

Article

The Clark Mountain Range San Bernardino Co., CA

At 7,929 feet (2,417m), Clark Mountain's credentials as the highest peak not only in the range itself, but also the entire Mojave National Preserve, hardly garners much respect from other loftier and better-known peaks throughout the West's cordilleran belt.

The mountain is a basin-and-range fault block composed of the usual suite of stratified Paleolithic rocks (limestone, quartzite, sandstone, shale) typical of such mountains throughout the desert region.

Comparatively speaking, the Clark Mountain Range is not all that impressive in scope, extending only about 15 miles (24km) from the **Mojave National Preserve** to the southwest to near **Stateline Pass** to the northwest about one mile (1.6km) from the Nevada border. However, it does boast several significant plaudits.

First, it has a very distinct 4,254-foot *verticle rise* (height as measured from the apparent base to summit), boldly standing out like a vigilant guardian over all other geographical features in the area, thus making it an important and dominant landmark for travelers passing through the region.



Secondly, it is regarded by experienced climbers as not only the best limestone climbing in California, but also a world-class sport climbing location! If not lofty peaks, then at least lofty respect!

And finally, it is the home of the famous Mountain Pass rare earth mine operated by Molycorp Minerals, located conspicuously on the south flank of the mountain. This important strategic mine had lain idle for a number of years until being reopened after a major expansion project that began in 2011. Interstate 15 bisects the Clark Range to the north and the Mescal Range across the highway to the south. The small adhoc "town" of Mountain Pass, which serves some of the residential needs of the Molycorp mine and hosts a Caltrans maintenance yard, is located adjacent to the mine just off the Bailey Road exit.

Despite being close to a major highway, it is rather odd that Clark Mountain has virtually no tourist attractions! There are no campgrounds or trails; only one forlorn, discreet picnic area at the southern base of the mountain that I know of, which I discovered many years ago as I passed through while exploring jeep trails that could serve as alternate ways out of the region besides the way I usually go in. I only stopped briefly to befriend a wild horse grazing nearby—he was not particularly interested, to my chagrin—then continued on my way without much regard to where the site actually was.

I couldn't find any history on the site, but the original intent must have been to serve expected visitors, then disregarded. Reaching it can be a challenge as there are no signs or markers, and the roads leading to it are unmaintained, thus rough and confusing.

Although I know where it is, even I sometimes have difficulty finding it without some measure of backtracking and finger crossing! Regardless, it's a beautiful area with many jeep trails, so the ride itself will be worth the effort even if you don't find the picnic grounds.

Match these intructions with the photos on the following pages.

Exit I-15 at Bailey Road in Mountain Pass (this is essentially the entry road to the Molycorp Mine, which ends at the guard shack just ahead). Turn left onto the paved Clark Mountain Road; this is a frontage road adjacent to the highway, so your left turn will be immediately off the exit. Drive west about a mile until the pavement ends at the cattle guard. Continue on an excellent dirt road (kept that way for the mine trucks) that circumscribes the fenced-in property of the Molycorp operation, keeping the mine dumps on your right. Ahead you will pass three large leach ponds on the left. Do not make any turns here, instead stay on the boundary road for a short distance until you reach a wide open area. Look to the right to see a gate with public-access signs posted on it. Open, drive through, then reclose the gate (remember, leave open gates open, and closed gates closed). The road splits in two directions; take the one to the left and continue on for about a mile until you reach another fork deliniated by Wilderness Road Marker 388. The route to the left will follow the powerlines and lead to mine sites on the north side of Mohawk Hill. To go to the picnic grounds, take the road to the right for 0.7 miles to a power substation. Turn onto the first road you come to on the left, drive 0.1 miles to a T-junction; turn left and stay left for about 1.3 miles. This road will split along the way, but rejoin a little further on (the right path is steep, so if you don't have a good 4WD vehicle, take the path to the left), then will fork again as you get close to the mountains at Wilderness Road Marker 9802. Take the left fork .5 miles to picnic grounds.

As you drive along you will notice a change in the surrounding vegetation. The foothills host the usual desert flora, including numerous species of cacti, creosote bushes, and Joshua trees. Higher up, these give way to typical mountain evergreens, such as pinyon pine and juniper.



A Trek Thru the Wilderness



Bailey Road serves as one entry point into this beautiful, but rarely explored, mountain area.



Entrance gate to the Mountain Pass Mine. Since this a strategic mine, no visitors are allowed in!



Frontage road by I-15 that circumscribes the Molycorp Mine. Turn onto this road immediately off the Bailey Road exit.



Keep a watchful eye out for burros and other wildlife along the way to the picnic grounds and other destinations.



First of three adjacent leach ponds. Stay on the dirt road keeping these ponds to your left.



This is the access gate to public roads beyond. Follow the left road after passing the gate.



Marker 388 at fork in the road. Left fork follows powerline service road down the north side of Mohawk Hill. Go right.



Follow Road 388 to the power substation at the top of the hill. There are several roads that branch away; take first left.



Looking ahead to the main body of the Clark Range. If you are looking at this, you're on the right road.

Interestingly, the north side of the crest, which is difficult to reach, supports a small forest of Rocky Mountain white fir trees (*Abies concolor*). Clark Mountain is one of only three mountain ranges where these rare trees persist in California; Kingston and the New York Mountains being the other two.



Several picnic tables peeking out from a stand of pines is the first clue that you've finally found this esoteric site.



Almost there! Bear left at this marker; the path you see in the photo fades away very quickly.



There are enough large tables like these to host a considerable number of visitors to the site.

The campground also provides...



... beautiful vistas ...



Really? Guess they don't like that!



... horseshoe pits ...

... and posts for a volleyball net.



The Molycorp Mine in the distance.

Since I'm a geologist, not a botanist, I come for the mining locales, not the trees. After awhile, they all look alike to me! But I do value the beauty of Nature; there's plenty of that here. So whether you are a geologist, nature



A convenient barbeque pit. Unfortunately, the pulley wheels are frozen tight.



Uh-oh! Did someone say barbeque?

lover, or just a rockhound, you'll have no trouble finding what your heart seeks here. While driving through, appreciate the unspoiled beauty of this small, but tantalizing, mountain range.