

A Guide to Adventures Along

WEST CAMINO CIELO



Raymond Ford • May 2026

West Camino Cielo feels like driving along the spine of the world above Santa Barbara.

Once you've climbed up from Highway 154 or Refugio Road, the pavement gives way to a high, narrow dirt road that rides the crest of the Santa Ynez Mountains at around 4,000 feet.

On one side you look straight down toward the Pacific and the Channel Islands; on the other, the land falls away to Lake Cachuma and the Santa Ynez Valley.



You will find pullouts and side tracks where you can stop, walk a short distance, and soak in 360-degree views that are hard to match in a half-day outing.

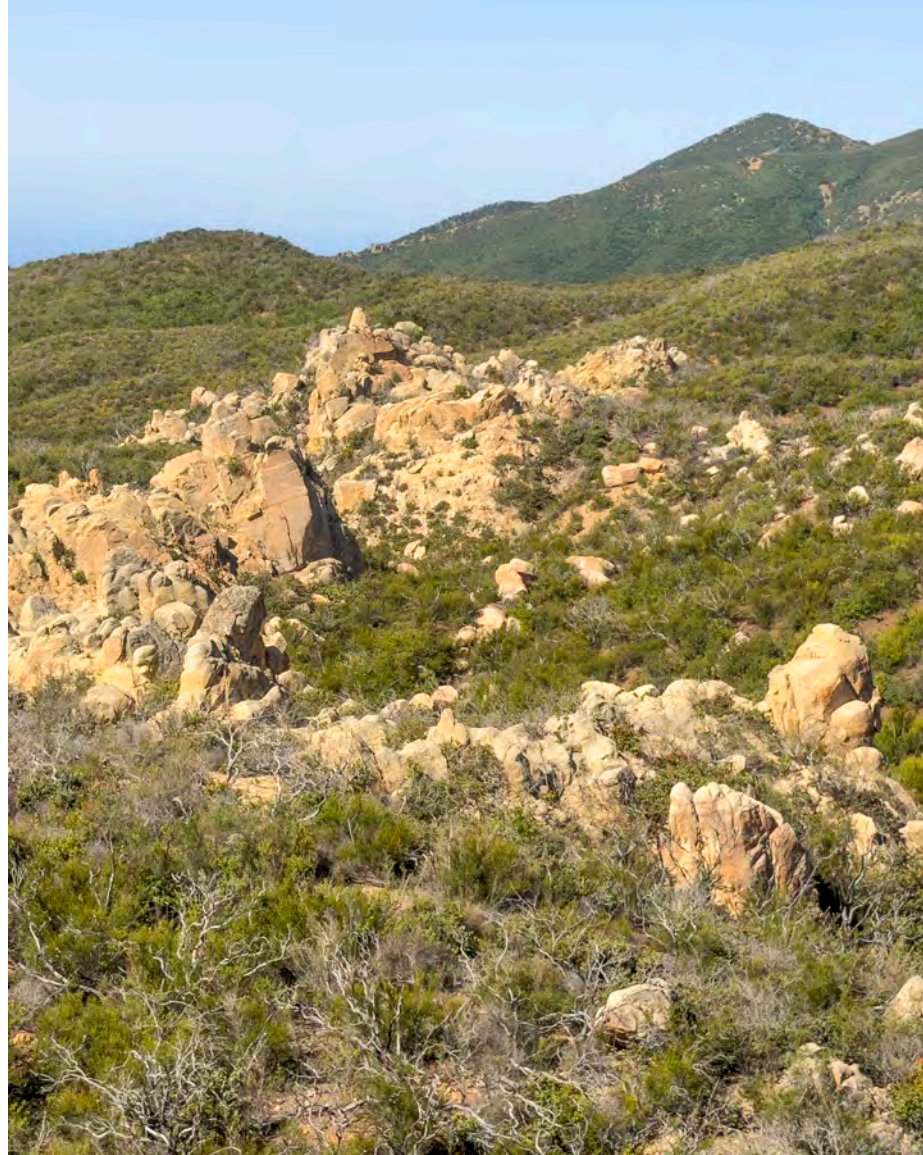
Sunsets and clear winter days can be especially spectacular, with the ocean glowing on one side and pastel foothills on the other.

There is something very meaningful about a few hours or a day away from the city in a place that changes little over time.



For someone who hasn't been, the reward is that combination of adventure and perspective. It feels remote yet is only a short drive from town, and every mile reinforces how abruptly the mountains rise from the coast.

If you like big views, a bit of mild off-roading, and the feeling of being on a high balcony above the Santa Barbara Coast, West Camino Cielo is worth the effort.



