

SAN DIEGO ACTIVE

Hiking The Hills

Steeper and tougher than trail running routes, these are best reserved for experienced trail runners or those with hiking boots.

1. EL CAPITAN

11.2 miles * MOST DIFFICULT

El Capitan Preserve. The trailhead is on the right side of Wildcat Canyon Road.

This trail is hot, dusty, and steep, but the views are worth it. The trail to the top goes down as well as up and up and up, making this climb one of the few that actually is “uphill both ways.” Warning: The trail descends before the final ascent to the summit. Don’t turn back too soon. If—when!—you make it to the top, you are treated to a 360-degree view of San Diego and the satisfaction of knowing you really earned it.

2. MT. WOODSON

6.4 miles * DIFFICULT

Lake Poway

How could you not want to hike a path that includes something called “Potato Chip Rock”? Unfortunately, the rock is less mid-hike snack and more about-to-break-off piece of stone. Still, the precariousness will stop you in your tracks. Views along the way are gorgeous and far-reaching, although the very top can be a bit of a disappointment, unless you are really into radio towers. For a more serene place to celebrate your climb, take a turnoff to the left shortly before you reach the summit.

3. IRON MOUNTAIN

6.6 miles * DIFFICULT

At the intersection of Poway Road and Highway 67 in Poway.

A pretty easy (read: not ridiculously steep and long) climb that still has those payoff views. Start off passing through a wooden gate and romp among the trees, then climb up and out of the woods as you head to the top. After reaching the summit, you can continue on a longer loop for your route down (totaling 9.5 miles instead of 6.6; take the third path that splits off about a mile from the summit). This route will bring you through some exotic-looking rock outcroppings and past a nice view of Ramona. End the loop tramping through a meadow, but don't veer off the path—that's someone's backyard.

4. PACIFIC CREST TRAIL

Out and back is 4 miles * INTERMEDIATE

Start at the Penny Pines monument about 27 miles up Sunrise Highway and follow the Pacific Crest Trail to Garnet Peak through Laguna Recreation Area.

This is a small segment of the Pacific Crest Trail, which avid (or crazy) hikers can follow all the way from Mexico to Canada. But even this portion makes you feel like you're in another country—or on another planet. Follow a path that crosses cliffs with 1,000-foot drops and provides views of landscapes that look like the surface of the moon. The elevation's above 4,000 feet, so unless you enjoy hiking in snow or windstorms, check the weather before you go.

