

Cienega Springs Trail

With all of the wonderful areas and trails that surround us, we often forget those that are the closest and the easiest to reach. We took the short journey to the East Mountains and hiked straight up to the Crest. Come on along! Ken Orth

The problem with hiking in the Sandias, if you want to call it a problem, is deciding where you're going to go. So many trails and so few free days. In fact, trails often aren't even necessary, particularly on the west side where it's easy enough to just find an interesting arroyo and head on up. Or scale a ridge till you find yourself unconsciously following the meandering path of a deer trail.

Truthfully, that freeform, "I wonder what I'll find" style of hiking is my preference more often than not when I am on my own with the dog. It's quite different, however, from the typical family hike which most often times has a destination of some kind, be it a hot springs or a volcano's summit or a waterfall. For the true wandering cross country hiker, the journey itself is the destination.

But that type of hike can be more difficult on your psyche, particularly the kids, who it seems we have definitely been raising to be goal oriented. This hiking without going anywhere seems contrary to nature somehow.

"How will you know when to stop?"

So when our family toyed with the many different ideas for a hike not too long ago, the dog and I got outvoted concerning the trail-less idea. We settled on the Cienega Springs Trail over on the east side, up the canyon to the crest. It had a trail, it had a destination, and it was in the trees, which seemed like a good idea on what proposed to be a hot summer day.

It also would have been a good idea to get started early, but sometimes that's easier said than

done with a family and a dog and a day when you don't actually have to get up. But we were out of the house shortly after nine and found ourselves at the trailhead around ten.

It could've been worse.

And it could've been hotter.

But not much.

The trail, it turns out, goes pretty much straight up the side of the mountain.

Switchbacks? What switchbacks? We don't need no stinkin' switchbacks.

The first quarter mile or so is deceiving though, as it follows alongside a delightful stream with numerous cascades and small waterfalls. Take advantage of it, cause when you hit the huge boulder in the middle of the trail, you've found the spot where the spring gurgles out of the ground and there'll be no more water for you this day.

My boys and I have developed a tradition of a sort where mountain streams are concerned. We each in turn fill our caps with water and dump it ceremoniously over our heads with much "oooooh that's cold" fanfare. Mom watches on stoically, wondering I suppose, in just how many of these bizarre traits the boys will end being like their crazy father.

After the spring, the true ascent begins. And I mean **ASCENT**. Steady and unrelenting for for 2+ miles.

The uphill struggle is broken briefly at the junction with the Faulty Trail when we meet up with a couple of older ladies taking a break from their own morning hike. One of them is jotting notes on a pad and I sense a kindred

"writer" spirit there.

Turns out that not only are they knowledgeable, avid hikers, but they're both members of the Southwest Writers Guild and no they haven't heard of Duke City Fit and why don't I belong to the group and would I be interested in articles about hiking and maybe I could come talk to their group sometime...

The boys enjoy the break, the dog enjoys being loved on by some new strangers, and I come away reinvigorated by their energy and their zeal. Methinks we've not heard the last of them.

The break was good, because the rest of the hike up is, shall we say, strenuous. Unfortunately, I think, we become consumed with the drudgery of lifting one foot in front of the other and trying not to stumble. It is a heavily wooded canyon, thick with undergrowth from the wet spring. In some places it's more like walking through a rain forest as the narrow trail pushes through the bushes. Butterflies and caterpillars abound.

Finally we actually encounter a few switchbacks and I yell encouragement back to my struggling comrades... I am sure that the switchbacks are near the top and therefore we are surely on the home stretch. They all look at me with no small amount of skepticism. Perhaps I had played the "it's just around the next bend" card once too often on our recent canoe trip?

But 5 minutes and a couple of sharp turns later and we find ourselves stumbling out into the open onto the Crest Trail. The triumph is short-lived however as we discover that there is no readily

available spectacular view.

"Great," the eleven-year-old says. "We'll have a wonderful view if we shinny up that darn tree."

I can't help but chuckle at his comment as I wander down a side trail looking for the viewing spot which I am certain must be here somewhere. It occurs to me to give him the pessimism lecture concerning the half full or half empty glass, but in truth I too am wondering if dear old dad has screwed up... they've heard the tale many times about how my wife and I hiked all the way up to the top of a Mount Tecumseh in the Adirondacks of upstate New York only to find we were surrounded by tall trees with absolutely no view. I'd "shinnied up" a tree and with my outstretched arm I'd taken a picture of a beautiful view that we never actually saw.

