

La Luz Trail

The original La Luz Trail went 4 1/2 miles straight up, to the old gold mine," says Forest Service volunteer Dave Hammack. "It was a very steep climb."

He should know. He has been hiking La Luz for 42 years, since 1959, and has no intention of stopping. Since he became a Forest Service volunteer for the Sandia Ranger District seven years ago, he has hiked the trail an average of 50 times a year for a total of 350 round trips. His grand total is closer to 1,500 and includes the 10 La Luz Trail races he's entered.

"Those get harder each year," he laughs.

Few people know the trail any better than Hammack. He can visualize all the switchbacks, even most of the rocks, and he always notices any changes on the trail.

"When I retired," he says, "I felt it was time to put some of my energy back into the trail." He thinks the popular La Luz Trail needs someone to answer questions of both concern and curiosity. If a problem arises on the trail, he usually knows it right away and reports it to the Forest Service.

Many hikers on La Luz are training to conquer higher peaks, be it Kilimanjaro, Wheeler or Pike's Peak. Others might be on their way to a challenging rock climb, but most people tackle La Luz for a pleasant picnic outing or an afternoon hike.

Whether you go for the scenery or to exercise in the outdoors, always keep in mind that you are entering a wilderness area and should be prepared for sudden changes of temperatures. The 8-mile hike moves through four ecological life zones, and even in the summertime there is danger of hypothermia after a rainstorm.

How did the current route come to be?

During the two years it took to build the Sandia Peak Tramway, which hoists thousands of passengers across Baca Canyon and up to Sandia Crest each year, the Forest Service worked on plans of how best to handle the inevitable heavier foot traffic. The redesigned and rebuilt La Luz Trail was the result.

"We used helicopters to drop top soil for building the trail near the top," retired forester John Hayden remembers. "That was the most efficient way."

Retired landscape architect Ron Bahm considers the upper third of the trail a huge success because of the soaring views and dramatic rock formations. "It's a picturesque trail, especially the upper one-third," he says. "On the lower trail, it's a ladder of switchbacks, but the trail accomplishes what it was designed for — to get hikers safely to the top."

If you haven't tread on La Luz lately — or never at all — now is a good time to go. It's a perfect place from which to appreciate the wonder of Bernalillo County's wilderness back yard.

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HIGHLIGHTS: This popular trail gives hikers sweeping panoramic vistas of Albuquerque. As hikers follow the switchbacks, they are treated to ever-changing views of craggy cliffs and numerous wildflowers. The wildflowers furnish hummingbirds food and hikers identification challenges. Also, make sure you keep an eye out for raptors soaring above the cliffs.

After reaching the trail juncture, continue to the Sandia Peak Tramway station, where, if you've made transportation arrangements below, you can buy a one-way ticket down the mountain. At the crest you can also have a meal, snack or drink at the High Finance restaurant.

Sue Mann