

60 TABLE TOP TRAIL



KEY AT-A-GLANCE INFORMATION

LENGTH: 7.8 miles

ELEVATION GAIN: 2,075 feet

CONFIGURATION: Out-and-back (optional bushwhack to true summit; add 1 hard-fought mile)

DIFFICULTY: Difficult

SCENERY: Pristine desert, Table Top Wilderness, panoramic views

EXPOSURE: Completely exposed, no shade

TRAFFIC: Very light

TRAIL SURFACE: Packed dirt, gravel, rock, loose rock

HIKING TIME: 4.5 hours

WATER REQUIREMENT: 3 quarts

SEASON: Year-round; hot in summer

ACCESS: Sunrise to sunset; free parking

MAPS: USGS Little Table Top and Antelope Peak; BLM map

FACILITIES: Toilet, campground, picnic area, no water

DOGS: No

COMMENTS: Beautiful hike in a remote pristine desert with ample vegetation. For more information, visit www.blm.gov/az/outrec/hiking/ttm.htm, or call (623) 580-5500.

IN BRIEF

Hikers who enjoy solitude will love this trail in the Sonoran Desert National Monument. Table Top Trail offers pristine desert scenery, unobstructed panoramas, and a challenging 2,000-foot climb to the top of Table Top Mountain.

DESCRIPTION

Occupying nearly half a million acres, Sonoran Desert National Monument preserves a huge section of the desert in south-central Arizona. This preserve contains three mountain ranges and surrounding valleys, encompasses wide expanses of open desert, and hosts a large variety of indigenous flora and fauna. Table Top Mountain is the tallest point inside the preserve, and its distinctively flat peak can be seen for many miles.

The Bureau of Land Management manages all trails in the area, including Table Top

Directions

Leave Phoenix on I-10 and head toward Tucson. Exit onto SR 347, Queen Creek Road/Maricopa Road and follow it south 29 miles until it Ts into SR 84. Take SR 84 west 6 miles to I-8. Continue 7 miles west on I-8 and exit onto Vekol Valley Road (exit 144). Turn left as if to get on eastbound I-8, but take the turnoff to Vekol Valley Road before the on-ramp.

Reset your trip odometer here and continue south on Vekol Valley Road, which soon becomes a dirt road. At 2.1 miles stay right at the Vekol Ranch turnoff and follow the "Trail" signs. At 11.3 miles turn east across a large cattle guard onto a smaller dirt road. Follow this rough road another 4.3 miles to the trailhead parking, staying to the right at any forks in the road. A high-clearance vehicle is necessary to reach the trailhead.

GPS Trailhead Coordinates

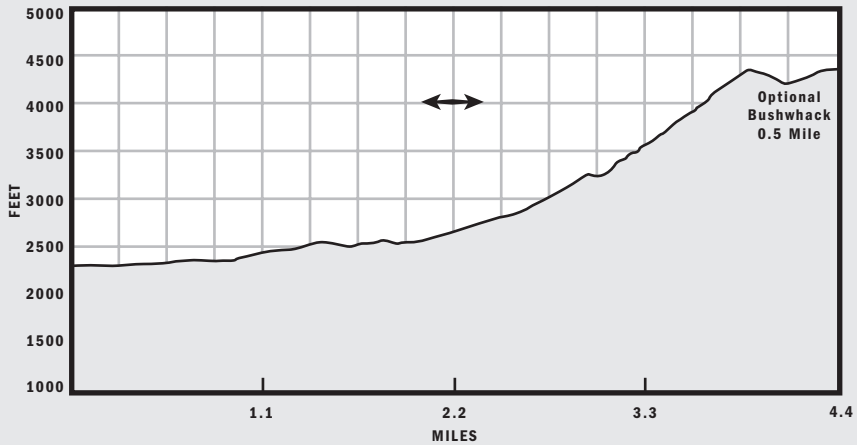
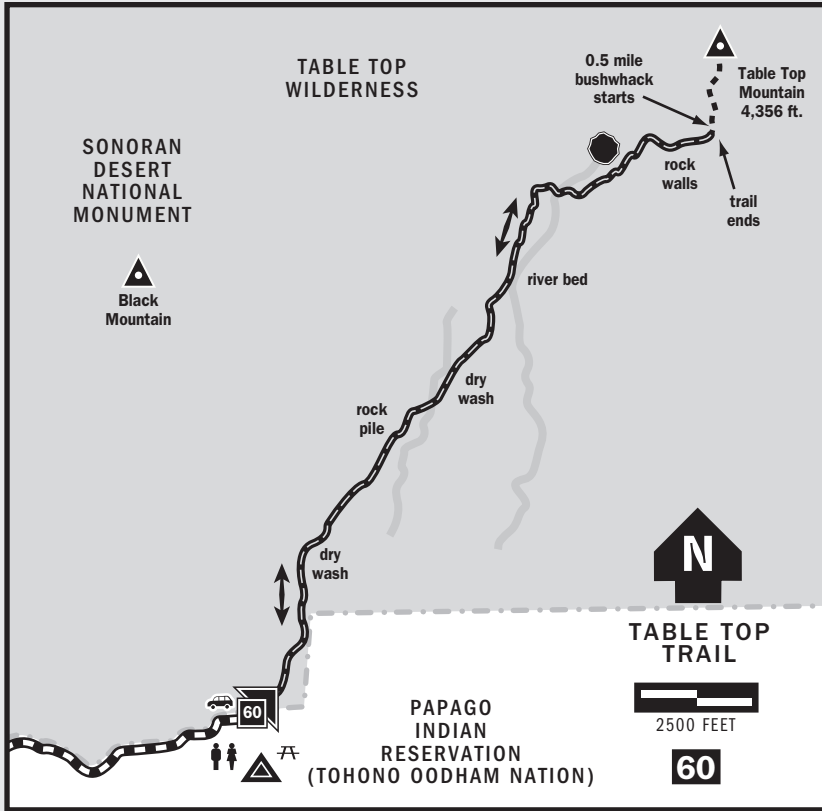
UTM Zone 12S

