 (toward Palmdale) and get off at the Soledad Canyon exit. Robin's Nest Resort is about nine miles up the canyon from the interstate. Those nine miles make a big difference: you abruptly leave the suburbs of the greater Los Angeles area behind and enter a quiet, country setting, with oaks and sycamores on the hillsides, and cottonwoods and willows in the sandy arroyo of the Soledad River. Above the river, great biscuit-colored boulders and monoliths lie in jumbled piles...a preview of the wonderful sculpture exhibit Mother Nature will be sharing with you in her high-country rock gardens over the next few days.

Robin's Nest Resort is an older, mildly funky campground along the river. They have many campsites around a little lake and along the stream feeding into the lake, most out on the open sandy dirt, but some in the shade and some on green lawns. They have a little swimming pool. Up at the back of the camp is a village of semipermanent trailer-court residences which look a little trashy, but shouldn't affect your camping pleasure.

My only concern about this camp is with respect to leaving cars here for the week. The proprietor set a fairly high price for this when we were negotiating our deal. We chose not to leave cars here after all. My guess is he makes this up on a case-by-case basis, and you may strike a deal that's acceptable to you. If you find yourself is some difficulty over this matter, get back to me and I will help you come up with an alternative.

The ride begins with a nearly level run up Soledad Canyon, (left) past more of the same scenery described above. At four miles, you turn right on Crown Valley Road, and then right again (at mile 5.7) on Country Way. This road changes its name from Country Way to Indian Oak Road to Briarglen Road as it works its way through an odd little rural residential suburb. An outpost of the nearby town of Acton, it can't seem to decide whether it's a tract neighborhood or just a cluster of individual ranchettes. This is a hilly neighborhood that will have you out of the saddle and thoroughly warmed up by the time you've made it out the other side into the country again. After two more residential streets—Cedarcroft Road and Avenue Y-8—the route hits Aliso Canyon Road (below) and begins a long climb...first through some up-and-down rollers and then steadily uphill to about mile 15, where it turns right on County Route N3. A sign tells you it's 18 miles to Hwy 2. That's where you're going.

You continue climbing on N3 for a little less than three miles to 4910' Mill Creek summit, and then you





over the vast, flat emptiness of the Antelope Valley and the Mojave Desert. At the higher elevations, the trees give way to soaring ramparts of bare rock, including one spot where the road drills through the cliff in two, back-to-back tunnels (below). They're unlighted, but short enough to be illuminated from each end.

Just beyond the twin tunnels at Islip Saddle, you come to a gate across the highway. This is the first of our unexpected challenges: the gate is closed. As you can see from the photo on the following page, a big chunk of the road has washed out, leaving it virtually impassable. The road crews have a huge project on their hands to repair this, and it's not going to

get your first real downhill of the day: a wide-open flier of over six miles. Most of it is not overly steep, but there are a few sections that are radical enough to get you wound up about as fast as any sane person would want to go. At about mile 24, you hang a left on Upper Big Tujunga Canyon Road and head for the Angeles Crest. At first, this road humps up and down in a series of uppity rollers, and then, around mile 27, it starts climbing in a serious way again...not too steep, but steady and long.

I haven't mentioned the scenery since leaving Soledad Canyon, but thus far, it's all been much the same...dry chaparral, rocky hillsides and deep canyons, with scattered deciduous trees and conifers and yucca plants scattered about, with a busy world of small plants and flowers in amongst the rocks...all very enjoyable.

At mile 33, you arrive at Hwy 2, the Angeles Crest Highway. You've knocked off almost half of your miles for the day, but only a little over a third of the elevation gain. Turn left on Hwy 2 and settle in for more of the same: up, up, and up. I won't attempt to list every up and down on this grand, ridgerunning road. There are numerous climbs and a few descents, and even a few rare flat sections. Some of the time you're in the forest and can't see much in the way of scenic vistas, but more often than not, you'll be diverted from your toil by one spectacular panorama after another (above). Sometimes you look off the ridge to the south, over the endless, smoggy sprawl of the Los Angeles basin—fortunately, you should be up above the smog here—and sometimes you look to the north,

happen any time soon. In fact, we hear that local environmentalists are urging that the road remain closed indefinitely so that sensitive flora and fauna



Day 1: tunnel near Islip Saddle



can have the peace to rehabilitate themselves without the invasive presence of people and their cars.

This presents you, the cycle-tourist, with a real problem: you can hop the gate and ride through, or you can make use of a detour around the base of the mountain, which we show on the map. If you have any sort of transport/sag vehicle following you, they will have to use the detour. We posed the question to our group of 20+ riders, and after some discussion, all agreed: hop the gate. We think it was the right decision, but there is some risk involved. Obviously, the local authorities don't want you doing this, so if someone—a ranger or road crew personnel or police officer—decided to make your life miserable, he could certainly do so. If you begin your tour on a Sunday, as we did, no road crews will be at work. We had the whole road to ourselves. Because the road is closed, nothing is being done to maintain it. Rocks falling off the cliff have been left strewn about the pavement...there are many of these. And of course there is the big subsidence to tiptoe around: not an easy thing to do if you're afraid of heights. And then, should anything bad happen to you out here—a medical crisis or even a serious mechanical—you are very much on your own.

The gated section amounts to ten miles, which is divided almost evenly into a five-mile ascent (above) to Dawson Saddle—at 7901', the high point on the stage—and a five-mile

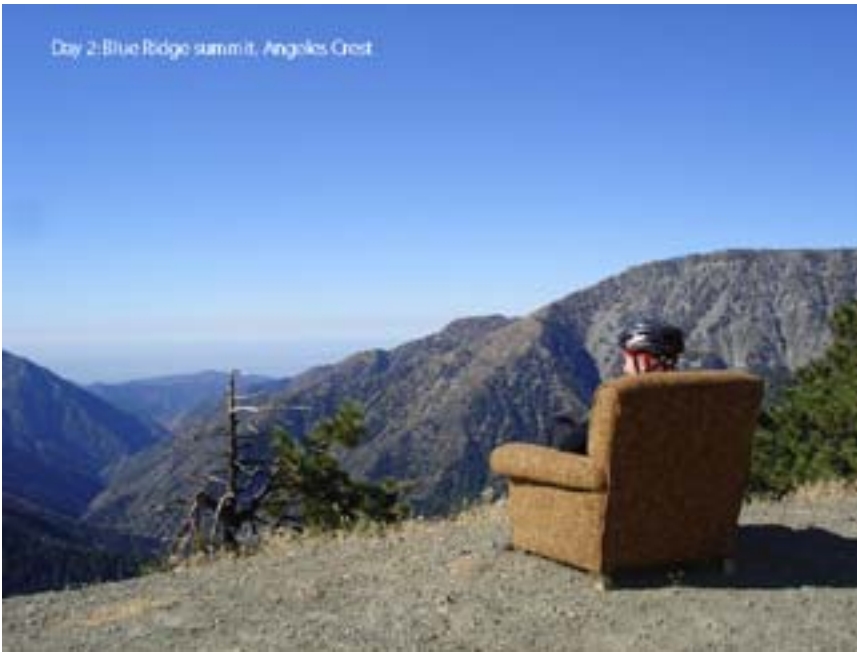
descent to 6585' Vincent Gap, where you hop the gate at the other end. It is on this descent that all the bad road drama takes place...the rubble tossed about and the big hole in the road. The subsidence is well barricaded, so you won't fly off the edge of it. Were it not for all the booby traps along the way, this would be a great descent.

All in all, we found this walk on the wild side a grand adventure. But if you are concerned about the legal or liability implications or the increased risk factors, then you can use the detour. I have not seen it, except in Google's wonderful aerial shots, but our sag drivers tell me it's decent but

mostly boring. If you do it, you will miss all of the magnificent Angeles Crest, which would be a pity. On the other hand, you would climb a lot less than 10,000' on the day and do a lot fewer miles as well... about 52, instead of 71.

Once back over the gate at Vincent Gap, you're down in a hole and you have more climbing to do. You may feel as if the climbing is never going to end, but it will eventually. Just after mile 68, you turn into the Grassy Hollow Visitor Center and follow the signs...uphill, what else?...to Jackson Flat Group Camp. This is a splendid location for a campground... 7600' high and with views off all sides of the ridge. In the spring and early summer, the surrounding peaks are still mantled in snow. There are several sites here for groups of





Day 2: Jackson Flat to Big Bear Lake

72 miles, 7300' up, 8100' down

It was in the bright light of a new day that we visited the observation tower mentioned earlier...what a great panorama. And then off down the narrow, twisting driveway back to the main road.

Once out on Hwy 2 again, you climb very briefly to 7381' Blue Ridge summit (where we found an old chair positioned perfectly for enjoying the view, left), and then, after a short level stretch, you begin a long descent. Not much to say about this downhill...a great ride through beautiful country...a fine way to begin

different sizes, but there is actually no lower limit on how many people you can put in a site...a couple can take a site if they wish. One of the reasons I chose this camp is because it's the only facility in the entire area that can be reserved. There is running water here, but unfortunately no showers, nor any creeks or ponds, so you'll have to be content with a wash cloth bath after your hard day of climbing. Sorry about that, but there aren't any alternatives. Tomorrow night's camp has showers, so you'll only have to be grubby for one day. The bathrooms are fairly primitive up at the camp, but the Grassy Hollow Visitor Center has clean, modern bathrooms, with all the trimmings.

The road from Grassy Hollow up to Jackson Flat is divided into a first, short climb, a level traverse along the ridge, and a final climb to the camp. There is an observation tower near camp that gets you above the surrounding trees and offers vistas in every direction over the magnificent mountains.

The Grassy Hollow Visitor Center is a handsome new facility with a very good gift shop and loads of information on the local ecology... books on the flora and fauna and big, fancy maps, as well as resident rangers and volunteer docents to answer your questions.

In summary: this was an epic stage for us. A huge amount of climbing—never steep, but pretty much endless—and the added challenge of negotiating the closed and damaged road. It was by far the hardest day of the tour. We used up all of our daylight and ended up washing the dinner dishes in the dark before falling into our sleeping bags like zombies. But a good night's sleep restored us, and we set off the next day in good spirits and with plenty of energy.

the day (below). At around nine miles—still descending—you enter the town of Wrightwood, a moderately large village—large enough to have supermarkets and other evidences of advanced civilization. At 9.3 miles, turn right on Lone Pine Canyon Road and follow it uphill through a residential neighborhood. There is a





bridge washed out on the road just near the edge of town which the locals tell me has been missing for over ten years now. In its absence, you have to jink around the block on a couple of little streets before picking up the main road again. The detour is well marked.

After the brief climb through town, Lone Pine Canyon Road levels out and then, at just over ten miles, hurls itself off into space on a wild descent of several miles that is quite exciting. After a few turns at the top of the hill, the road straightens out and plummets down the mountainside in a long, straight chute. In total, you lose almost 3000' of elevation in around nine miles, but the bulk of it comes in that straight section of three or four miles, all of it at or near 10%. One could pile on some really high speed on that steep, straight free fall, but there are some slight irregularities in the pavement that could become quite troublesome at high speed. Also, near the bottom, after a few corners, there is a very tight little dip in the road in the middle of a blind corner that could launch an overeager rider off into the yuccas. According to locals, that corner has been the scene of several fatal accidents over the years. A little margin for error on a descent this hairy is always prudent.

At mile 19.1, Lone Pine Canyon Road tees into Hwy 138. You turn right and continue downhill on the busy highway. This portion of 138 often carries a heavy load of traffic, but there is a decent shoulder and you'll

only be on it for about a mile. At Cajon Junction (the bottom of the hill), 138 crosses I-15, and most of the traffic turns onto the interstate. Back up for a minute: at the junction of Lone Pine Canyon and 138, you ride through a marvelous valley of standing stones called variously the Mormon Rocks and the Stone Basin. I didn't see any signs or scenic overlooks that would indicate anyone thinks these great rocks are special, but to me—a lover of sculpted rock—these soaring domes and contorted, sandstone puff-pastries are worthy of attention.

Beyond Cajon Junction, with much of the traffic siphoned off onto the interstate, Hwy 138 continues, climbing briefly, and then larking about for a couple of miles in a twisty section of short but quite steep climbs and smaller descents. Eventually, at mile 22, it begins climbing steadily (above) to a summit at mile 23, at which point it slips downhill rather lazily for over five miles toward Silverwood Lake. There is a small store at around mile 25. Between miles 28 and 34, the road rolls up and down across open hillsides above the lake (below), gaining or losing a couple of hundred feet every mile or so...all of it on a modern, well engineered road with wide shoulders.

At mile 34, all that changes. You pass a turnoff for the Miller Canyon camp on the lake, and just around the corner, the wide, smooth road suddenly crumples up





steep—for awhile—as the last climb to Crestline. At 41.6 miles, you turn left on North Road and climb some more before turning left on Hwy 189 and descending steeply to a right—and another climb—on Daley Canyon Road. This is all a little confusing and a lot of hard work, but again, the goal was to escape from the main highway for awhile and explore the backroads.

Eventually though, we have to return to the main highway, which is now Hwy 18, otherwise known as Rim of the World Drive. Turn left on the highway at the top of the Daley Canyon climb, and almost immediately, you realize where this wonderful road gets its name. It tightropes along the edge of the mountains, with

into a wickedly steep, switchbacking, tangled beast of a climb. This is an intimate bit of nastiness...very up-close and personal, and probably the hardest climb on this tour...certainly the steepest. It grapples its way up the thickly forested hillside for three miles, gaining over 1300' in that span. Not the longest climb you've ever done, nor the steepest, but nevertheless a very intense, concentrated dose of hard work.

Midway up the climb, you bail off of 138 onto Old Mill Road. I chose this detour to get away from whatever traffic there might be on Hwy 138, even though I don't think it will be too bad. Old Mill is—in theory anyway—a little quieter. Once over the summit at mile 37, the road slithers down into the village of Crestline on a descent that is probably too tight and curly for high-speed hi-jinks.