The drive across West Camino Cielo is a bit over 15 miles and the first five of that is on pavement—easy driving that many of you have probably been on, whether for a trip to the Playground or a bit further, Lizard's Mouth.

You may have also gone a bit further to practice your skills at either the Winchester Gun Club or Skeet area, which are both open to the public on the weekends. But that's where the road ends and one of Santa Barbara's most scenic challenges begins.

For the next ten miles you'll be on dirt all the way, but not just any kind of dirt. Much of it will be rocky, gullied and narrow enough that one or the other of you will need to back up, at times on sections steep enough to give you the shivers and close enough to the edge to make you wonder if you'll make it through.

By the time you pass the turnoff to Santa Ynez Peak you'll feel like you've been through a wringer—and most likely loving every minute of it. Passengers perhaps not as much given at times when your seatbelt seems like the only thing keeping you from hitting your head on the roof.



Not to be left unmentioned is the type of vehicle that works best for this type of road—or which you should absolutely NOT consider taking. Be forewarned that this jeep road is for high clearance vehicles only and better yet those with 4x4.

Full immersion Around the Corner

While the first several twists and turns may make you think this isn't so bad. Then in a quarter mile reality hits when you get to your first turnout (a blessing) and views both straight downhill to Winchester Saddle and west to Broadcast Peak in the far distance. It's the perfect spot to check out what's in store.

Off to the right are first glimpses of Lake Cachuma and to the left looking down and Winchester Canyon you may be able to spot a bit of the coastline and straight in front of you a narrow swath of the crest that seems devoid of any kind of vegetation.



Fire fighters will tell you that this is known as a "fuel break." designed not to keep fire from crossing over it but to serve as a line of defense where crews may be able bring resources in safely to go directly on the fire which would be impossible if it were covered with chaparral.



Most recently, the break served to hold the 2017 Whittier Fire from crossing into Bear Canyon on the inland side of the crest and move down into the Winchester canyon drainage and directly down into the homes along the western part of Cathedral Oaks.

Beyond this the climbing begins. At this point it's about 1,600 feet of vertical elevation to the top of the Broadcast Peak which you can spot in the far distance but given the number of ups and downs along the way you'll be climbing close to twice that by the time you drive past it.

Step Back in Time

Looking back to the east towards La Cumbre Peak are the shadowed ridges and high peaks that have separated Santa Barbara from the back country for thousands of years; looking to the west you can spot the tail end of the Santa Ynez range dipping down eventually into land's end near Point Conception; turning to your left and out over the Channel Islands and glimpses of the Gaviota Coast, seemingly unchanged over time; and then looking back into the interior, across Lake Cachuma to the San Rafael Mountains and in the very far distance the Sierra Madres.

Mountain Driving

Mostly likely you won't see many others along the way, especially on a weekday, which is highly recommended given how much of the road is basically a one lane adventure. However you should expect that you will.

There is one simple rule you need to know: **Downhill drivers must yield.**

When in doubt a conservative approach is always best. It is simply much safer to back uphill than it is to back down. In most cases along West Camino Cielo the chaparral crowds the roadside and there are plenty of twists and turns, meaning the views in front of you are often obstructed.

There are a few things you can do to minimize the danger: always have seatbelts on at all times; look in the distance for upcoming vehicles, honk your horn at dangerous corners, be much more cautious, especially when heading downhill. Above all, go slow.



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There are a few things you can do to minimize the danger: always have seatbelts on at all times; look in the distance for upcoming vehicles, honk your horn at dangerous corners, be much more cautious, especially when heading downhill. **Above all, go slow** and enjoy the a great day out on one of the classic drives in the Santa Barbara area.



West Camino Cielo Road Log

Start — Kinevan Road/West Camino Turnoff

Head up State Route 154, known as “the pass” to the turnoff a half mile before the crest onto Kinevan Road. Look for the left turn lane onto it but note the downhill traffic coming down from the Pass can be driving extremely fast so use caution.

0.2 mile — Kinevan Road Turnoff

Kinevan Road is a short beautiful canyon road that leads up to the top of San Marcos Pass and provides a unique glimpse of what the road was like before the state highway was constructed. Bicyclist often use this route as a scenic alternative to staying on Hy. 154 where the traffic speed increases dramatically.

2.4 miles — The Playground Trailhead

Look for the small pullout where the trailhead to the Playground begins.

3.7 miles — Lizard's Mouth

There are several informal access points to Lizard's Mouth. Look for the trail sign for the main one. Please, take your trash with you and respect the area.