But not this time! I spot a big rocky ledge with plenty of views and I excitedly start to yell back at my pessimistic offspring (which I need not have done because unknown to me he's right on my heels anyway). But I stop mid-sentence and mid-stride when I suddenly spot several elderly gentlemen already occupying the ledge. Somehow I forgot to make reservations.

"No, that's okay," one of them yells. "Come on out and join us, there's plenty of room."

So we join them and proceed to have one of the most unusual lunches in one of the most spectacular of settings that it has ever been my pleasure in which to participate.

First, this is no ordinary view. Though we ascended the east face, we have now come slightly over

the crest and find ourselves with grand views to the west. There are two or three canyons before us, several peaks around us, and the Duke City itself spreads out over the valley floor far, far below us. The green of the trees and the blue of the sky are more brilliant than the mind can grasp. The air is clean with a minty hint of sage and juniper. My lungs are alive and makes me want to fairly burst out singing.

But, second, there is this group of elderly gentlemen. And this is no ordinary group of hikers. No. This group of six refers to themselves as "The Gourmet Hikers". As we approach they are just finishing up their salmon pate on crackers and they are quick to

Well, it does, but I'll not go into the dry martini with an olive, because you probably just wouldn't believe me.

Anyway, we sit out on the ledge swapping food and drink and stories, letting the grandeur of the mountain setting soak into us like a gentle rain on the sandy, desert soil. Somehow, from this vantage, the world seems like safer, gentler, more wonderful place where our elders pass on mysterious tales to the wide-eyed wonderment of my boys. And me. The dog wanders from stranger to stranger seeking handouts and love, and a lone unidentified bird of prey circles on the rising currents far below.

As if to belie the serenity of our gathering, and perhaps to remind

came. We stand on the rocks and wave goodbye till they disappear among the trees below and then we, too, head out, in the opposite direction.

"At least it'll be cooler with all these clouds," our oldest, wisest son opines.

"Yah, maybe we'll get some rain!" the youngest says excitedly as we descend into the trees.

The hike down, not surprisingly, is infinitely more enjoyable. We take the time, as they say, to stop and smell the roses. Aside from the occasional rumble from the Olympian bowling alley, the forest is very quiet. Standing still, we can actually hear what sounds like, but what is not, tiny raindrops falling in the trees around us.

we are hearing it. Not exactly "smelling the roses" is it?

Be that as it may, there are wild roses in plentiful supply. And Indian Paintbrushes and huge trees... some snapped and broken by winds more fierce than our mere mortal minds can fathom.

We stopped and talked and gawked at rocks and gathered sticks that look like Star Wars laser guns. We dilly-dallied our way back down the canyon until finally the gurgling sound of a spring told us that we neared our journey's end.

Almost simultaneously we heard and felt the splat, splat, splat of giant raindrops. (Fortunately, caterpillars don't get that big). We

took off at a sprint down the path as the rain started falling in earnest, becoming a serious storm with hail and lightning. Racing to the car we clambered in, wet dog and all. There we sat in relative comfort and safety, fresh rain water dripping down our noses and ears, quietly contemplating the rain and all that we had seen and heard and done.

"Wow. That was great!" the little one



offer me a glass of white wine. Our peanut butter sandwiches pale in comparison to their smoked ham on french bread, but the boys are delighted when they are invited to join in with the brownies and ice cream for dessert.

I am not kidding. These guys carried up a half-gallon of ice cream packed in dry ice and it was still so hard that we had to set it out to thaw for a while before we partook. Does it get any better than this?

us all of our precarious place in the natural order of things, there is a sudden, startling rumble of thunder behind us. Glancing eastward simultaneously, we are all made aware of the gathering dark and ominous clouds.

Packs are packed, walking sticks gathered, quick goodbyes and photos and promises to meet again are exchanged and our aging gourmands are headed back down the trail on the west side of the mountains from whence they

"Frass," my sons remind me. Frass.

We were given the word by a retired, aging, gourmet botanist back up on the crest. Frass is the word used for the sound of falling excrement from the hind ends of the multitudes of hungry, munching caterpillars throughout the forest.

Caterpillar poop. We're hearing caterpillar poop! I'm not sure I believe it, but there it is... and there is absolutely no doubt that

said, his nose pressed against the window. "Can we do that again sometime?"

Somehow, I doubt it.