Crestline merges into Lake Gregory Village—both vacation resorts, on or near the shore of Lake Gregory. Being Southern California mountain resorts, their overall architectural look naturally runs to the faux-Swiss chalet sort of thing, along with a moderate ration of all-American kitsch. But generally, the effect is pleasant, and the lake is certainly pretty (above). You ride through town and around the north shore of the lake on a nearly level road. Then you have to go to work again. Just beyond the lake, you climb to a junction with Arosa Road and keep on climbing—steeply—for most of two miles (right). This is nearly as

nothing on the right side of the road but empty space. Far, far below (literally, 5000' down at this point), the entire Los Angeles metroplex sprawls away to the horizon (photo, top, next page). Over the next 20 miles, you'll climb and descend along the ridgeline, sometimes right out at the edge of the cliff, and sometimes winding back through canyons of red rock and pine trees. You pass ski resorts and little towns—Skyforest, Running Springs, Arrowbear—as you work your way in large and small increments from an elevation of 5600' near Daley Canyon at mile 43 to around 7200' at mile 58. Most of that gain comes in a six-mile stretch beyond the town of Arrowbear. Once up to that highest elevation, the road traverses the mountainside on a nearly level run of over three miles—through a region of mostly bare rock, snow banks, and endless sky—before a final, two-mile descent to Big Bear Lake.





has been changing in the past few years, as they upgrade some of their facilities. This is a good example of the newer sort of camp, with nice bathrooms and showers. The camp is situated in a dry, piney grove, with sage or similar brush in the understory. They have several double-wide campsites that are ideal for larger groups of tent campers. Not too far away is a new, very upscale visitor center... even fancier than the one at Grassy Hollow.

Day 3: Big Bear Lake to Banning **73 miles, 5500' up, 9300' down**

Day 3 begins with a little more rolling terrain along the north shore of the seven-mile long lake (below). At about three miles, the route leaves the lake for the quiet residential streets of Big Bear City, and at just over four miles, it turns right and heads south through the town to a reunion with Hwy 38. (The highway veers off at mile three, while our route seeks out roads with a little less



At the lake, you turn left on Hwy 38 (also called North Shore Drive) and ride along the north shore of the lake (above). From here to the finish the road is level, except for a few small rollers, as you glide along next to the water. Before I visited here, I expected the lakefront to be intensely developed and not too nice, but I was pleasantly surprised to find the commercial clutter fairly minimal and unobtrusive, at least on the less populated north shore. It's not a pristine wilderness, but all in all, these are good cycling miles, with only the small town of Fawnskin interrupting your progress through scattered woods and open meadows rolling down to the beautiful blue lake. Two miles beyond Fawnskin, you turn right onto North Shore Lane, and in just over a mile, left into Serrano U.S. Forest Service Campground.

Forest Service camps have traditionally been rather primitive, but that

traffic.) Once outside of town, Hwy 38 begins climbing. It will continue to do so, on a moderate but steady grade, for the next seven miles. This is an unremarkable climb. The scenery is pleasant, if not spectacular, and the climb won't kill you, but it will go on for a long time. The object of all this effort is





doing. But if you want to save a mile and avoid a few climbs, just stay on the highway, which gets to the same point on a fairly level and pleasant run along the other side of the lake.

Once Jenks Lake Road tees back into Hwy 38, the grade remains fairly mild, although generally tilting downhill, and the scenery is delightful...lots of impressive rock formations and high, alpine forest. There is a cafe in the tiny burg of Angelus Oaks at mile 36, and then, at mile 38, the really steep, wild descending resumes. For the next five miles, it's rip-city, including another of those long, straight chutes with

Onyx summit, at 8443', the highest pass in Southern California. There isn't anything remarkable about the summit either...just a hump in the road in the forest...but the descent off the other side will definitely get your attention. The pass is at mile 15, and over the course of the next 30 miles, you will drop over 6000' in a series of separate descents, each with a slightly different character. Much as you bid adieu to the San Gabriel Mountains with the hair-raising plunge down Lone Pine Canyon, you now do the same as you drop out of the San Bernardino range.

The first descent is nine miles, all of it fast. The first six miles are probably as fast and wide open as a descent can be (above). As long as you don't get tangled up with an RV or a string of cars, you should be able to roll the whole thing out at whatever your maximum speed is. As one veteran of this ride said, "Let the tandems rip!!" After six miles of terminal velocity, the grade eases off a bit, and at nine miles (24 miles overall), you actually have to do some work, climbing several small hills and rollers before departing the main highway for a brief detour through the woods.

This is Jenks Lake Road, which I think primarily serves as the access road to about a dozen summer camps arrayed around the little lake. The whole road is five miles long and in that distance offers up a few small climbs and nifty little descents...much more of a dinky, backroad sort of experience than what you get out on Hwy 38. It's good cycling and worth

nothing to do but hang on and fly (below). This particular stretch is called Damnation Alley by local cyclists, but that name stems from doing it as a climb, not screaming down it at warp speed.

At mile 44, the descent settles into a more sedate roll-out, and at mile 47, you leave Hwy 38 for a left turn on Bryant Street, heading toward the town of Yucaipa. You'll be heading into a suburban setting, with wide boulevards and shopping centers. It's not great cycling, but not terrible either, and it's only for a couple of miles. You haven't had any exposure to stores since leaving Big Bear City, so if you need munchies, you may appreciate this stretch.

You will eventually be turning left and heading uphill on Oak Glen Road. This is a delightful detour around an area of sprawling commercial junk in Yucaipa (a





nice town, but not a great place to ride). The run up to Oak Glen however, is a wonderful place to cycle (both photos). It's also another big climb: around nine miles long and over 2000' up. This proved to be the hottest day of our tour, and it peaked at well over 100° on this long, exposed climb, making it feel much harder than it might have otherwise.

We noticed an interesting phenomenon when we did this tour in the month of September, and we think it's a common condition. It may be very hot in the lowlands, but as you climb into the mountains, the temperature drops. As you drop out of and climb into four distinct mountain ranges on this tour—the San Gabriels, San Bernardinos, San Jacintos, and Lagnas—you have several opportunities to experience this. If you have a thermometer on your bike—I do—you can watch the numbers going up as the day heats up. But then, as you climb higher and higher, you begin to see the numbers come back down again. And it's a mercy that they do come down as you go up. Otherwise, these stages would be brutal.

The scenery up around Oak Glen is quite a change from what you've been seeing up in the high, rocky mountains. For one thing, the hills are mostly covered in apple orchards. It's what they do here. The town of Oak Glen, which comes up at around mile 54, is for the most part just a collection of fruit stands. I really like the

quality of these roadside attractions and the overall feel of the town. It's very quiet and laid back...charming, in a corny sort of way, without any glitzy, tacky trimmings. There are all sorts of colorful signs out along the road advertising the delicacies in the shops, but by luck or by design, everything has a modest, rather relaxed air about it...a throwback to a simpler, less hurried era. If you can hold out this long, this is probably a better spot for snagging some snacks than in the shopping center back in Yucaipa, especially if you prefer homemade apple fritters or apple pie to store-bought junk food.

Once over the top of the hill above the town (at mile 55), you have a great downhill ahead...almost seven miles of sweet, slinky turns on smooth pavement. The last mile or so rolls out onto the neighborhood streets of the town of Cherry Valley. Oak Glen Road becomes Beaumont Avenue at some point here, although you'll probably be descending too fast to notice the change. When you get to the first stop sign in town (at around mile 63), turn left...on Vineyard. Stay straight on Vineyard, even though the main flow of the road appears to veer left onto Avenida Mirvalla. This begins probably the least scenic, least rural section of the entire tour: 11 miles through Cherry Valley and the larger town of Banning, alongside Interstate-10. Most of the miles are on either quiet residential streets or moderately busy





off and on, until you reach 6100' at mile 23. (The climb starts at around mile 2.) But don't think of it as a 21-mile climb. There are numerous flats and even some descents along the way to break up the steady diet of uphill.

At first, you climb through a zone of chaparral and big boulders, and then, at higher elevations, you enter a semi-alpine world of deep, cool forest, with soaring cliffs crowding the road (left). There are no towns along this stretch, but there are some nice picnic areas, including one at a pretty little lake (below). And there are vista points...well worth visiting, as the views become more and more impressive as you work your way up from the valley floor. All of the scenery on this tour is grand, but the San Jacintos may be the best of the bunch. If you carry a camera while you ride, you'll be stopping constantly to try and capture one beauty spot after another. It really is lovely.

The tiny town of Pine Cove is plunked down right on the summit. There is a market and a gas station and not much else. The road then drops 800' in three delightfully wiggly miles to the well known town of Idyllwild. This is a very charming village that has a long-standing reputation as an artists' colony. There are art centers, museums, cinemas, and other cultural

boulevards. None of it is terrible. It's just not great back road cycling.

At mile 72, on the northern, uphill edge of Banning, you have to turn downhill and cruise right into the heart of town. Here we encounter another of our unexpected difficulties. The campground we wanted to use no longer accepts tent campers. Only RVs. There is another campground in Cherry Valley, but it's not really in the right place for us, especially in light of where we have to go on the next stage. And it doesn't have showers. So instead, we spent the night in a motel in Banning and ate out at a restaurant in town. It actually worked out quite well for us, giving us a break from camping and camp food for one evening.

Day 4: Banning to Oak Grove

80 miles, 7500' up, 7700' down

70 miles, 6000' up, 6200' down

This stage begins with another long, long climb...this time up into the San Jacinto Mountains. The climb is never steep, but as usual for this tour, it goes and goes and goes. Banning is at 2300', and you'll be climbing,





niceties for the bohemian crowd, as well as the usual sampling of arts and crafts shops. Tacky trash, if not entirely absent, is at least fairly minimal. It's a nice place, and a long list of nearby resorts and bed-&-breakfast inns attests to its popularity with visitors from the flatlands. At 26 miles, it's an obvious spot for a regroup.

There is a small bump of an uphill leaving town and then a really fun, 4.5-mile descent winding away through the forest in a series of sweeping, curling turns. At the bottom of the hill (at around mile 31), Hwy 243 tees into Hwy 74. This junction gets a dot on the map identified as Mountain Center, and it sports the curious elevation of 4444'. Turn left on 74 and head uphill for a couple of miles to Keen Camp summit...about 450' of climb in those two miles. The climb is matched by a two-mile descent on the other side, down into Garner Valley (right), a wide, almost flat valley with the vacation homes of the residential/resort community of Hemet Lake scattered all over the grassy meadows along the road. This is the first such open valley you see on this trip. Up to this point, it has always been mountains, canyons, and either chaparral or forest. From now on, you'll spend a fair amount of time crossing these pleasant, rolling grasslands. You still have many hills to climb—and descend—but they will no longer make up your entire bill of fare.

Hwy 74 climbs very gently, over easy rolling slopes, to your next turn, a right onto Hwy 371 at mile 43.3. There is a little cafe on this corner where several people in our group wiled away half the afternoon. Hwy 371 climbs a little hill after the turn and then descends for most of four miles into the Anza Valley... another open, nearly level grassland. The four-mile transit of this valley does not rate quite so high on my scenery meter. It's nice, but nothing special, and there is a fair amount of commercial crud scattered around the town of Anza, including yet another of those middle-of-nowhere-but-always-crowded tribal casinos. But hey, it's not terrible. If this were the worst

place you ever had to ride, you'd be in heaven.

You leave the town of Anza behind and climb very gradually—only 100' in two miles—before rolling downhill for six miles...not too steep, but a pleasant run. One more short climb brings you to the top of a really steep, fast descent. The first two miles are a screamer, losing over 300' a mile, but you have to stay alert for your next turn, which pops up suddenly in the middle of the descent at mile 60.5. It could be very easy to miss, and you don't want to miss it, as it's a great biking road: Wilson Valley Road.

On the other hand, you may choose to miss it if you feel you want less than the 80 miles on the long, hilly





it split the miles perfectly between today's stage and tomorrow's. Now, this stage is a bit long and tomorrow's is a bit short.

Ah well...no use crying over spilt milk or lost camps I guess, so let's move on. The miles beyond Reed Valley on Wilson Valley are just as good as those that preceded it...all exciting miles on a twisting, dipping, climbing little road to nowhere, amidst wonderful, boulder-strewn scenery (left). Sage Road, which follows, is just as nice... more of the same writhing, wriggling fun. The two roads total ten miles, and all of them are primo. Unless you really cannot handle the miles today, I urge you to

route. If so, just blow past Wilson Valley and keep heading downhill to a junction with Hwy 79. This is where the longer route rejoins, so let's go back and explore that option.

Wilson Valley Road descends too, but now, instead of being wide open and fast like the main highway, it becomes tight and technical—and great fun—as the twisty little road drops down through the rocky chaparral to Wilson Creek. This is excellent biking...as good as it gets. Beyond the creek, the road runs level along the pretty valley floor to a junction with a side road called Reed Valley.

Now we encounter the next of our logistical problems, and this one may have caused me more pain than all of the others put together. When we first laid out this tour, we planned to end this stage with a run up Reed Valley to a very nice campground a few miles up the road. It had showers, a lake, a swimming pool, and Reed Valley is a nice road for getting to it, and back again in the morning. Sadly, that camp recently reinvented itself as a summer camp for kids, and even though their camp season was over in September, they refused to allow us to stay there, no matter how much I begged and bribed and pleaded.

So we have to push on another few miles to another camp that, while decent, is not nearly as nice as the one that closed. Losing access to this camp was extremely frustrating for me. Not only was the camp nice, but

tackle this longer option. It is excellent cycling.

Sage eventually tees into Hwy 79, where you turn left and head up a gentle, rather boring and possibly rather busy grade, then roll back down to the junction with Hwy 371 at the little village of Aguanga. This is where the short route got to while the long route was off in Wilson Valley. Now the routes are back together.

Beyond the junction you start climbing again. You'll gain elevation steadily between here and the finish, six miles away, but it's all easy, mellow climbing (below).

Oak Grove US Forest Service camp sits across the road from an old stage coach stop, now commemorated with an historic marker. The camp is pleasant enough, although it lacks our favorite feature: show-ers. (None of the people in our tour group had seen





Back to the basic route... The long, gradual climb that brought you to Oak Grove at the end of yesterday's stage continues today, all the way to 3282' Sunshine summit at five miles. Once over the top, you enter another of those beautiful, wide valleys of softly waving grasses (left).