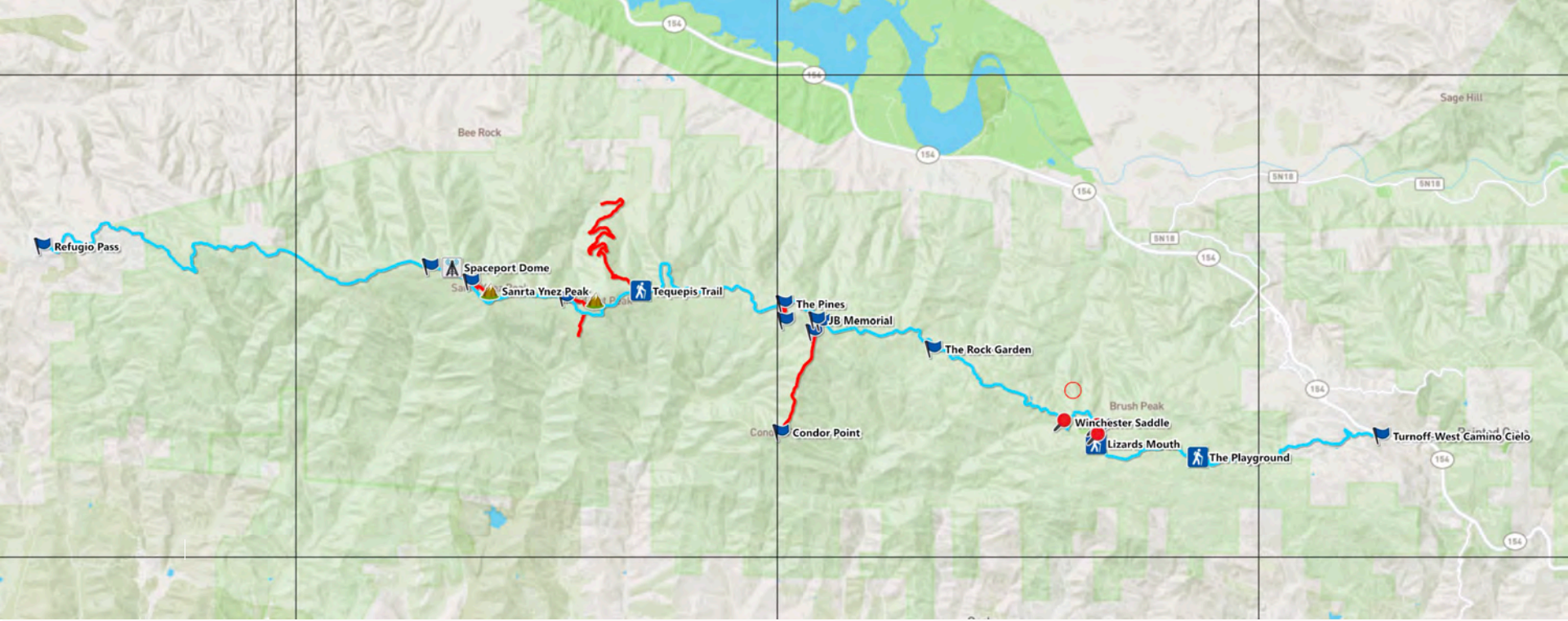
3.9 miles — Winchester Gun Club & Skeet Shooting