Easting 0391419

Northing 3620254

Latitude N32°42.990'

Longitude W112°9.557'



Trail. This rugged and remote hike to the top of Table Top Mountain celebrates the pristine Sonoran Desert, untainted by development or overuse. It showcases forests of saguaros and ocotillos, the volcanic landscape, a historic trail with signs of ancient cultures, impressive panoramic views, and the strange and unique grassland on Table Top's wide summit. Getting to the trailhead requires a long haul from town and considerable off-road driving in a high-clearance vehicle, but the time and effort expended in both traveling and hiking pay off handsomely with a challenging yet rewarding experience.

As you approach the Table Top Wilderness from Vekol Valley, the odd sense of complete isolation overwhelms you. When you reach the trailhead, however, civilization returns in the form of a surprisingly clean toilet, a small campground and picnic facilities, and an informative plaque. Water is not available here, so remember to bring a few extra gallons just in case you get stuck in the desert.

Pick up a brochure from the trail register near the toilet, and begin by hiking northeast on a wide, level dirt road. Table Top Mountain looms large ahead, and the surrounding desert offers little sound to drown out the shuffling of your feet along the trail. It's so quiet and peaceful that you can almost hear your own heartbeat. Follow the flat trail as you admire the forests of giant saguaros on nearby hills and dodge piles of "landmines" left by wandering wildlife. A small wooden plaque marks the official trailhead at 0.7 miles into the hike. Sign in at the trail register and continue along the obvious trail as it bends north.

Notice the rich variety of desert plants adjacent to the trail. Saguaros, chollas, creosotes, prickly pears, and ocotillos dominate the landscape. Fallen ocotillos often litter the trail, while live ones bloom with bright and delicate flowers in spring. Cross a wide wash at 0.9 miles, and follow the trail directly toward Table Top Mountain as you begin a gradual climb.

At 1.5 miles pass a mound of twisted and layered rock next to the trail. The next half mile of Table Top Trail snakes around the base of the mountain, crossing another wash as it approaches the foothills. Beyond 2 miles, the trail begins to climb in earnest. The smooth trail gives way to crushed rock as the vegetation becomes denser and brushier. The terrain suddenly changes at 2.3 miles as the trail merges with a dry creek bed laden with ancient river rock. Pink puffs of fairy duster blossoms can often be seen nearby.

Cross the dry wash again at 2.9 miles and climb up a bunch of loose boulders. Look for a small cairn to guide you in case you lose the trail here. A quarter mile farther, the trail begins its punishing ascent up a series of switchbacks next to a large boulder field of volcanic rock. When negotiating the north-facing legs of the switchbacks, you'll see a large rock outcropping with a vertical cliff face directly ahead jutting out from the side of the mountain. Continue laboring up this seemingly endless climb.

At 3.7 miles, as you near the top of the mountain on loose, pale gravel, notice a series of low walls constructed from stacked rocks. Similar features can

Thick stands of saguaros thrive on Table Top Mountain's arid hillsides.

be found on the Elephant Mountain Trail (page 215) north of Phoenix. Did the Hohokams, who inhabited central Arizona hundreds of years ago, build them? Are they wind shelters or protective walls? No one knows the answers to these questions. Hike a bit farther and reach a ridge crest where you can see the summit. From this vantage point, it is evident that there are really two flat summits separated by a large dip in the connecting ridge.

When the trail reaches the top of Table Top Mountain, the landscape changes dramatically again. The summit is wide and flat, and an eerie field of desert grasses, yuccas, ocotillos, and sickly-looking yellowish cactus blanket the entire plateau. Unlike the mountainsides, the peak is entirely devoid of saguaros. The wild and bizarre landscape looks like a scene from another world. Continue to Table Top Trail's terminus at an unceremonious post 3.9 miles from the trailhead. The elevation here is 4,350 feet, more than 2,000 feet higher than the parking area.

From the top of Table Top Mountain, you command an expansive view in all directions. The mountains and desert plains stretch out as far as the eyes can see. Interstate 8 is just visible to the north, while Casa Grande and the sharp tip of Picacho Peak lie toward the east and southeast. Astute observers looking northeast will notice that the other summit is actually slightly higher than the peak at the end of the trail. If you feel compelled to conquer the true peak, bush-whack the half-mile gap of cactus minefield toward some metal poles planted on its summit. Given the amount of effort required and that the only worthwhile sight on the true summit is the U.S. Geological Survey elevation marker, I would





Pristine Sonoran desert surrounds the remote summit of Table Top Mountain.

recommend you forgo the aggravation and the almost certain puncture wounds just to conquer the final 26 feet of elevation gain. Return the way you came along the Table Top Trail, and don't forget to sign out in the trail register.

NEARBY ACTIVITIES

Sonoran Desert National Monument offers other scenic trails including the Brittlebush Trail (page 290), Margie's Cove Trail, and Lava Flow Trail. Picacho Peak (page 295), approximately 40 miles due east, provides another excellent hike. An interesting collection of rock mosaics rests near a wide turnaround about 1,000 feet west of a cairned turnoff on Vekol Valley Road, 4.7 miles south of I-8.