At mile 14, you pass through Warner Springs, an upscale, private resort. There is a gas station open to the public and maybe a small convenience store, but everything else is gated and off-limits. Aside from that, there's just a whole lot of empty out here... beautiful and peaceful and serene...and you'd better pray for

the really cool camp up Reed Valley Road, so they didn't know what they were missing. As far as they were concerned this USFS camp was a delight...and really, it is very nice. Just not as nice as the camp that slipped through our fingers.)

Day 5: Oak Grove to Palomar Mountain

42 miles, 4000' up, 2000' down

Bonus miles: Palomar Observatory out-&-back: 10 miles round trip, 1200'

Notice the low mileage figure? That is the result of our lost campground. But with the Palomar Mtn out-&-back, the day can be made fairly substantial. And besides, you might want an easy day sandwiched in between yesterday's long, hilly stage and ditto for tomorrow.

Aside from the official bonus miles option, I have one other suggestion for padding the miles today. I have not done this road, but one couple in our group did it after I pointed it out to them on the map: Chihuahua Valley Road. It comes very early in the stage...a little over three miles from the start. It climbs for awhile and then levels out in a little secret valley, at the center of which is a Buddhist temple (right). Linda and Sid thought it was a dandy road. It added about 12 miles to their total for the day. In spite of being a little road to nowhere—nowhere except the temple—it was beautifully paved.

favorable winds. This could get a little tedious with a strong headwind blowing. Off on the western ridgeline, you can see the white mushroom dome of Palomar Observatory on Palomar Mtn, your destination today. We passed very close by Southern California's other great astronomical observatory at Mt Wilson on Day 1, but it wasn't visible from our route, while on Day 2, we camped near the Big Bear Solar Observatory. On Day 7, we'll pass another observatory at Mt Laguna. This mountaintop odyssey has definitely taken you a little closer to the heavens. Today though, you have the opportunity to ride all the way to the observatory and maybe even go inside, if your ride coincides with visiting hours. More on that later.

At mile 22, you leave Hwy 79 for a right onto Hwy 76. Although both these roads carry state highway





preceded it. There are some breaks in the trees that offer vistas back down to Lake Henshaw, which you passed at the bottom of the hill. Some local entity—Parks and Rec or Public Works—has built a wonderful flying deck cantilevered off the hillside overlooking the lake. Those of us who took the time to stop here, midway up the East Grade climb, found this to be one of the prettiest views on the whole tour (left). The grassy valley sprawls away to the far mountains, with the mirror smooth lake in the middle distance. We all

designations, neither carries much traffic. It's pretty quiet out here. Hwy 76 rolls along much as 79 did, rising and falling very gently...nothing on this stretch that even merits the name of roller. That's about to change though, as you turn off the highway onto East Grade Road at mile 26.5 (below). The word "Grade" tells you what's ahead...that and the little sign that says, "Palomar Mtn 14 miles." You don't have to go all the way to the mountaintop unless you want to, and even if you do, not all the miles will be climbing. But most of them will, and just getting to the junction where you make that decision will take 12 miles. None of the climbing is brutal, but a lot of it is hard enough that you'll feel as if you've had an honest day's work, even with the short miles.

The scenery along the climb eventually becomes more wooded and closed in than the open miles that

agreed that it reminded us of our impressions of the Serengetti plain in Africa. All that was missing were those herds of zebras and wildebeasts.

My notes show the initial four miles on East Grade as uninterrupted climbing, followed by over seven miles of short climbs interspersed with flat sections of varying lengths. The climb eases off somewhat near the top, and even includes a bit of mild downhill. At mile 38, you hit a junction. Four roads meet here: the one you just rode in on; the out-&-back to the observatory (which appears to be straight ahead for you); the road to today's campground (a left turn); and the road you take on the way out of here tomorrow (South Grade). Seeing as how the miles are so light today, I'm going to assume you will want to tackle the bonus run up to the mountaintop, so let's look at that road first.





Before I did this road, I assumed it would all be uphill. Not so. In fact, right from the junction, it descends rather dramatically, and for quite awhile, losing around 600' in two miles. You can either think of this as deficit spending—doing the descent first and the climb on the way back—or as eating dessert first. After it bottoms out, the road climbs for most of three miles through dense hardwood forest—never too steeply—before topping out in the parking lot at the Palomar Observatory (above). Elevation at the top is 5550' and the view from the summit is impressive.

During the 1920's, work with the 100" telescope at Mt Wilson convinced astronomers of the need for an even bigger telescope to keep up with advances in astronomical research. After a long search, Palomar Mtn was selected in the 30's as the site for a new, larger facility. Work began at the site in the late 30's, was delayed by WWII, and the observatory finally opened in 1947, featuring the 200" Hale Telescope, supported by other, smaller telescopes that perform other functions. The observatory is managed by CalTech for the use of their faculty and the staff of the Jet Propulsion Lab and several major universities. In spite of increasing light contamination from the not-too-distant suburbs of San Diego, the observatory still operates at full schedule...busy every night...and various technological advances in processing the images have helped it retain its position as

one of the premier windows into space. Tours are available, and if you arrive here around midday, as seems likely, you may be able to check things out. (Many of us took the time to tour the facility. It was great fun. The short stage became an asset in this context, leaving us plenty of time for exploring this fascinating site.)

After hobnobbing with the stars, you retrace the road back to the junction... almost three miles of ripper downhill and then two miles of moderate climbing. For you, the turn toward Palomar Mountain State Park will be a right.

If you skipped the out-&-back, the turn for the camp will be a left from East Grade Road onto State Park

Road. This is a beautiful park. I hate to sound like a one note song, but I can't help repeating how surprising it is to find so many leafy trees this far south in California. If you tour here in the autumn, this park will be a glorious blaze of turning leaves. The road climbs gently for a mile, then descends for about a mile to the park gate. Through the entrance and onward a few tenths, you'll turn right and head steeply downhill, following the signs to the campgrounds. My destination of choice here is the Cedar Grove Group Camp, 1.5 miles from the park entrance and 8/10ths from the turn down the steep hill. It's a wonderful site, with a beautiful common area around a big fire pit (below), and with its own showers right at that site. Other individual





campsites are nearby, as is a pretty little lake (above). This is one of the nicest campsites I have ever found in a state park. It's right up there among the best on any tour we offer. If you had a short day today, you won't mind hanging around in this camp a little longer than usual.

Day 6: Palomar Mountain to Mount Laguna

72 miles, 9000' up, 7900' down

Two shortcuts available

It's hard to pick out one favorite day from all the rest on a tour that's as uniformly nice as this one, but if someone held a gun to my head and forced me to choose, I'd probably pick this one. Taken as a whole, it has a savory blend of all the things one values in a good bike ride, and as a result, it's the day that left me with the most pleasant memories. (I wrote the above copy for the stage as I had it laid out in an earlier version of this tour, with a somewhat different route.

Since then, I've been back through the region and have revised and improved this stage. So improved is it, in fact, that I now have no qualms about declaring this absolutely the best day of the tour. It is superb.)

Those miles through the rolling grasslands over the latter half of Day 5 and the first half of Day 6 constituted a transition from the San Jacinto Mountain Range to the fourth and final mountain range of the tour. Each succeeding mountain range that we've done has been slightly less rugged than the one before it, and this range—the Laguna Mountains—is the lowest and least formidable of

the group. Our journey up to Palomar was the opening movement of this alpine symphony, and it will continue in one way or another—uphill or down—all day today.

The first little movement will involve climbing back up out of the deep hole where the park campsites reside. The first bit is the steepest, followed by assorted uphill bumps and even a little downhill. You will climb 500' in the first three miles, but then you get some serious payback...some of the best gravity candy on this or any other tour. First you get the one mile of moderate descent back to the junction where you came in yesterday. Then you turn the corner onto South Grade Road and...enjoy! This road is revered by San Diego area cyclists, and with good reason. It has everything one looks for in a descent: good pavement; a gradient steep enough to be fast, but not so steep as to require constant braking; and an endless series of twisting, slinky S-bends, hairpins and wiggly whoopdeedoes to keep you entertained. South Grade





is 6.8 miles of purest bike heaven. Add in the mile of descent on State Park Road at the top and the roll-out on the next road at the bottom, and you will be in Newtonian gravy for over ten miles, dropping 3000' over that distance. To trot out the old cliché: it just doesn't get any better than this.

South Grade tees into Hwy 76, which you were on briefly yesterday. Turn left and descend to somewhere beyond mile 15 on the day. Descending on this bigger highway is less exciting than on South Grade, but it's still pretty good stuff. Once the downhill peters out, the highway resumes its mildly up and down habit. You'll pass the East Grade junction where you turned off yesterday, and will be backtracking your route for a little less than two miles to a right onto a dinky lane called Center Loop Road, where a sign says, "To Mesa Grande Rd." Center Loop is so small it would be easy to miss. If you do, don't worry. It's just a little shortcut to Mesa Grande, and that bigger road will come up on the right in a few yards. In any event, you want to end up heading uphill on this wonderful bike road.

Unless, that is, you want to shorten those 72 hilly miles today. The first of our two shortcuts is here: stay on Hwy 76 until it tees into Hwy 79; turn right and head south on 79. Eventually you'll pass the other end of Mesa Grande and the routes will be together again. Doing this will save you five miles and 1000' of climbing and your scenery will be good but not great.

Mesa Grande on the other hand, is a terrific backroad biking experience. To call it a "bigger road," as I did above, is a bit misleading. It's way off the beaten

path and no bigger than it needs to be to serve a few local ranches. It begins climbing right from the start and continues uphill quite steeply for most of two miles, topping out around mile 25. You get more nice vistas out across Lake Henshaw during this climb.

Over the next ten miles, beyond the summit, this delightful road will bounce up and down over rolling hills, snake around hillsides, meander through pocket valleys, and generally just horse around in an amusing way. It's one of those magic roads that is perfectly scaled to the tempo and

mechanics of cycling. The relative elevation at the end of this 10-mile run is less than 500' lower than it was at that summit at mile 25, but somehow that modest drop totally fails to capture the essence of this road. Yes, there are more descents than climbs, but the whole is more than just the downhills. It's a total cycling experience. Good stuff throughout.

I've become so enraptured with the road, I've neglected the scenery, which is a good portion of what is good about this road and, for that matter, this entire stage, all day. Mesa Grande features leafy woods, little farms, rolling meadows, steep hillsides, and chunky, folded ridges...a medley of varied landscapes, all of them tasty (both photos).

At mile 35.5, this happy road finally fizzles out, as it tees into Hwy 79. This will splice it back together with the shortcut route. You'll be turning right here and heading downhill toward the little town of Santa





lovely valley nestled in the hills below: a tidy little farm and a tidy little pond, surrounded by green meadows, orchard, and hardwood forest. It could have been the Green Mountains of Vermont, or the Willamette Valley in Oregon. Admittedly, I visited here in early summer and again in late fall, both seasons when copious rainfall had turned everything a most brilliant green. Perhaps it's not always this lush, but even in a drier season, it would still be a pretty spot. Strange to think of this verdant glen being less than 40 miles from Mexico!

Ysabel, but just off-course to the left a few tenths is Mission Santa Ysabel, one of the many well preserved California missions. If you like California history or mission architecture, you might want to wander over and scope it out.

Two miles down a gentle grade from Mesa Grande, the scattered cluster of shops that is Santa Ysabel marks the junction where Hwy 79 merges with Hwy 78. Hwy 78 pours in from the right, and both roads join forces to turn left and go up the hill as route 78/79. This is another moderately ambitious climb...600' in a little less than three miles. The combined traffic load of the two highways finally makes this seem like a fairly well traveled arterial, but there are wide shoulders, and I doubt you'll be bothered by the passing parade. In three miles you arrive at a little wide spot in the road called Wynola (at around mile 41). This area is noted for its apple crop, and Wynola is a bit like Oak Glen on Day 3: little more than a collection of fruit stands. What Wynola means for you is that it's the turning-off place for a little scenic loop away from the busy highway on tiny backroads. If the traffic has been getting to you, this scenic bypass will provide the perfect escape hatch. This little loop off the highway is only a little over five miles long, but it's another of the highlights of the day...another example of why I like the stage so much. I love this bit!

Turn left on Wynola Road, drop just a little and then climb for two and a half miles, winding your way up as pretty a hillside as you'll ever want to see (above). Everything about this little world is perfect, and all of it is perfectly suited to the pace of a cyclist. It's car-free and carefree. Just beyond the summit, you turn right on Farmer Road and climb a little more. When I toured here, I had to stop near the top and take in the

Over the top of the hill is a very pleasant section of rollers winding through the woods (below), and then you drop suddenly out of the woods and into the quaint old gold mine boom town of Julian (at mile 46). Gold was discovered in these hills in the late 1860's, and by the mid-1870's, the town had sprung up to cater to the influx of miners. Within just a few years though, the mines were all played out and the town drifted off into a deep slumber. In more recent times, it has prospered as the center of the





apple growing region, and more recently still, as a charming little tourist mecca. I'm generally a grumpy old cynic about tourist meccas, but I was beguiled by Julian. I found it an easy place to visit and enjoy...for an *al fresco* lunch or just a slice of their famous apple pie, or for a prowl along the well-preserved Victorian main street (above).

Once you've had your fill of apple yummys and Julian ambience, it's time to hit the road again. This marks the beginning of our second shortcut. At the center of town, our backroad bypass merges back into Hwy 78/79. The long route will turn right on the highway and head back downhill to another set of little backroads. The shortcut follows the main highway in the opposite direction, uphill through town and out the other side. At the far edge of town, 78 and 79 go their separate ways. You—on the shortcut—turn right and follow Hwy 79, first downhill a bit and then up a long, gentle grade. In about three miles, you reach the summit and glide downhill on an easy descent of four and a half miles into another of those pretty, open, grassy valleys...this one with pretty Lake Cuyamaca at its center. Taking this pleasant shortcut will save you another ten miles and around 1500' of elevation gain.

Just as the lake comes into view, you turn left from Hwy 79 onto

Sunrise Highway. This is the point where the long route rejoins the short, so I'm going back to Julian now to follow that route around and through the hills and back to this point.