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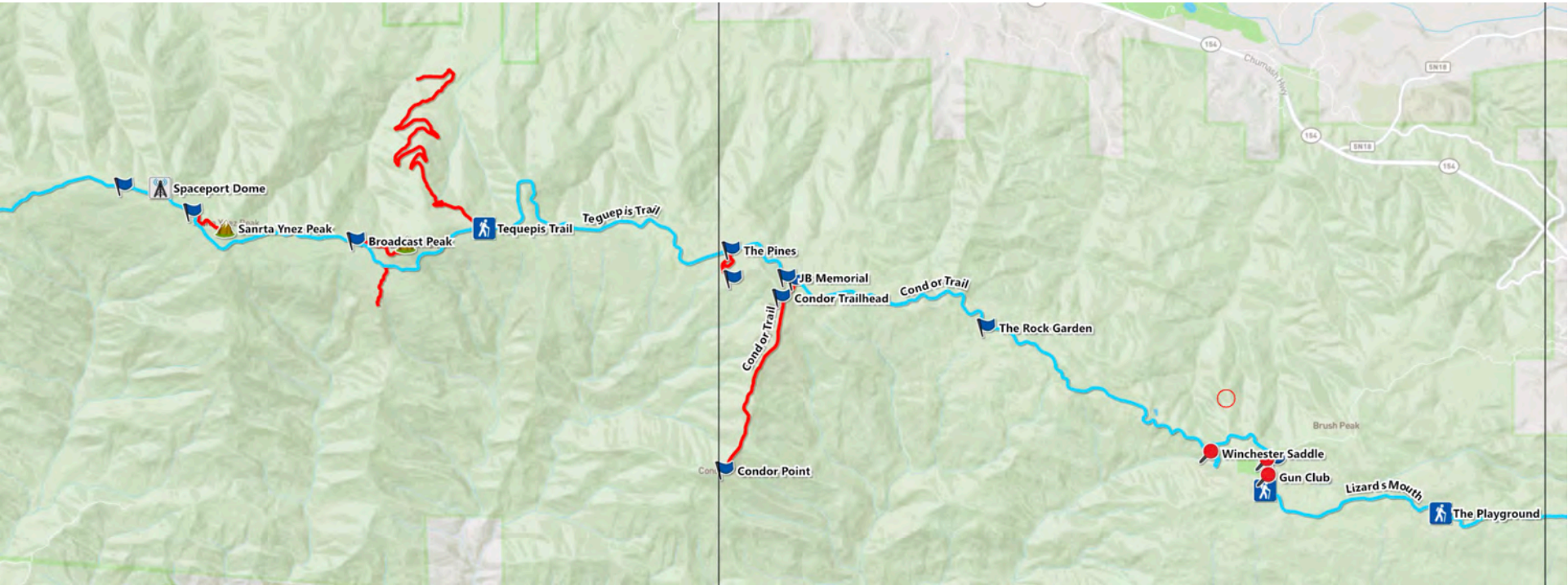
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3.9 miles — Winchester Gun Club & Skeet Shooting

3.9 miles — Pavement Ends



Overview & closer view of the West Camino Cielo route from Hy 154 to Refugio Pass



Don't go beyond this point unless you are planning on at a minimum going down to Winchester Saddle as there aren't any places to turn around before that. Rainfall of any amount will make the road extremely treacherous.

4.7 miles — Winchester Saddle

Winchester Saddle is the lowest point on the trip across West Camino Cielo and the start of just under 8 miles of dirt road that will take you from 2,500 feet in elevation to just over 4,000 feet and some of the best views on both sides of the mountains.

6.5 miles — The Rock Garden

A unique set of boulder fields that are a bit difficult to get down to but a blast to explore.

8.0 Miles — Condor Peak

The 3,985-foot peak hangs out over the coastline near Dos Pueblos Ranch. A very brushy off-trail route leads out to the top of the point. 2.6 miles out and back.

8.1 miles — Memorial to "JB"

This beautiful memorial is dedicated to Jonathan Garcia-Bogarin who died nearby when his truck rolled over and pinned him underneath it. The image and the words are poignant reminder of the dangers roads like this can possess. The words there are heart breaking: "YOUR WINGS WERE READY BUT OUR *HEARTS* WERE NOT."

8.7 miles — The Pines

The Pines are perhaps the only straight and almost level stretch of dirt along the entire road and prior to the Whittier Fire in July 2017 was like a forest oasis, the wide-open flats providing one of the best camp spots along the jeepway. Sadly today those shown below are all gone, having burned when the fire crested along this portion of the crest and to the west around the Santa Ynez and Broadcast peaks.

10.9 miles — Tequepis Trailhead

The Tequepis Trail begins near Circle V Camp (located across from the Lake Cachuma County Park) and climbs steadily for 2,300 feet up the north side of the Santa Ynez Mountains, eventually reaching the ridge east of Broadcast Peak at the perfect spot to inhale the ocean smells and island views. The trail is also one of the great downhill mountain bike rides and with a shuttle the ride across the crest and down is one of the best. If you have time, a short hike over the hill and a half mile or so down is well worth it.

11.7 miles — Historic Gato Trail

The 4,030 foot tall Broadcast Peak in Santa Barbara County is the second highest point in the Santa Ynez Mountains, and is best known for the antenna and transmitter site clustered on its summit. The peak sits above the coastal fog and has long been used for broadcasting because its elevation gives signals broad reach along the Central Coast.

11.9 miles — Broadcast Peak

Broadcast Peak is not just a technical site; it is also a hiking destination. Trails and rough access roads lead to viewpoints where visitors can see the Pacific Ocean, Lake Cachuma, and nearby peaks—and on a clear day the 180-degree views it offers.

