

Spotlight: Observatory Trail



*Observatory Trail hikers walk the last 0.4 miles to the Palomar Observatory

Highlights

Elevation Gain	900 ft
Distance	4.4 miles round trip
Pets Allowed	Yes
Fees	\$5 for parking (trailhead fee is not required for campers staying at Observatory Campground)
Hike Time	2.5 hours
Difficulty	Moderate
Best Seasons	Fall, Spring, Summer
Location	South Grade Road, Cleveland National Forest, Palomar Mountain, CA 92060
Trail Conditions	Good
Ranger District	Palomar Ranger District – (760) 788-0250

Listed as one of only four National Recreational Trails in San Diego County, and touted as a “perfect summer trail,” this shaded 4.4 mile hike offers much in the way of exercise, scenery and nature views. Located on Palomar Mountain 10 miles north of HWY 76, this oak-lined trail provides a good aerobic climb, well maintained roads, and access to a world-famous observatory, all while boasting an easy to find trailhead and campground with spectacular views of the Mendenhall Valley. If you are planning a trip to hike the Observatory Trail, here are a couple of notable facts before you get started:

Special Features: With an abundance of large pine, fir and cedar trees, this trail is one of the few in Southern California with a Sierra Nevada-like atmosphere. Couple this with sweeping views of the Mendenhall Valley offering up large meadows, grazing cattle, gleaming ponds, and sprouting wildflowers, and you have a robustly unique hike.

Points of Interest: Beyond its beautiful forests and meadows, Palomar Mountain is possibly best known for its Observatory. Established in 1928, the Palomar Observatory contains several telescopes, including the 200-inch Hale Telescope. The Observatory is open daily for visitation from 9am to 4:30pm. Call (760) 742-2119 for information about unanticipated closures.

Difficulty: The trail is well-traveled, well-maintained and has no trail junctions. Difficulty is listed as moderate, with a 4.4 mile round-trip hike plus another 0.4 miles if visiting the Observatory.

Fees: No permit is required to hike the Observatory trail; however a Forest Adventure Pass is required for each vehicle parked at the trailhead. Adventure Passes can be purchased for \$5 per day or \$30 per year at Cleveland National Forest offices, or at a local retailer listed [here](#). Alternatively, the day use fee can be paid at the trailhead using the fee tube.

Camping: Observatory Campground is just 2 miles from Palomar Observatory offering a unique learning experience and great views of the night sky. The facility offers a variety of amenities for both tent and RV camping such as drinking water, coin-operated showers, grills, trash cans, campfire rings, a flush toilet, and monthly [star parties](#), , while hiking, biking and picnicking can be found nearby. Campsites cost \$15 or \$30 per night depending on size, and reservations are highly encouraged. To book your camping trip, visit the [recreation.gov](#) Observatory Campground site and reserve your spot today.

What to Watch For: Animals, such as cougars, mountain lions, and rattlesnakes have been reported in the area. Also be wary of hazardous plants like the Poodle Dog Bush and poison oak, which line trail in abundance. Contact with either one of these plants can cause rashes, blisters, swelling, and general irritation.

Poodle Dog Bush



Poison Oak



Directions: Heading north from downtown San Diego, take the 15 Freeway to exit 46 for Route 76 east toward Pala. Drive east on Route 76 for 20.4 miles and turn left onto South Grande Road (S6). Take South Grade road for 6.8 miles to an intersection with East Grade Road and angle left to continue up South Grade Road, driving north for another 2.4 miles to Observatory Campground. Turn right into the campground. The trail starts from the day use parking area at the far side of the campgroud loop road.



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