From Farmer Road in Julian, turn right and head downhill on 78/79—a swift little descent of one mile—to a left on Pine Hills Road. This begins another meandering section in the hills around Julian, as nice as the section after Wynola... more of the same good stuff.

After a mile and a half of mild uphill on Pine Hills, turn right and head downhill—mostly downhill—on Eagle Peak Road. Pine Hills, although a backroad, for sure, has a bit of a

busy feel to it, as it feeds into the town of Pine Hills (which we bypass entirely). But once off onto Eagle Peak and the roads that follow, busy is not a word that would apply. This is extremely remote, quiet, and exquisitely pretty. Back road riding at its best.

Eagle Peak dips and dances in and out of wooded canyons and arroyos for a mile and a half, then gives way to Boulder Creek Road (below), which continues in the same vein for another three-plus miles. Around mile 53, you turn left onto Engineers Road. True to its name, it is a little more engineered than the two previous backroads, which were tiny and quaint in the extreme. Engineers is a little wider, a little smoother...but only relatively speaking. It is still a quiet road to nowhere, perfect for biking. You better





like climbing though, because that's what this road does for the next few miles. (If you don't like climbing, you're on the wrong tour!) The road climbs steadily and sometimes quite steeply for most of four miles, then continues upward through a mix of flats and rollers, eventually gaining 1300' in five miles.

All of this used to be in lovely deciduous forest... dappled shade and leafy greenery on all sides. Sadly, this was one of the hardest hit areas in the massive wave of forest fires that devastated Southern California in 2003. You will have seen evidence of these many fires in other places along the route, including Rim of the World Drive on Day 2, but nowhere is the damage so severe or so apparent as here. What had been a shady run through something resembling Robin Hood's Sherwood Forest is now open and stark. In its own way, it's still a lovely landscape, with jumbled piles of sculpted rock now visible (above) and a riot of wildflowers colonizing the open spaces created by the fire (below). But I miss the leafy glades and the grand old sycamores and oaks. Not all of the region burned. There are still many places where the old forest remains, and you can get a sense of what it was like when it was all like that.

At some point you pass a sign announcing that you're entering Cuyamaca Rancho State Park. I can't recall any park infrastructure along this road—campgrounds or ranger stations—but everything certainly does look park-like. Eventually, the flats and rollers give way to a snappy little descent of something over a mile that drops Engineers Road down to a tee with Hwy 79. Turn left and follow the highway through rolling meadows for a little over two miles back to the junction with Sunrise Hwy near Lake Cuyamaca, where we

left the short route. Turn right onto Sunrise Hwy...the last road of the day.

This is a very scenic road...but don't take my word for it: the U.S. Forest Service has designated it a National Scenic Byway, and in my experience, when the Forest Service puts that tag on a road, you can count on it being a primo ride. This delightful road will carry you all the way to your destination on the flanks of Mt Laguna, ten miles away. Along the way, it will climb from around 4550' to 5750' in a series of easy stairsteps... gentle climbs broken up with more-or-less flat interludes and dips. Most of this lovely run is at least partially out in the open, so there are wonderful views over vast tracts of empty forest and rugged ridgelines in the Sawtooth Wilderness Area, and distant desert, far away and far below. Somewhere along here—on the left side of the road—is another of those wonderful flying-deck vista points to get you out into this spectacular panorama.

I've toured over this road three times now, and all





Day 7: Mt Laguna to Alpine

**47 miles, 2500' up, 7300' down
37 miles, 2000' up, 6800' down**

After all the long and sometimes hard climbing you've done on this mountainous tour, it's only fair that you finish up with a handsome return on your investment. Today's stage will certainly give you that, as it is almost entirely downhill. Okay, there are a few small climbs, but compared to what you've been

three times, I've encountered fierce crosswinds blowing from right to left (west to east) on this long, exposed ridgeline. On our most recent tour, the winds were as strong as any I've ever experienced on a bike ride, and we were reduced to a crawl on the downhills so as not to be blown over. It was outrageous, and while we were worn to a frazzle by the intensity of the wind, we were also highly entertained by the sheer, epic adventure of it.

Laguna Campground and El Prado Group Camp share the same beautiful site sprawling over scattered woods and open, grassy meadows near the shore of Big Laguna Lake (above), which, in spite of its name, is actually a rather small but pretty lake.

There are numerous group sites and a large number of individual sites as well. There are even showers in the regular campsite area. This is another of the new generation of Forest Service camps with all the modern conveniences... well, with showers anyway...all that matters at the end of a long ride.

The one bad thing about this camp, in the context of this tour, is that you will arrive here on a Friday night. This is one of those camps where they enforce the idiotic policy of making you reserve your sites for the entire weekend if your arrival day is a Friday. I hate this policy! I talked to the camp hosts about it and they told me it would be safe to do this overnight without reservations: show up and take your chances. This is especially true if you are touring here after Labor Day, as I suggest that you should. We did this, and it wasn't at all a problem. We had a lovely area all to ourselves. So skip the stupid reservation protocol on this night and just wing it.

doing, they're fairly insignificant.

You begin with one of the little climbs (below)...a couple of hundred feet up in a couple of miles to the high point on Sunrise Highway (and the highest point remaining on this tour: 6000'). Just down the other side, you pass the rather grand old Mt Laguna Lodge, which contains a decent small market and gift shop. Nearby is a short spur road off to the left that leads to a vista point facing east, out over the vast, emptiness of the Anza-Borrego Desert, the Salton Sea, and the Chocolate Mountains.

After that, it's nothing but beautiful mountain scenery and smooth, breezy descending for the next ten miles. For the first few miles, you're in a subalpine setting of mixed conifer and deciduous forest, frequently broken up with flower-freckled meadows. At some point, you make a transition into the chaparral zone, with yuccas and cacti and great masses of cinnamon-colored rock...everything from small boulders to towering cliffs and monoliths. The first few miles in the cool woods are really hot descending: slinky turns





another great downhill run of almost three miles to a junction with Hwy 79. (You were on 79 most of yesterday until veering off on the Sunrise Highway. You've now come back to it.) Turn left on 79, and after a mostly level mile, the highway ramps uphill briefly to an interchange with I-8, where the route crosses under the freeway and resumes its highly entertaining downhill ways.

As far as I can tell, the road loses its Hwy 79 designation at the interstate and becomes just Japatul Road. This will be your happy home for the next 12 miles...almost all of them downhill in the most enjoyable sort of way,

and grades that are steep enough to keep you on the boil (above). At about the point where you drop out of the forest, the grade eases off to the extent that you'll probably be pedaling as much as coasting.

The panoramas are vast and open here, and you can scan down the canyon and see your road descending, mile after mile, toward the valley floor. For me, seeing so many miles of downhill ahead imparts the same sort of warm and cozy feeling I get when I know I have a fat balance in my bank account or a full refrigerator... livin' large and loving every minute of it! (Reality check: This descent was not "warm and cozy" for us. In contrast to those broiling triple digit temperatures on Day 3, we found ourselves at something of the other extreme on this first descent of the day on Stage 7. Halfway between the balmy beaches of San Diego and the bake-oven desert to the east, we began this descent with the mercury sitting at a nippy 40°. I have to say it took a little fun out of this marvelous downhill derby to have it be that brisk. It hurt!)

After dropping 2000' in ten miles, you fetch up against Interstate-8, but just before the freeway, you turn right on Old Highway 80 and descend another 300' to the small resort of Pine Valley. Now you come to one of the only really substantial uphill of the day (right): a one-and-a-half-mile, 200' climb to the tiny town of Guatay (WAH-tie). By mile 17 you've left the town behind and are embarked on yet

curling and slashing round one bend after another (photo, next page), at all times passing through surroundings that are at worst merely pleasant and at best spectacular. The descent subsides into rollers and flats at mile 32, along the shore of Loveland Reservoir. There follows another mile-and-a-half, 300' climb, and then, just over the crest of the climb, you need to look sharp for a left turn on Dehesa Road. Dehesa tumbles down the rocky hillside for over three more miles of sexy downhill fun before finally flattening out at about mile 38. It runs level for one mile to a junction with Harbison Canyon Road. Dehesa bears left but you turn right and begin working your way up Harbison Canyon, which winds uphill through scattered oak forest, gaining a few hundred feet in two





is to have lunch at the Bread Basket and then drive (assuming you have follow vehicles) a few hours north, back to the Soledad Canyon area or to other campsites or motels, say in the Magic Mountain, Newhall, Santa Clarita area (not far from Soledad Canyon). Then your final drive home is not so daunting. It's even possible for a large group to carpool to Soledad Canyon at the start, leave some cars there—or near there—and drive back to those cars at the end (making another assumption: that you can all squeeze into your sag vehicles for the four-hour drive back to the start neighborhood). With all the marvelous tourist attractions in

to three miles of climb. It's a decent country road...narrow, but with not too much traffic...and the only notable commercial establishments on it are a couple of small stores and a nudist colony.

It tees into Arnold Way at the top of the hill and you go right on Arnold and head up a mild hill toward the town of Alpine, a little over two miles away. Hold on though. We have to backtrack a little and bring the short course into Alpine as well. Back up to where you turned left off Japatul Road onto Dehesa Road. Instead of turning downhill on Dehesa and then having to climb back uphill on Harbison Canyon and further uphill on Arnold, you can eliminate some climbing and ten miles by staying on Japatul, which becomes Tavern Road and hits the town of Alpine in two mostly uphill miles.

Alpine is suburbia—right along Interstate-8—but of a tolerable sort. The important thing about the place for you is that there is a great restaurant and bakery—the Bread Basket—with good food, good prices, and nice ambience...tables outside on a tree-shaded lawn (right)...and it's easy to get to on a bike. This is where we're ending the ride...and the tour.

Why are we ending up at a restaurant? Logistics, mainly. If you came to this tour from Northern California, for instance, you had a good, one-day drive to the start in Soledad Canyon. But now, at the finish near San Diego, you have a drive home that would be very tough to do in one day. The plan

San Diego (and LA, for that matter), there are many ways you could end the tour and segué into another adventure.

We had too many people on our tour to fit into our sag wagons for the drive back to near the start of the tour, where we had left our car pool fleet. So we rented an extra passenger van in El Cajon (near Alpine) and used it to ferry the troops north, then dropped it off at Burbank International Airport. Both the pick-up of the van in El Cajon and the drop-off at Burbank entailed drives of around a half-hour for a couple of our people. But those little efforts made the whole trip possible. It was worth it for us.

If you still need a campground for this final night, there is one not too far away: Lake Jennings Park, a county-run campground. It has showers and is a

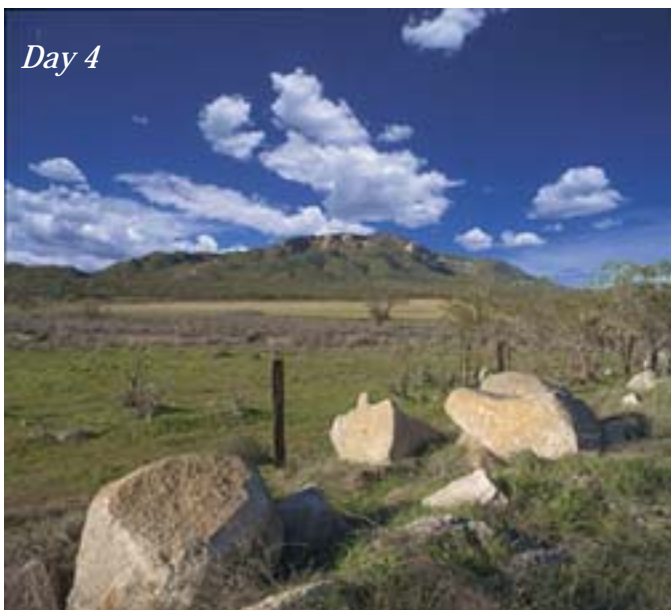


decent camp. To get there, you turn left on Arnold at the Harbison Canyon junction, climb a small hill and cruise west for a little over 12 miles. At first these last few roads travel through rural ranch-style suburbs, with horse paddocks and open space, but at the end, you're passing 7-11's and similar scenic wonders before turning into the park. In spite of the increasing level of suburban poo, I would still rate this as decent cycle-touring, right up to the park at the finish. This would yield you a ride of about 52 miles.

You can finish up at Lake Jennings and still enjoy a lunch in Alpine. Arnold Way departs the town very near the Bread Basket and drifts downhill all the way to the Harbison Canyon junction. That would net you a total ride of 47 miles, with a bit less elevation gain than if you went down Dehesa and up Harbison Canyon.

Directions to Lake Jennings: Arnold merges into Alpine Blvd. Bear left on Alpine and follow it until you nip under I-8 and then turn left on Olde Highway 80 and follow this road until you hit a junction with Lake Jennings Road. Turn right and head uphill, looking for a right turn into the park. Reservation info for the camp is included in the Details section at the back.

And that wraps up the tour. When I was first considering this tour—poring over maps and talking to friends in the area—I had my doubts about how nice it would be... spending so much of its time so near the car capitol of the world. But by the time I'd done it myself, I was a convert. This is a fabulous route, with great roads through a stunningly beautiful landscape which will reward you amply for all the effort you put out on all the major climbs.



• Details •

Day 0: Arrive in Soledad Canyon

The Robin's Nest Resort

8237 Soledad Canyon Road, Acton, CA 93510 (approximately nine miles east of I-14)

805-268-1221 • 805-268-1223 (fax) beran@scvnet.com

Camp fees:

Per site (first two people) \$14.00

Extra adults \$3.50

Camp facilities: showers, diner, swimming in pool or lake, playground, game room.

There are no motels or restaurants near the camp.

Day 1: Jackson Flat Group Camp

Near Grassy Hollow Visitor Center, Angeles Crest Hwy (Hwy 2), two miles west of Big Pines

Valyermo Ranger District Office: 805-944-2187

Reserved through ReserveAmerica.com

May be reserved any time after January 1.

Five group sites for up to 40 campers each. No lower limit on number of campers in site. Camp fees vary according to size of site. Costs vary. Our group site was \$124.

Camp facilities: flush toilets, piped water, barbecues.

Modern restrooms at Grassy Hollow Visitor Center.