13.2 miles — Santa Ynez Peak

Santa Ynez Peak at just under 4,300 feet, is the highest summit in the Santa Ynez Mountains and just a rock's throw from its eastern partner, both of which form the most dramatic viewpoints along the Gaviota coastline. During the Whittier Fire much of the vegetation surrounding the peak was destroyed, including hundreds of trees in the ravines on both sides of the peak.

13.6 miles — Spaceport Dome

From the driveway leading up to Santa Ynez Peak the intense yellows of the CA Goldenbanner frame the view and in the hazy distance Gaviota Peak and in few more miles the western end of the Santa Ynez Mountains near Point Conception. You might also spot a silvery dome-like structure a half mile further that has the look of

an observatory but is actually connected the development of the Vandenberg Space Port.

19.2 miles — Refugio Pass

Take it slow on the drive down from the Space Port now that you're back on pavement. The road is steep and narrow and the consequences of going over the side are huge. On bike this is one of the great free rides anywhere, 4,000 feet of downhill with no pedaling needed—though your brakes better be in excellent condition.

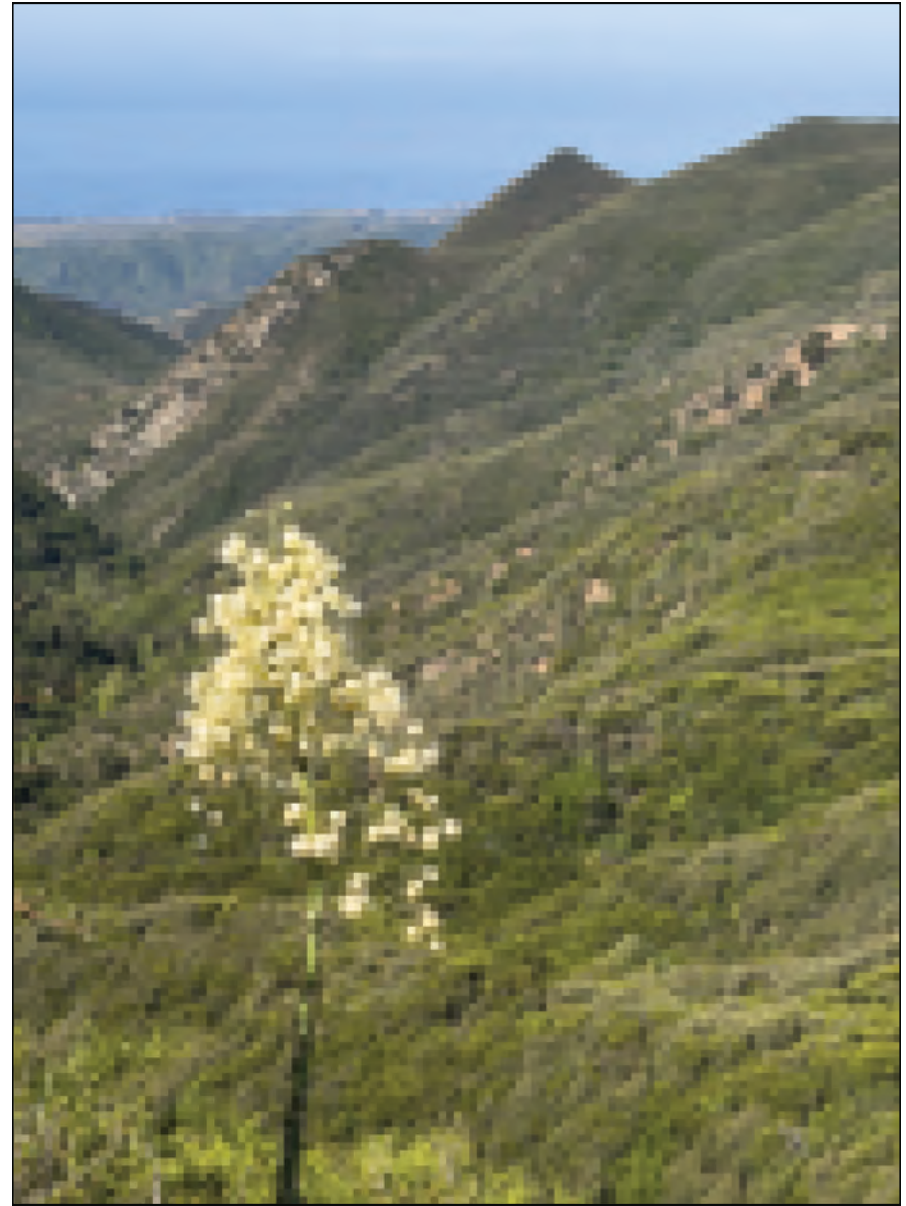
The reward just before you reach the Pass is a perfect ending to the drive across. The last mile meanders along the back side of the crest and through some of the most lush vegetation these mountains have to offer. The Crown Jewels are the gigantic Manzanita "trees" and even larger Madrone, a remnant of a climate far in distant times that was much wetter. While n abundance in Northern California and Oregon the Madrone exist here only in shaded pockets on the back side of the crest in places like this.

