

Cajon Pass Description and History

Cajon Pass is one of the two rail routes from the Los Angeles basin to the east. It is one of the best train-watching places in the US due to heavy traffic, stiff grades, attractive surrounding scenery, and easy access. In the 1970s and 1980s, it was one of the few places where mainline trains of all three major western railroads (not counting Burlington Northern, a northwestern railroad, or smaller operations like the Milwaukee or Western Pacific), the Santa Fe, Southern Pacific, and Union Pacific, could be seen.

The tracks climb from San Bernardino, CA, at an elevation of about 1000 feet (300m) to the summit at elevation nearly 4000 feet (1200m). A brief chronology of the history:

- 1885: First track (“South Track”) completed and put into operation by the Atlantic & Pacific Railroad, becoming part of the Santa Fe in 1897. This track has a grade of 2.2% from San Bernardino to Cajon in the middle of the canyon, and 3% between Cajon and Summit.
- 1905: Union Pacific (LA&SL) obtained trackage rights on the Santa Fe through the pass, an arrangement which continues to this day.
- 1913: A second Santa Fe track was added, making the line double track from San Bernardino to Cajon. The new track (“North Track”) ran on a separate longer right-of-way between Cajon and Summit, on a 2.2% grade. Uphill (EB) trains normally took the North Track with its less severe grade, leading to normal left-hand operation through the pass.
- 1967: The Southern Pacific completed its Palmdale-Colton Cutoff through the pass. The SP track roughly parallels the ATSF North Track at a slightly higher elevation.
- 1996: Southern Pacific was absorbed into the Union Pacific, and the Santa Fe and Burlington Northern merged to form the BNSF.
- 1999: A crossover between the Santa Fe North Track and the SP track was built at Silverwood, just west of Summit, so UP transcontinental trains can cross to or from the Palmdale Cutoff.
- 2008: The BNSF added a third track, making for triple track below Cajon and essentially double-tracking the North Track. With Centralized Traffic Control, trains can move either direction on any of the tracks, although uphill trains still tend to use the North Track.

I still use the names South Track, North Track, and SP Track as being descriptive, even though these names are now obsolete: the BNSF tracks are numbered 1–3 and the SP Track is now UP (but calling it the “UP Track” would be confusing since UP trains can run on any of the tracks).

There have been many relocations and other track changes over the years. Besides the Silverwood crossover and the triple-tracking, the ones within my memory affecting current appearance are:

- 1972: Major relocation of the tracks at Summit. This was shortly before my first visit, so I never saw the classic layout at Summit.
- 1977: S-Curve between Mormon Rocks and Alray relocated.
- 1978: Sullivan's Curve relocated and widened.
- 1996: After a runaway train derailed near Mormon Rocks, killing two crew members, the Summit area was fenced off with tight security where WB trains stop for a brake check.
- 2008: As part of the triple-tracking, the two short tunnels on the North Track were daylighted.

A curious inconsistency in terminology arose when the SP Palmdale Cutoff was built. Uphill Santa Fe and UP trains on the Santa Fe track through the pass are naturally eastbound, and downhill trains westbound. But on the Southern Pacific, the rule was that "westbound" meant "toward San Francisco" (railroad headquarters) and "eastbound" meant "away from San Francisco." Thus uphill SP trains heading toward Palmdale were "westbound." So two westbound trains (and, for a while after 1996, even two westbound UP trains!) could pass each other in opposite directions on parallel tracks. (This SP terminology was even more curious in Oregon, where trains headed from California to Portland were "eastbound," and, even worse, trains headed on a branchline from the Willamette Valley toward the coast were also "eastbound"!)

The UP no longer uses this terminology on these former SP lines.

I have arbitrarily divided the Pass into areas. Some of these area names are commonly used, and some not:

Lower Area: The section between San Bernardino and Blue Cut. Below Blue Cut the canyon widens and ends around Devore. Below Devore the land is flat, although the 2.2% grade continues all the way down to San Bernardino. I find this part of the line less interesting scenically, and I have not done much photography here.

Campground Area: The section between Blue Cut and Cajon. I call this the Campground Area since there used to be a National Forest campground here where I camped several times. I liked to sit in the campground in the early morning and watch the parade of trains with interesting power.

Cajon: The place where the North and South Tracks diverge. There was once a station here by that name.

Sullivan's Curve: A long sharp curve up against some picturesque rocks on the North Track (and now SP Track too). One of the most scenic spots in Cajon Pass, named for legendary rail photographer Herb Sullivan who took many photos here in the 1930s.

Pine Lodge: The section between Sullivan's Curve and Route 138. There was once a station here named Pine Lodge.

Mormon Rocks: The section between Route 138 and I-15, named for the notable rock formations in this area. Another very scenic spot.

Tunnel Area: The rugged section between I-15 and Hill 582. There were two short tunnels on the North Track in this area, now gone.

Hill 582: A nice little park built and maintained by railfans on top of a small hill, with good views of trains coming out of the Tunnel Area onto the Upper Flats and all the way to Summit.

Upper Flats: The section east of Hill 582 where the tracks run east-west through relatively flat country before turning south through Silverwood and Summit.

Silverwood: The north-south stretch just west of Summit. The North and South Tracks come together here, making (now) triple track through Summit. A great place to come in the late afternoon or early evening before sunset; it gets the last sunlight in the Pass area.

Summit: Self-explanatory. Although the track area is fenced off, good views can be obtained from surrounding hills. The SP track is not close to the BNSF track here, since it was built before the Santa Fe tracks were relocated; it is closer to the original alignment.

East Slope: There is a 1.6% grade on the east side of Summit, although it is not particularly scenic. I have not done much photography here.

One very nice feature of Cajon Pass is that except for the closed area at Summit, almost all the land surrounding the tracks is public (National Forest) land, giving almost unrestricted access. This is in contrast to Tehachapi, another arguably even more spectacular mountain crossing in Southern California, where much of the land around the tracks is privately owned and access is difficult or even impossible in many areas. In Cajon, one need only worry about rattlesnakes (I have encountered a number of them), not landowners.