Nearest motels and restaurants: Wrightwood, 10 miles into the next stage.



*Big Bear Lake,
Day 2*

Day 2: Big Bear Lake

Serrano US Forest Service Camp

North Shore Lane, north side of Big Bear Lake, three miles east of Fawnskin.

Reserved through ReserveAmerica.com

Camp fees:

Individual site	\$15.00
Double site	\$24.00
Reservation fee	\$6.50

Camp facilities: 132 sites, some double (not all sites are reservable), showers, campfires, bike path, visitor center.

There are many restaurants and motels and inns at Big Bear Lake, but there is nothing near the camp.

Day 3: Banning

Travelodge Banning

1700 Ramsey Street
Banning, CA
951-849-1000

Day 4 Oak Grove USFS Camp

This camp is so remote and so unvisited that we didn't bother with reservations.

Camp fees:

Individual site:	\$15.00
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Camp facilities: nothing but bathrooms and running water.

Day 5: Palomar Mountain State Park

PO Box 175
Palomar Mountain, CA 92060
31 individual sites in Doane Valley

Campground. Three group sites in Cedar Grove Group Campground. Site #1 accommodates 25; the other two sites accept up to 15. We paid \$103 for site #1.

Campsites can be reserved up to seven months in advance.

Reserved through ReserveAmerica.com or call 800-444-7275.

Local info: palomar@parks.ca.gov or 760-742-3462

Camp facilities: hot showers, Doane Pond, hiking trails.

Day 6: Laguna Mountain USFS Camp

Laguna USFS Camp, El Prado Group Camp

Sunrise Hwy, approximately three miles north of Mt Laguna.

Reserved through ReserveAmerica.com

(but don't bother)

Camp fees:

Individual site	\$12.00
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Camp facilities: showers, campfires, hiking trails.

Mt Laguna Lodge is approximately three miles south of camp. It has both lodgings and a restaurant.

PO Box 146, Mt Laguna, CA 91948 619-445-2342

Day 7: Near Alpine

Lake Jennings County Park

Off Lake Jennings Park Drive, near El Cajon

Reserved through San Diego County Parks and Rec: 619-565-3600

5201 Ruffin Road, Suite P, San Diego, CA 92123



Mesa Grande Road, Day 6

Reservations made three to twelve weeks in advance.

Camp fees:

Individual site

\$10-12.00

Reservation fee

\$3.00

Camp facilities: 96 sites, showers, campfires, swimming in lake.

There are many motels and restaurants in the surrounding San Diego area.

Mill Creek summit, Day 1



Jenks Lake, Day 3



Garner Valley, Day 4





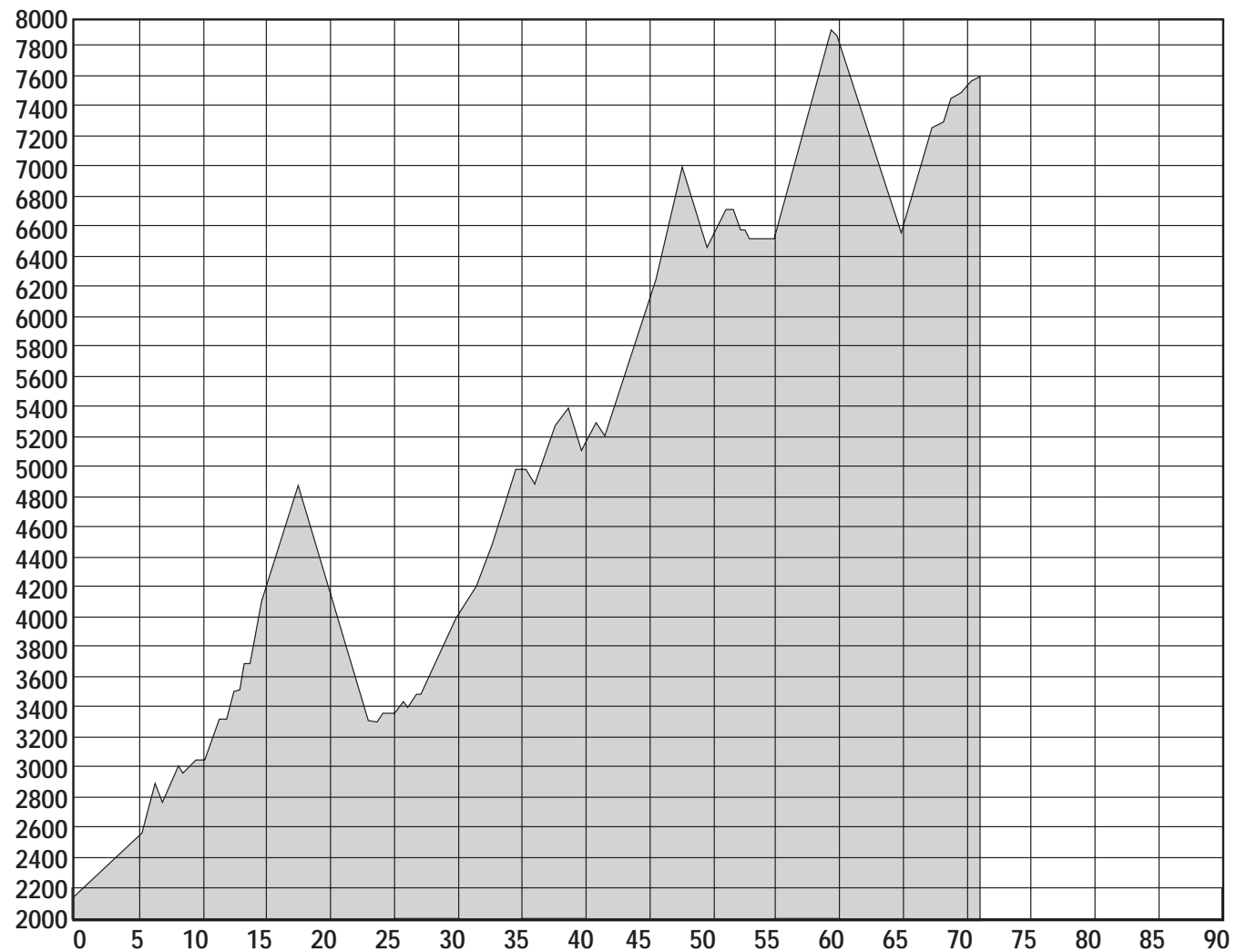
Southern Peaks Tour

The Southern Peaks Tour

Day 1: Soledad Canyon to Jackson Flat

71 miles, 10,000' up, 4100' down

MILE	DIR	ROAD	COMMENTS
0.0	L	Soledad Canyon Road	Leave Robin's Nest.
4.0	R	Crown Valley Road	
5.7	R	Country Way	Becomes Indian Oak Road, then Briarglen Road.
7.8	R	Cedar Croft Road	Becomes Avenue Y-8.
8.7	R	Aliso Canyon Road	Rollers and then a long climb.
14.7	R	County Road N3	Sign says, "Hwy 2 18 miles." Still climbing.
17.4	S		Mill Creek summit (4910'). Long downhill.
23.7	L	Upper Big Tujunga Canyon Road	Climbing again.
32.9	L	Angeles Crest Hwy (Hwy 2)	Still climbing.
40.5	S		Devil's Canyon vista point (☆).
47.6	S		Cloud Burst summit (7018').
53.8	S		Two short tunnels.
60.4	S		Dawson saddle (7901'). Big descent.
68.4	L	Into Grassy Hollow Visitors Cntr	Follow signs to Jackson Flat group camp.
70.9			Jackson Flat group camp.



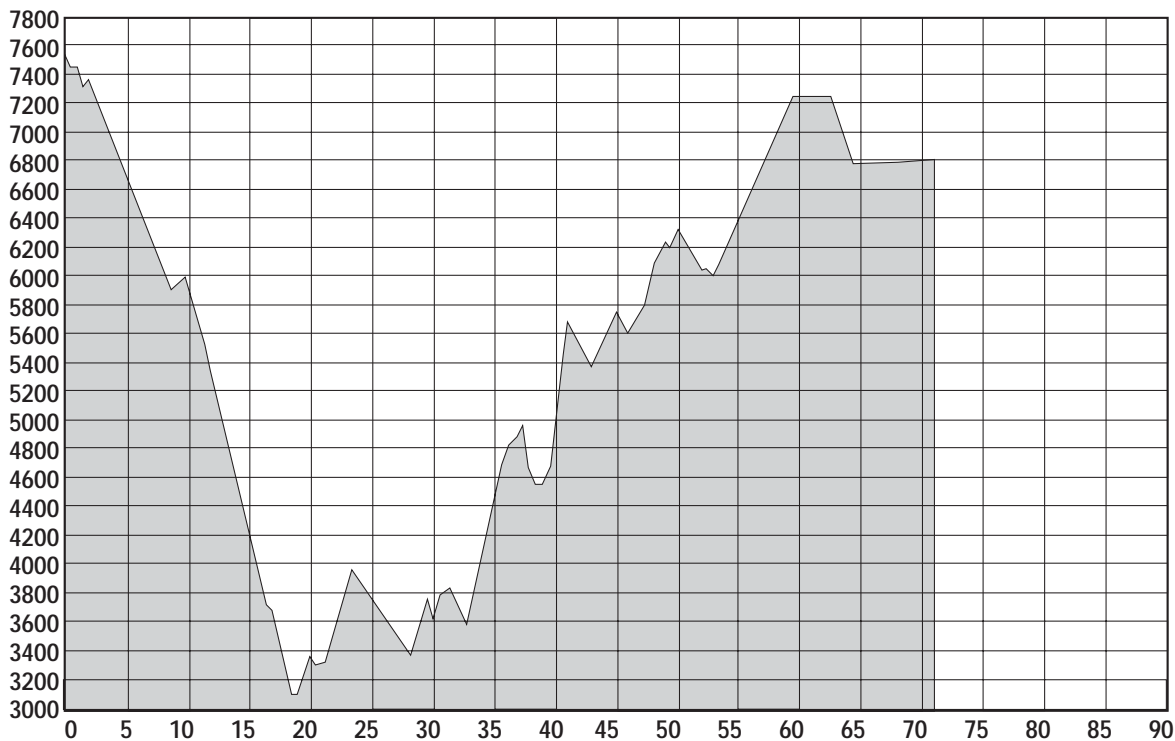
Day 1: Soledad Canyon to Jackson Flat
71 miles, 10,000' up, 4100' down



The Southern Peaks Tour

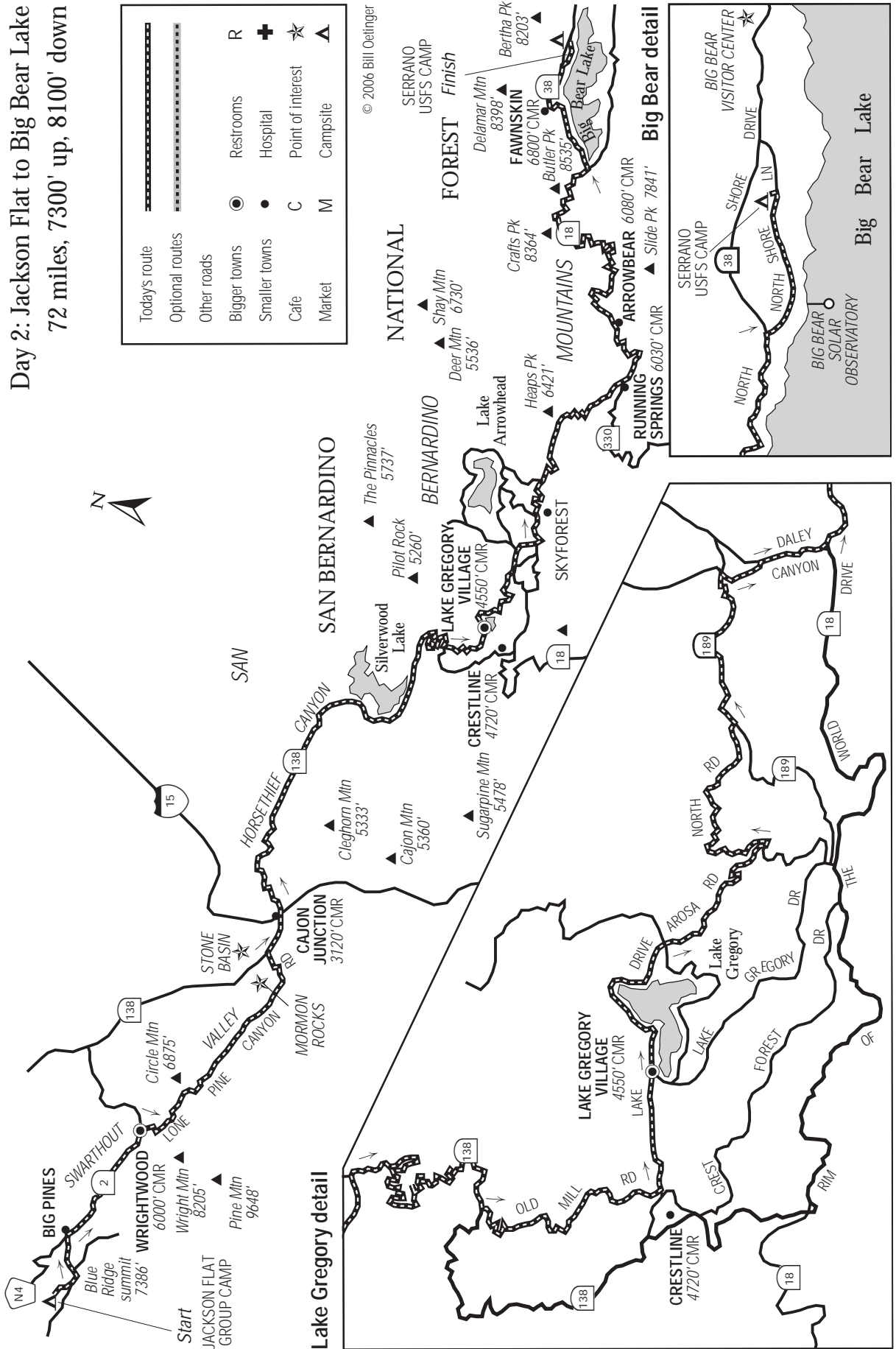
Day 2: Jackson Flat to Big Bear Lake • 72 miles, 7300' up, 8100' down

MILE	DIR	ROAD	COMMENTS
0.0		Jackson Flat access road	Leave camp
2.5	L	Angeles Crest Hwy (Hwy 2)	Leave Grassy Hollow.
2.8	S		Blue Ridge summit (7381'). Nice descent.
9.3	R	Lone Pine Canyon Road	Town of Wrightwood. Stores, restaurants.
9.7	L	Thrush Street (detour)	Follow signs to Lone Pine Canyon Road.
9.9	R	Heath Creek Road	" "
10.1	L	Lone Pine Canyon Road	End of detour. Leave Wrightwood. Big downhill.
19.1	R	Hwy 138	Busy highway. Still downhill.
20.2	S		Cajon Junction (3120'). Store.
36.8	L	Old Mill Road	In the middle of a big climb.
38.3	L	Lake Drive	Towns of Crestline, Lake Gregory. Stores, cafes.
40.4	S	Arosa Road	Lake Dr. blends into Arosa Rd. Begin steep climb.
41.6	L	North Road	
43.0	L	Hwy 189	
44.8	R	Hwy 189	Bear right on 189 at Grass Valley junction.
45.1	R	Daley Canyon Road	Uphill.
45.6	L	Rim of the World Drive (Hwy 18)	Spectacular vistas (☆).
46.2	S		Crest summit (5756').
53.5	S		Town of Running Springs (6030'). Store, cafe.
53.7	R	Hwy 18	Bear right on 18 at Hwy 330 junction.
54.8	S		Town of Arrowbear Lake (6000'). Store, cafe.
59.0	S		Lakeview Point summit (7117').
66.1	L	North Shore Drive (Hwy 38)	Ride along north shore of Big Bear Lake.
69.3	S		Town of Fawnskin (6750'). Store.
71.2	R	North Shore Lane	
72.0	L		Into Serrano USFS camp.