26.7 miles — Highway 101

From the Pass the drive is almost anti-climatic but the 7.5 miles of twisting downhill and level cruising through miles of avocado ranches a nice way to end your adventure.



Closeup view of Santa Ynez Peak. Note the fire damage that occurred to the trees on the upper slopes though the chaparral has recovered nicely.



One of the first sights along West Camino Cielo is that of the "Old Indian," a beautiful part of the sandstone carved out by centuries of erosion. On the right a Yucca in full bloom.



View several hundred yards down from the start of the jeepway with views overlooking Winchester Canyon. The long strip of bare ground represents a fuelbreak designed to allow fire fighters to defend the ridgeline.



First peek at the upper Santa Ynez Valley and Cachuma Lake. The reservoir is a key source of water for the area via the Tecolote Tunnel. The reservoir was completed in 1957 and spilled for the first time in 1961. Heavy winter rains filled it this year.



A closer look at the ridgeline leading for just under nine dirt miles to the Santa Ynez and Broadcast Peaks which are the high points in the far distance.



First views of the major peaks and beyond that what is known as the "back country." Shown here from left to right is McMinley Mountain, San Rafael Mountain in the center and to the right, the top of Santa Cruz Peak just barely peeking over the far mountains.



At Milepost 6.5 you'll spot an interesting collection of rocks that are still accessible to explore though in a few years as the chaparral grows back that may not be the case. Getting down the steep drop by the roadside is the most difficult challenge to get there.



Another view of Cachuma Lake and a much better view of the San Rafael Mountains. Note in the upper left where the mountains dip down to what looks like a saddle and just to the right a tiny pointed peak. That is Cachuma Mountain and the saddle to its left leads to the entry point into the San Rafale Wilderness.



At Milepost 6.1 you'll spot a small memorial set in place to honor a friend simply known as "JB" whose truck overturned close by and resulted in his death. Say a silent prayer as you pass by and use this as a reminder to take care on the remainder of your trip.





Another break in the mountains over the mid part of Cachuma Lake provides a peek of another range, the Sierra Madre Mountains. Below you can spot Arrowhead Island and to the left is Santa Cruz Bay, Much of the land in that area is private and not open to the public.



Paroramic view of Lake Cachuma. From left to right I can spot Grass Mountain, Zaca Peak, Figueroa Mountain, Ranger Peak, Cachuma Saddle, Cachuma Peak, McKinley Mountain, San Rafael Mountain, Santa Cruz Peak and Arrowhead Island. Make it a lifetime challenge to visit all of them if you haven't already.



Designed with gently sloping tops these tanks can hold precious water need in remote locations for fighting fires. Many are in disrepair and today they serve both as artist palettes and the perfect spot to lay your sleeping bag down and watch the stars.



Finally the major climbing begins near the 8 mile mark and your clear views of Broadcast Peak are in full view, From this point over the next several miles much of the vegetation was burned to mineral soil during the Whittier Fire.



The bones of many of the trees, especially on the inland side, fed by huge flames coming up the steep slopes caused huge damage. While the chaparral has adaptations that allow it to recover from fire that's not the case for many species of trees.



View of the Tequepis Trail cutting across the flanks of Broadcast Peak. A hike out to at least the switchbacks is moderately easy and the views are even better once you reach that point. Mountain bikers often make the ride across the crest and ride down to a waiting shuttle.



The Tequepis trailhead is not pretty but once you reach the flat top of the hill in a few hundred yards, the trail is in much better condition and as you begin to cut around the eastern flank of Broadcast Peak the views keep getting better and better..



Finally, just about to the base of Broadcast Peak just past the point where Teguepis Trail takes off.



A bit further and Santa Ynez Peak begins to appear in the far distance..



Given the increased elevation the views continue to get better and better. This looking down on the coastline a mile or so before Refugio Beach State Park.



First full views of Santa Ynez Peak.

