

Palisade Creek Trail to North Fork American River

6640 ft to 4700 ft and back; 6-8 miles (3-4 hours) each way on good foot trail

Blistering hot in summer because the trail faces due south; most people hike down, spend the night, and hike out early the next morning. But pick a cool day in September-October and it can be a pleasant one-day round trip (and not so crowded).

From the flashing traffic signal in Soda Springs, drive south across the railroad tracks on Soda Springs Road 0.9 miles and turn right on Pahatsi Rd. Follow Pahatsi 0.5 miles west past Royal Gorge's Summit Station to where the pavement ends, and then keep going on a reasonably good dirt road about 5 more miles to Cascade Lakes. Along the way you will pass several turnoffs (including one to Palisade Creek, which you ignore), several camps, and several (mostly man-made) lakes. Park overlooking Upper Cascade Lake (left), Lower Cascade Lake (right) and the dam between.

The trail starts steeply down (watch your footing on loose gravel), crosses the dam (on the far side there is a sign marking the official beginning of the Palisade Creek Trail), and heads very gently up into open forest. At about 1/4 mi the trail to Long Lake continues straight ahead (this is a delightful destination if you want only a short hike or have kids along who would rather swim or play on the granite slabs; there are a surprising number of overnight camping spots for such a modest sized lake). Rather than go to Long Lake, take the right turn to the North Fork.



Long Lake



The trail winds through the granite, sometimes making you wonder who picked the route. But there are nice views down to Long Lake (east), up toward Devil's Peak (west), and more distantly to Castle Peak (northeast) and south across the North Fork. After about an hour the trail skirts some granite slabs on the left (south), crosses a small stream, and enters a thicket (middle of Section 5; see map). This is your last good water (after filtering) until you reach the North Fork. The sharp-eyed explorer may find indistinct, off-trail signs of a prehistoric Native American presence in this area.



Aspens and off-trail petroglyph



The remainder of the trip down is mostly in forest and uneventful; the trail junction shown in Section 8 is either not obvious or non-existent. It is interesting to see the vegetation change as you move downward from the cooler upper levels to the drier and hotter canyon depths. A bridge about a mile from the end helps you cross Palisade Creek. The last half mile or so is mostly in chaparral. There are bridges at the bottom to help you cross the North Fork.

Downstream from your arrival point and easily accessible are several nice pools for swimming and a couple waterfalls (take care not to swim near the falls). Note the sculpted rock, eroded by thousands of years of water.



North Fork waterfall



North Fork pool

The trail continues up the south side of the canyon, but a major flood/rockslide ripped out several hundred yards about 10 years ago and it has not been repaired. The adventurous could get through the washed out section, but there's at least one place where you have to climb an almost vertical wall of loosely consolidated gravel and rock; and there are associated dangers. You can take a look from the bottom side; all the damage is in the lower 1 mile. The south side trail is very different, being almost completely in the shade. But taking this route out will leave you truly in the middle of nowhere unless you have arranged transportation home with someone who knows the area; the upper part of the trail does not intersect the roads as shown on the USFS map. Best to go back the way you came and save the south side trail for another day.

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