The Southern Peaks Tour

Day 2: Jackson Flat to Big Bear Lake
72 miles, 7300' up, 8100' down

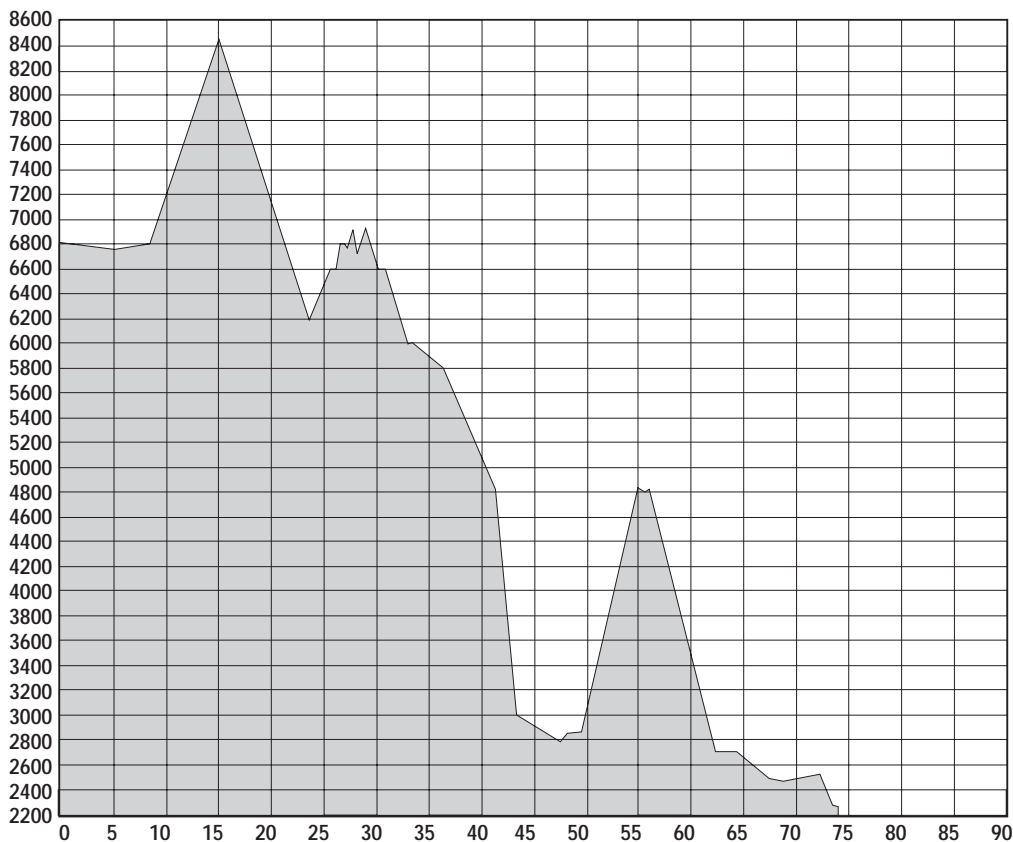


The Southern Peaks Tour

Day 3: Big Bear Lake to Banning

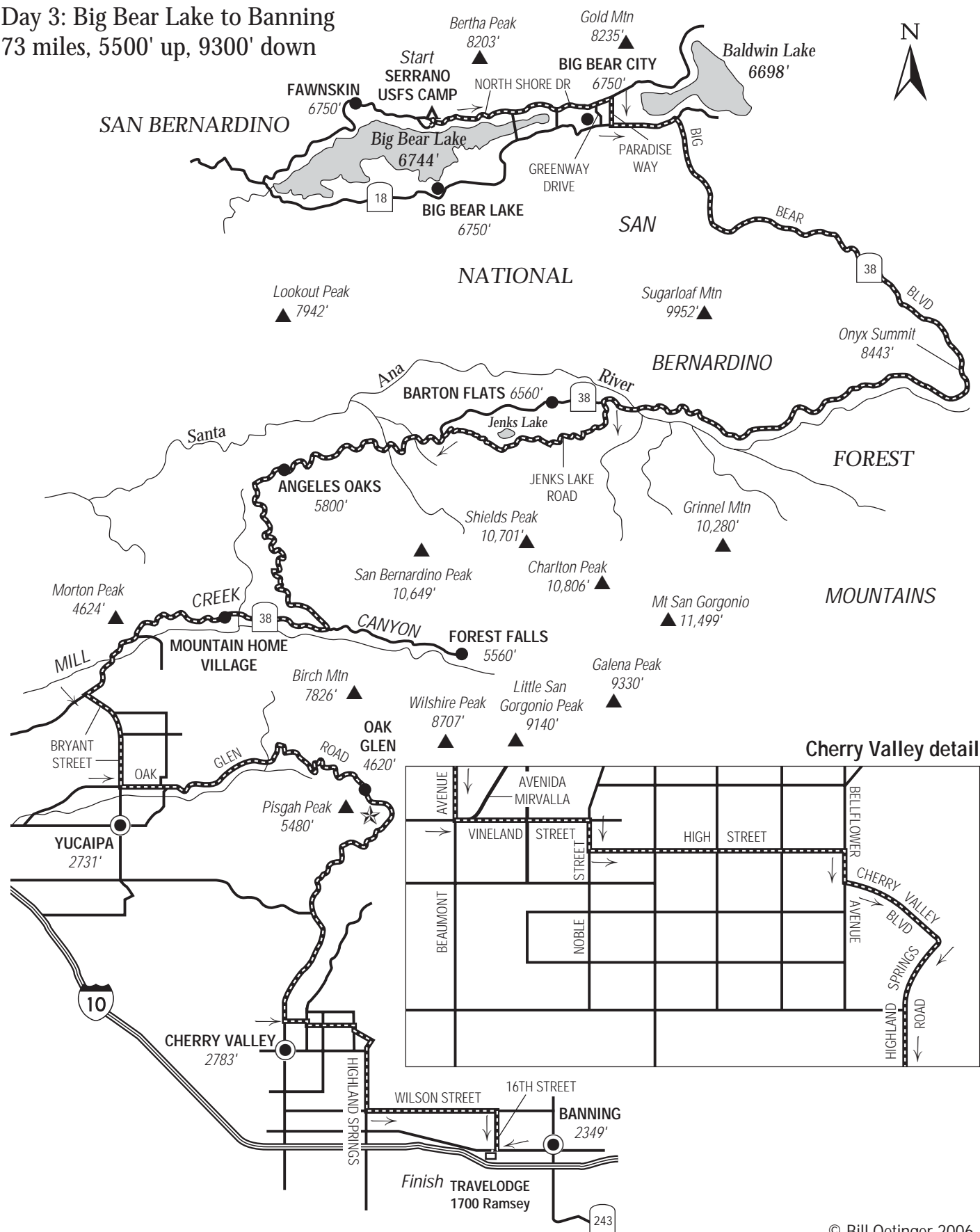
73 miles, 5500' up, 9300' down

MILE	DIR	ROAD	COMMENTS
0.0	L	North Shore Lane	Leave Serrano USFS camp.
0.2	R	North Shore Drive	
4.4	R	Paradise Way	Town of Big Bear City. Mostly residential.
5.2	L	Big Bear Blvd. (Hwy 38)	
15.2	S	Hwy 38	Onyx summit (8443'). High point of tour. Big descent ahead.
25.3	L	Jenks Lake Road	Short detour off main highway. Moderate climb.
30.1	L	Hwy 38	Return to main highway.
35.6	S		Town of Angeles Oaks (5800'). Cafe. More descending.
47.1	L	Bryant Street	Heading into city of Yucaipa (2731'). Shopping mall.
49.5	L	Oak Glen Road	Climbing. Leave Yucaipa.
55.0	S		Town of Oak Glen (4620'). Fruit stands, nice descent.
62.8	L	Vinelland	Becomes Beaumont Avenue in Cherry Valley.
63.4	R	Noble Street	Town of Cherry Valley (2783'). Mostly residential.
63.4	L	High Street	
64.5	R	Bellflower Avenue	Working through town on neighborhood streets.
64.6	L	Cherry Valley Boulevard	
65.1	R	Highland Springs Road	
67.4	L	Wilson Street	Into the city of Banning (2349'). Many stores.
72.2	R	16th Street	
72.9	R	Ramsey	
73.0	L	Into Travelodge Motel	Finish.



The Southern Peaks Tour

Day 3: Big Bear Lake to Banning
73 miles, 5500' up, 9300' down



The Southern Peaks Tour

Day 4: Banning to Oak Grove

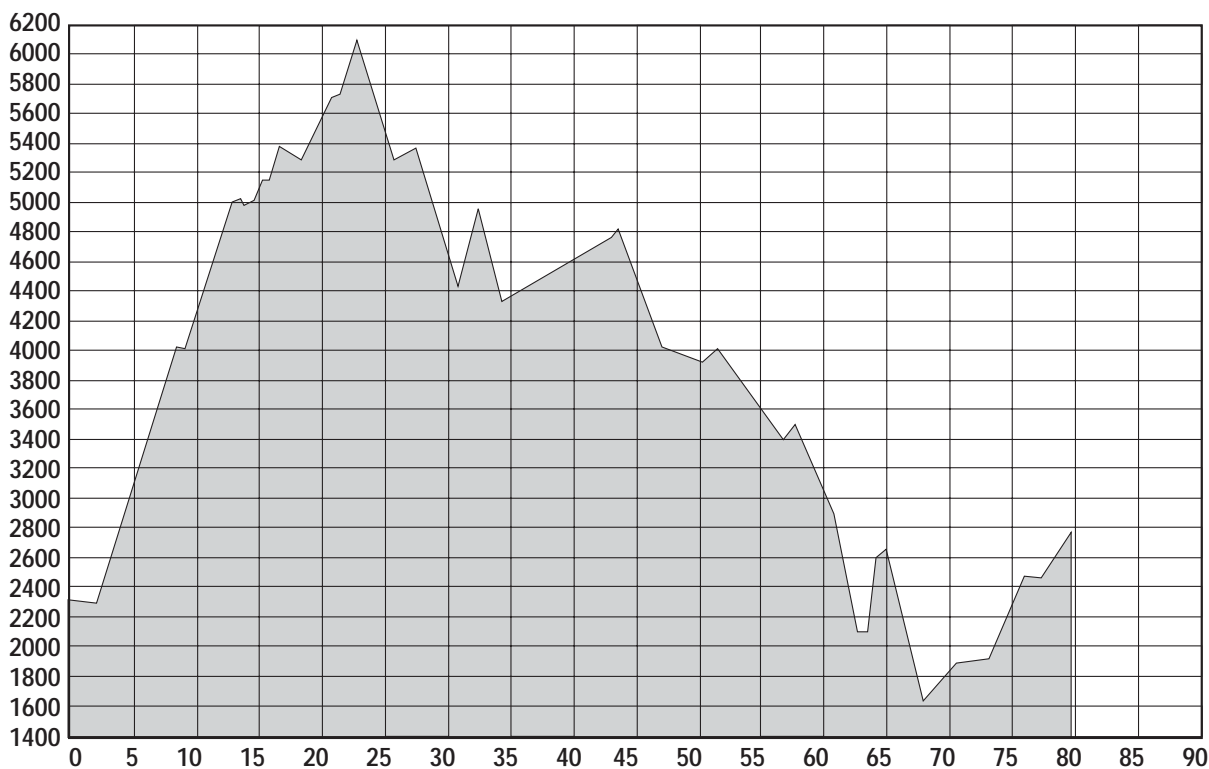
80 miles, 7500' up, 7700' down

70 miles, 6000' up, 6200' down

MILE	DIR	ROAD	COMMENTS
0.0	R	Ramsey	
0.5	R	8th Street (also Hwy 243)	Under I-10.
0.7	L	W. Lincoln (243)	
1.2	R	Hwy 243	Heading for the hills...
16.1	S		Picnic area and vista point (☆).
23.1	S		Summit (6100'). Town of Pine Cove. Store.
26.1	S		Town of Idyllwild (5303'). Stores, cafes. Descent.
30.6	L	Hwy 74	Mountain Center junction (4444'). Climbing.
32.5	S		Keen Camp summit (4917'). Descending.
34.5	S		Town of Lake Hemet (4340'). Store.
43.3	R	Hwy 371	Paradise Cafe on corner. Another descent ahead.
48.5	S		Town of Anza (3910'). Store, cafe.
60.5	R	Wilson Valley Road	Warning: turn comes in the middle of a fast descent.
65.0	L	Sage Road	
70.2	L	Hwy 79	
73.8	S		Town of Aguanga (1940'). Store.
79.6	S		Oak Grove Historic Site (☆).
79.8	L	Into Oak Grove USFS camp	Finish.