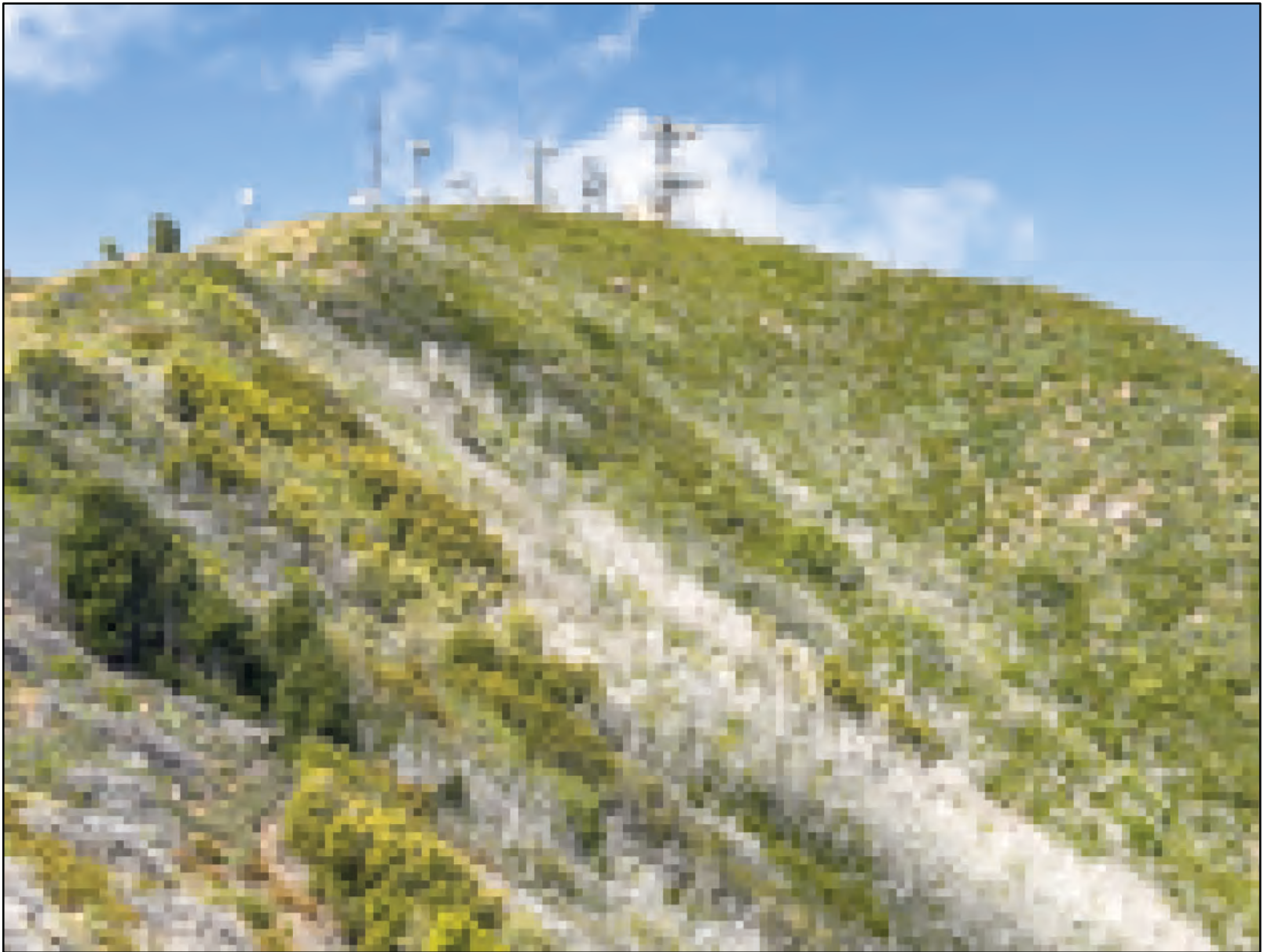




Looking back at Broadcast Peak.



Last view of Lake Cachuma and the best viewpoint near the turnoff point for the side road to the top of Santa Ynez Peak. The Sierra Madres display prominently in the background. The view from the top of Santa Ynez Peak is even better.



Pullout immediately below Santa Ynez Peak shows both the long term impacts to the trees as well as the healthy recovery of the chaparral just 9+ years after the Whittier Fire burned through this area.



Closeup of Bradbury Dam and Bee Rock Quarry opposite the entry road to the Dam Overlook spot. Operation began in 1952 when the extraction of limestone material was used as part of the construction of Bradbury Dam and Lake Cachuma.



View from the tunoff to Santa Ynez Peak of a new dome-like building in the process of being constructed. A worker there told me this was part of the Vandenberg Space Force Base's Space Port program.