Short route:

60.5 S Hwy 371 @ Wilson Valley Rd Stay on 371 straight to Aguanga; rejoin long route.



The Southern Peaks Tour

Day 4: Banning to Oak Grove

80 miles, 7500' up, 7700' down

70 miles, 6000' up, 6200' down



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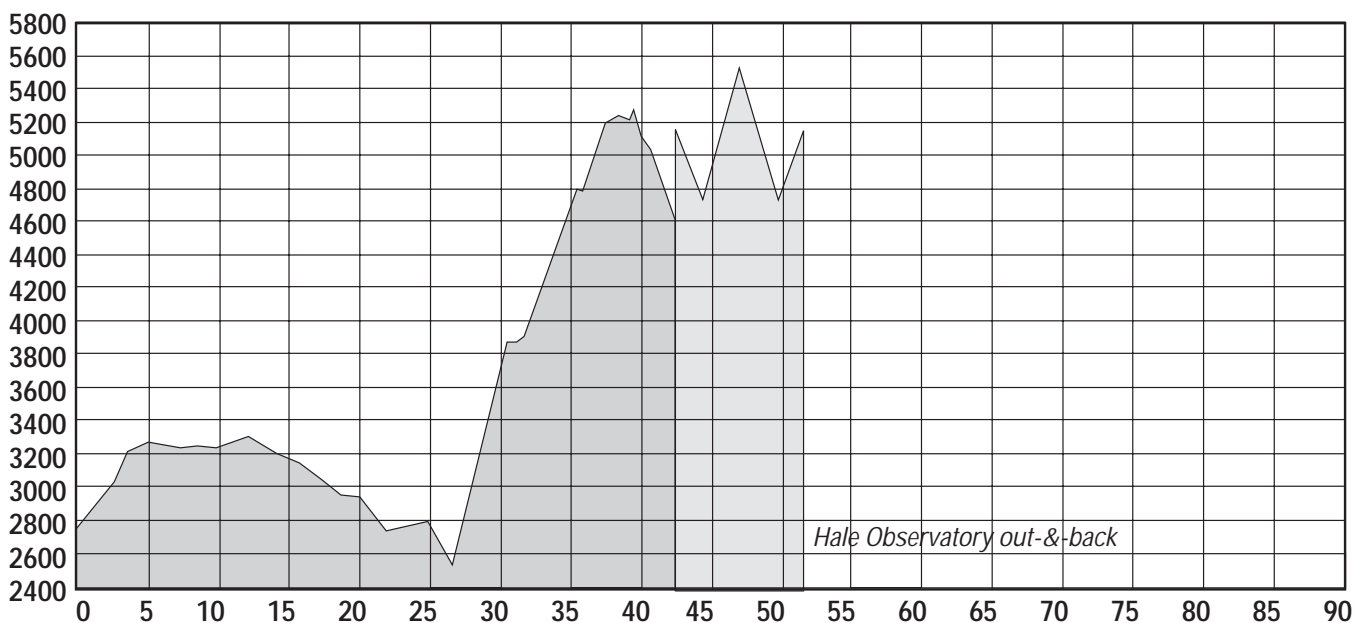
The Southern Peaks Tour

Day 5: Oak Grove to Palomar Mountain

42 miles, 4000' up, 2000' down

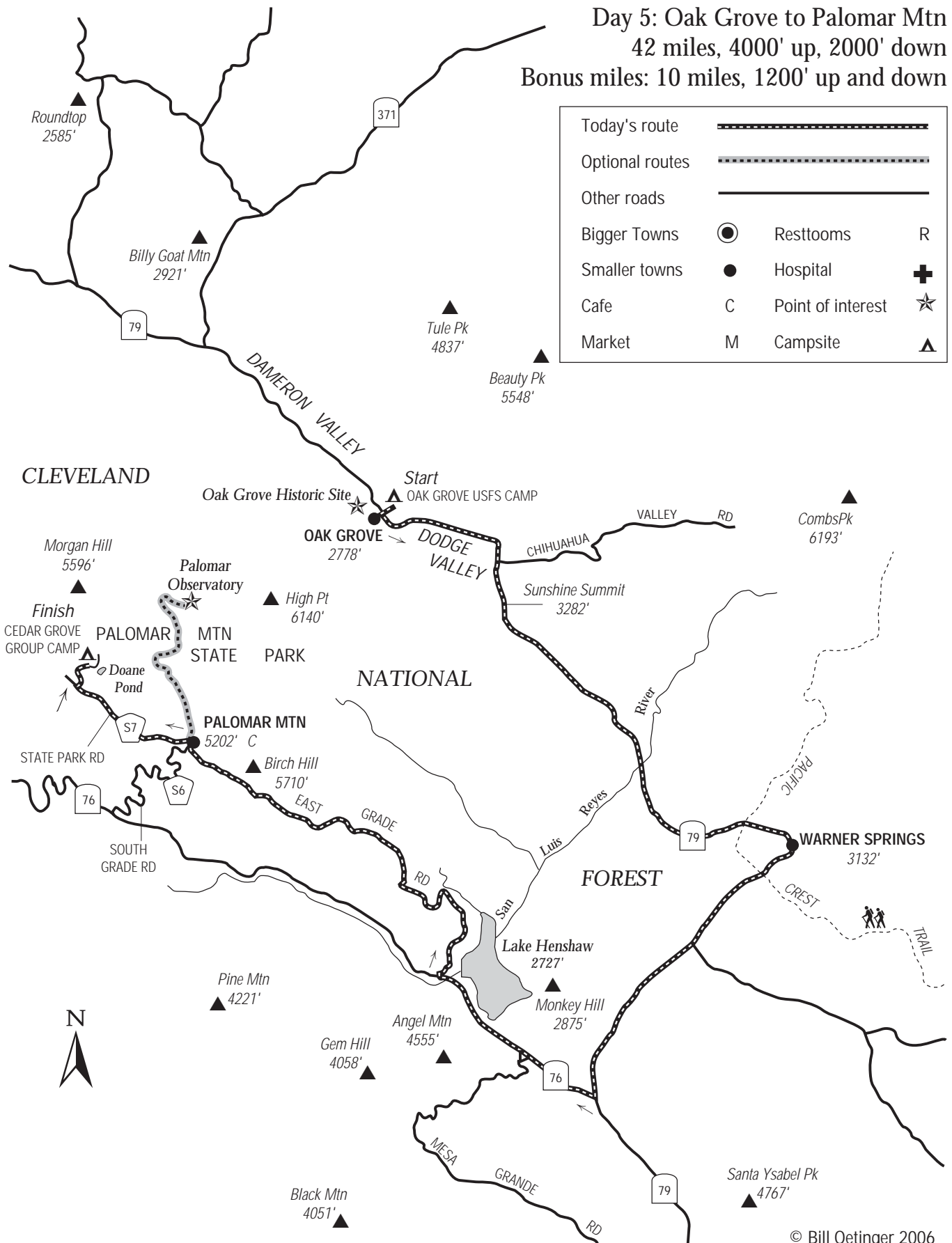
Bonus miles: Palomar Observatory out-&-back: 10 miles round trip, 1200' up and down

MILE	DIR	ROAD	COMMENTS
0.0	L	Hwy 79	Leave Oak Grove camp (2778').
2.8	S		Cafe.
5.0	S		Sunshine summit (3282'). Rolling grasslands.
13.9	S		Town of Warner Springs (3132'). Store.
21.9	R	Hwy 76	Follow sign to Lake Henshaw.
26.5	R	East Grade Road	Sign says, "Palomar Mtn 14." Long climb...
38.1	L	State Park Road	To Palomar Mtn State Park
			Out-&-back to Observatory (☆): go straight.
40.7	S		Palomar Mtn SP entrance.
41.4	R	Access road to campgrounds	
42.2	L	Into Cedar Grove group camp	Finish.



The Southern Peaks Tour

Day 5: Oak Grove to Palomar Mtn
42 miles, 4000' up, 2000' down
Bonus miles: 10 miles, 1200' up and down



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The Southern Peaks Tour

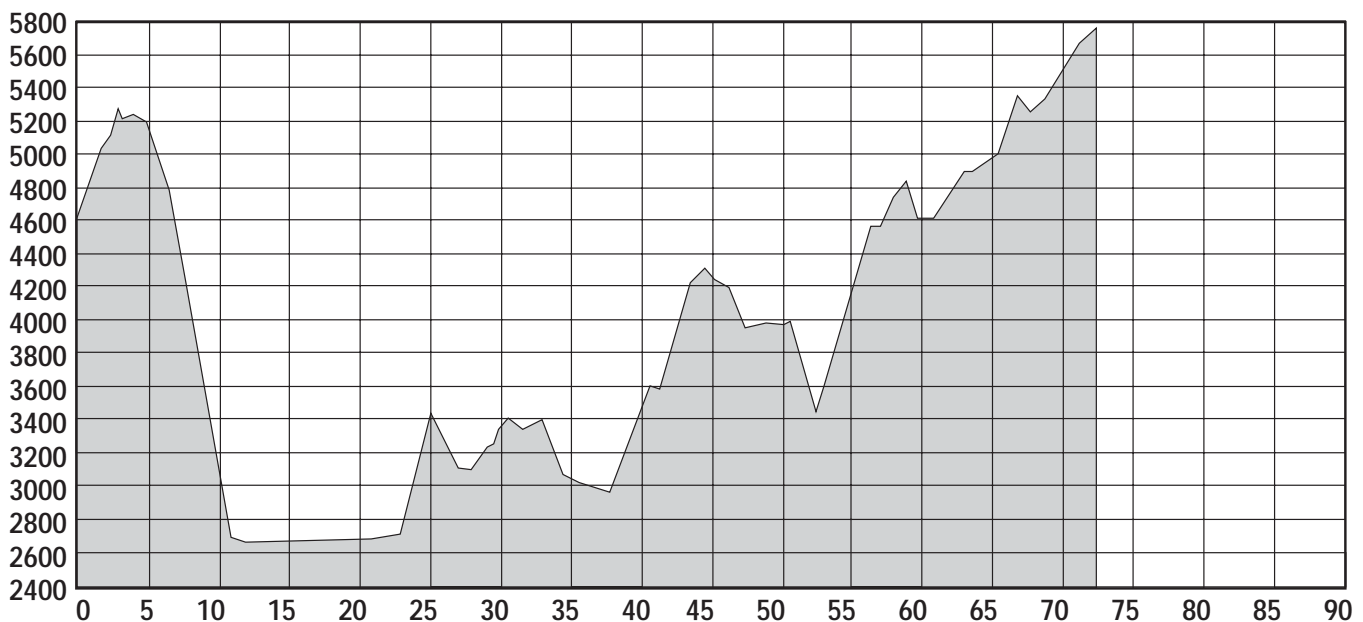
Day 6: Palomar Mountain to Mount Laguna

72 miles, 9000' up, 7900' down (two shortcuts available)

MILE	DIR	ROAD	COMMENTS
0.0	R	Park access road	Leave Cedar Grove camp.
0.8	L	State Park Road	
4.1	R	South Grade Road	At Palomar Mtn junction. Major descent.
10.9	L	Hwy 76	
23.2	R	Center Loop Road	
23.3	R	Mesa Grande Road	Start climbing...
25.1	S		Summit. Up and down for 10 miles...fun!
35.5	R	Hwy 79	
37.5	L	Hwy 78/79	Town of Santa Ysabel (2984'). Begin climb.
40.3	S		Town of Wynola (3600'). Road levels out.
40.7	L	Wynola Road	Climbing on pretty backroad.
44.0	R	Farmer Road	Sign says, "To Julian 2."
46.1	R	Hwy 78/79	Downhill out of town of Julian(4220') (☆).
47.0	L	Pine Hills Road	
48.6	R	Eagle Peak Road	Great backroad exploring.
50.1	L	Boulder Creek Road	
50.4	R		Bear right on Boulder Creek.
53.4	L	Engineers Road	Uphill.
59.4	L	Hwy 79	
61.7	R	Sunrise Highway	
71.6	R	Into Laguna Campground	72.2 to El Prado Group Camp.