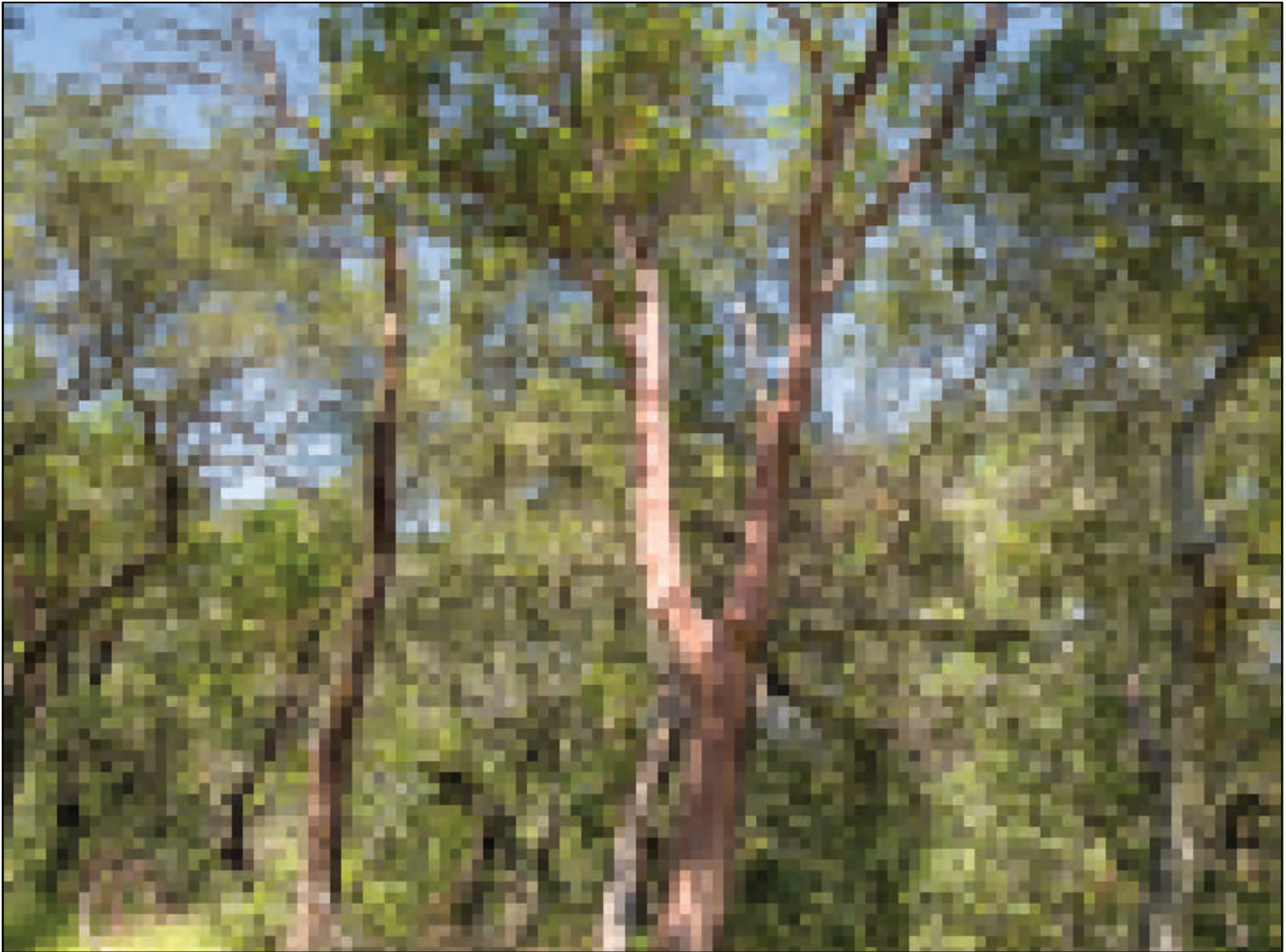


Finally, 10-degree views of the entire western part of Santa Barbara County.





Gigantic Big Berry Manzanita (*Arctostaphylos glauca*) is a large evergreen shrub to small tree and is California's official state shrub.



The Pacific Madrone (*Arbutus menziesii*) rarely found below Santa Barbara and here only on scattered pockets along the back sides of the Santa Ynez Mountains where cooler, shaded conditions allow them to survive.



Last mile of the road down to Refugio Pass continues through the Madrone forests and lush green forest type vegetation that provides a nice end the the trip across West Camino Cielo.