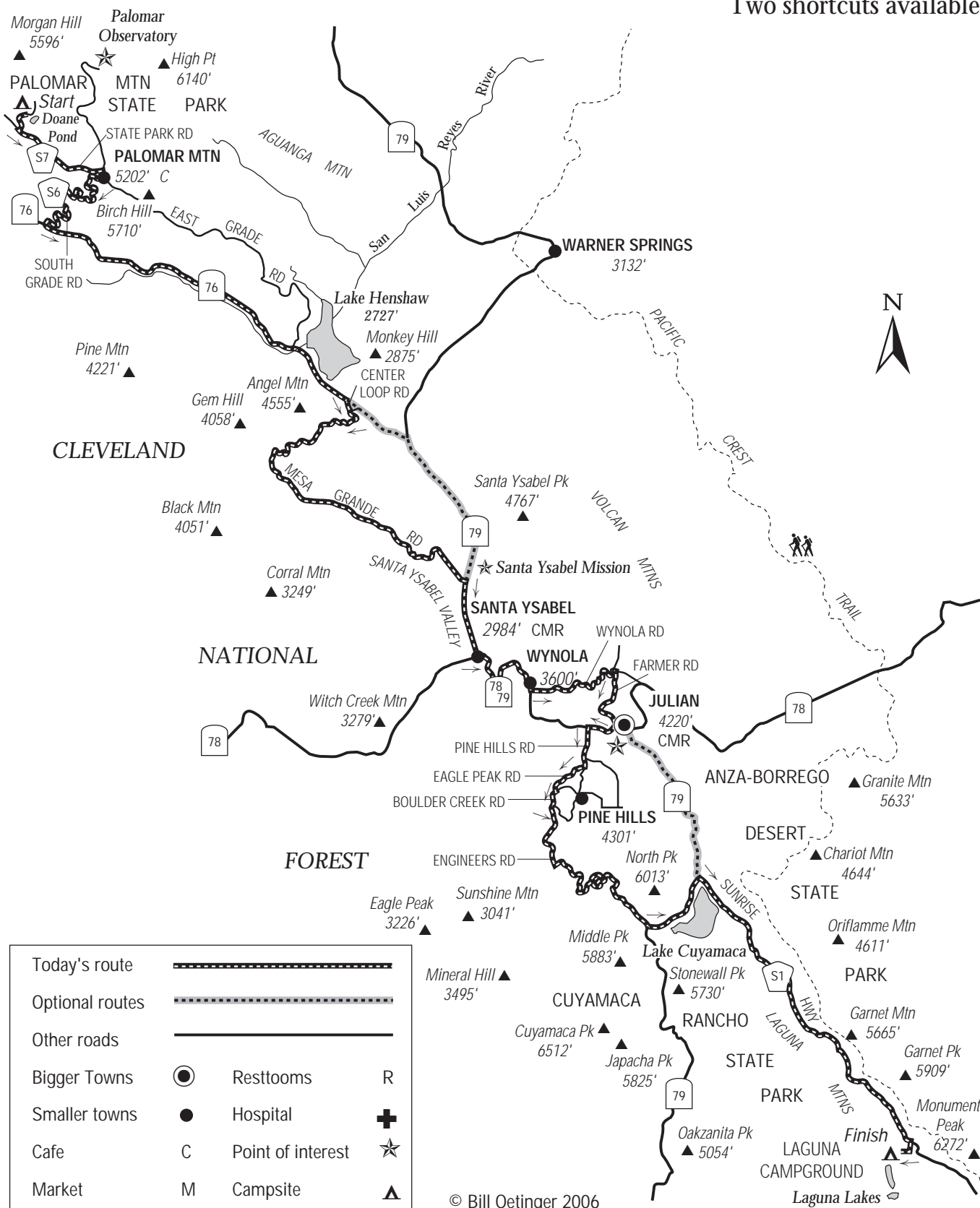
Shortcut #1: Stay on Hwy 76 @ Center Loop Rd; R on Hwy 79. Saves 5 miles & 1000' of climbing.

Shortcut #2: Stay on Hwy 79 straight through Julian to Sunrise Hwy. Saves 10 miles & 1500' of climbing.



The Southern Peaks Tour

Day 6: Palomar Mountain to Mount Laguna
72 miles, 9000' up, 7900' down
Two shortcuts available



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The Southern Peaks Tour

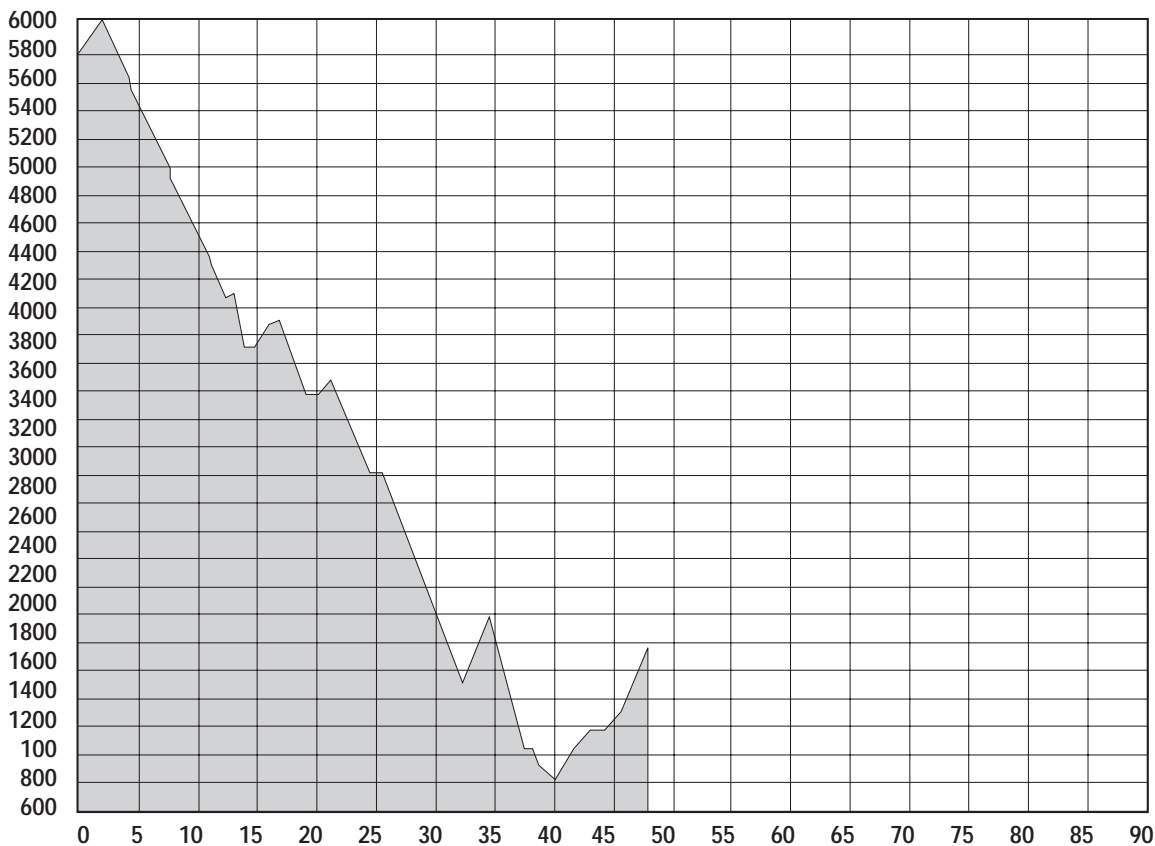
Day 7: Mount Laguna to Alpine

47 miles, 2500' up, 7300' down or 37 miles, 2000' up, 6800' down

MILE	DIR	ROAD	COMMENTS
0.0	R	Sunrise Highway	Leave Laguna USFS camp.
2.4	S		Summit (6000'). High point on stage. Big descent.
2.6	S		Mount Laguna Lodge (5975'). Store, cafe.
12.6	R	Old Hwy 80	More downhill.
13.7	S		Town of Pine Valley (3726'). Store.
16.6	S		Town of Guatay (3917'). Store.
19.2	L	Hwy 79	
22.0	S	Japatul Road	Becomes Japatul at Interstate-8. Long downhill.
32.4	S		Loveland Reservoir.
34.3	L	Dehesa Road	More downhill. Short route goes R on Tavern Rd.
39.5	R	Harbison Canyon Road	Climbing.
44.2	R	Arnold Way	Uphill toward town of Alpine.
46.4/36.8	L	Tavern Road	Into Alpine (1700'). Rejoin short route.
46.7/37.1	R	Alpine Blvd.	
46.8/37.2	R	Into Alpine Creek Shopping Center	
46.9/37.3		Finish at Bread Basket Restaurant and Bakery	

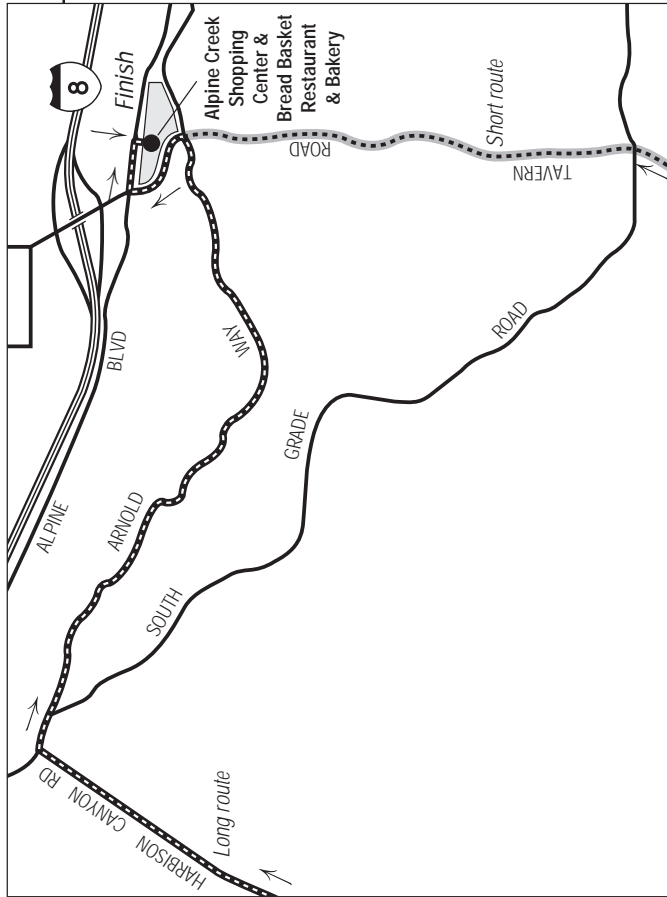
Short finish...

34.3	R	Tavern Road	More straight ahead than right, uphill into Alpine.
36.8	S	Arnold Road junction	Long route rejoins.

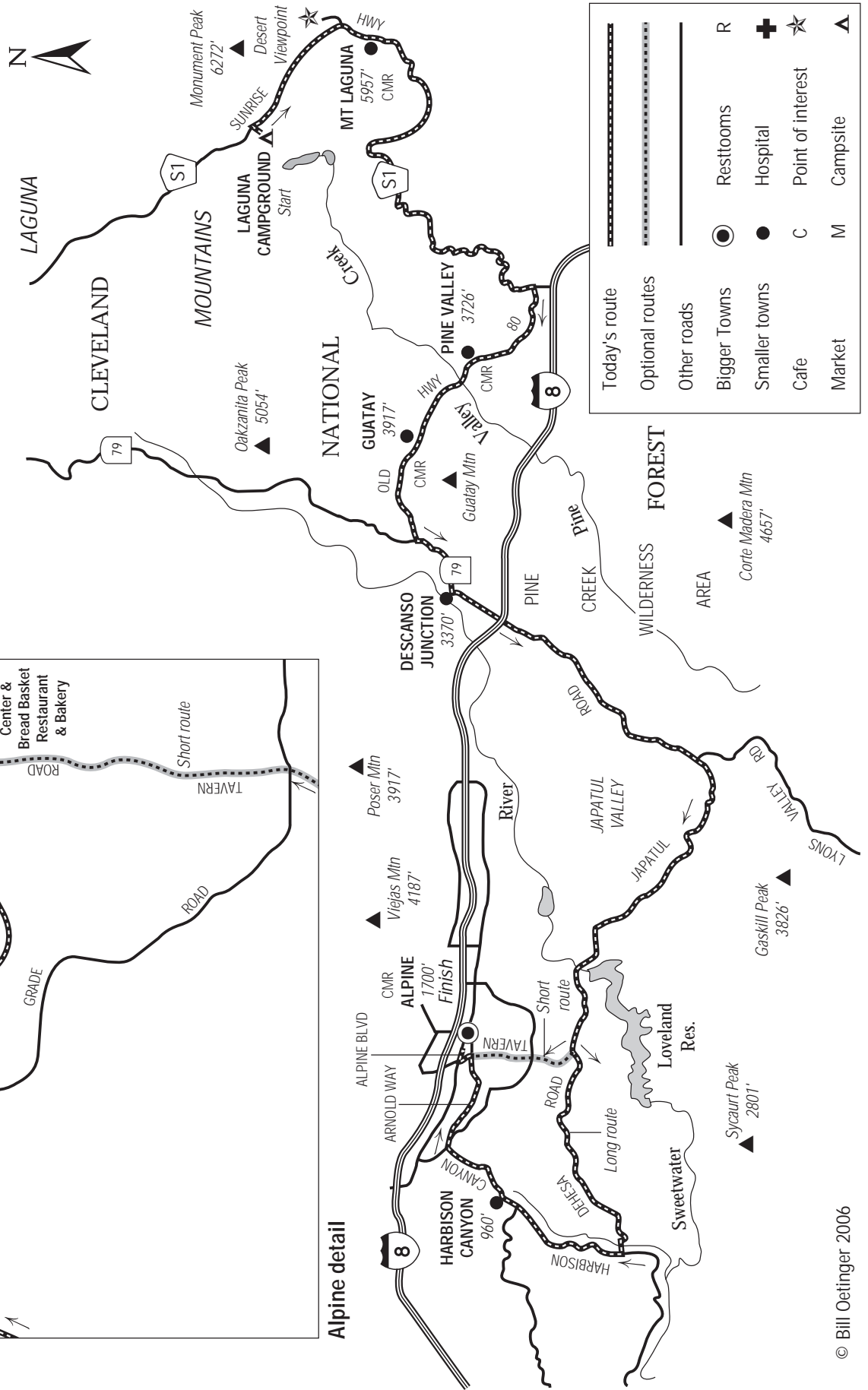


The Southern Peaks Tour

Day 7: Mt Laguna to Alpine
47 miles, 2500' up, 7300' down
37 miles, 2000' up, 6800' down



Alpine detail



The Southern Peaks Tour

Day 1: Soledad Canyon to Jackson Flat...alternate detour

52 miles

MILE	DIR	ROAD	COMMENTS
0.0	L	Soledad Canyon Road	Leave Robin's Nest.
4.0	R	Crown Valley Road	
5.7	R	Country Way	Becomes Indian Oak Road, then Briarglen Road.
7.8	R	Cedar Croft Road	Becomes Avenue Y-8.
8.7	R	Aliso Canyon Road	Rollers and then a long climb.
14.7	L	Angeles Forest Hwy (County Road N3)	Depart basic route for detour
17.0	R	Mt Emma Road	
26.8	R	Fort Tejon Road	
33.8	LR	Pallett Creek Rd/Valyermo Road	
36.7	L	Big Pines Hwy (County Road N4)	
48.2	R	Angeles Crest Hwy (Hwy 2)	
50.7	R	Into Grassy Hollow Visitor Center	Follow signs to Jackson Flat group camp.
52.1			Jackson Flat group camp.