

CAMELBACK MOUNTAIN: CHOLLA TRAIL

02

IN BRIEF

Camelback Mountain is the tallest point in the city of Phoenix. From the 2,704-foot summit of Camelback, hikers command an impressive 360-degree panorama of the city and surrounding mountain ranges. The Cholla Trail offers hikers an easier, albeit longer, way to reach the top of Camelback Mountain than does the popular Summit (Echo Canyon) Trail (page 26). Fans of cityscape can appreciate the Cholla Trail for its open views along the way.

DESCRIPTION

When people say, “I’m hiking Camelback Mountain,” they usually mean they are climbing up the Summit (Echo Canyon) Trail on the northwestern end of the mountain and the head of the sleeping camel shape for which the mountain was named. The Summit Trail, with its cliffs of red sandstone and huge boulders, does offer a very scenic experience of Camelback Mountain. However, the Summit Trail is also steep and sometimes overcrowded. A less crowded and somewhat easier way to summit Camelback Mountain is to hike up the Cholla Trail from the mountain’s gentler eastern end. Nearly 2 miles in length, the Cholla Trail

Directions

From Loop 202: Exit onto 44th Street and drive north 3.5 miles to Camelback Road. Turn east on Camelback Road and continue 2.7 miles to Invergordon Road. Turn north on Invergordon Road, drive 0.7 miles, and park in marked spots on the western side of the street.

From Loop 101: Exit onto Chaparral Road, and drive west 3.2 miles until it Ts into Invergordon Road. Turn north on Invergordon and park on the western side of the street.



KEY AT-A-GLANCE INFORMATION

LENGTH: 3.8 miles

ELEVATION GAIN: 1,331 feet

CONFIGURATION: Out-and-back (if you choose the optional one-way hike down Summit Trail, subtract 0.8 miles)

DIFFICULTY: Moderate

SCENERY: Desert, city panorama

EXPOSURE: Late-afternoon shade, otherwise exposed

TRAFFIC: Heavy

TRAIL SURFACE: Packed dirt, gravel, stair-steps, some scrambling

HIKING TIME: 2 hours

WATER REQUIREMENT: 1–1.5 quarts

SEASON: Year-round; hot in summer

ACCESS: Open sunrise to sunset; free but limited parking

MAPS: USGS Paradise Valley

FACILITIES: None

DOGS: Yes, leashed at all times

COMMENTS: No parking available at the Cholla Trailhead. Park in designated spots along the western side of Invergordon Road or along the southern side of Jackrabbit Road. For more information, visit <http://phoenix.gov/parks/hikecmlb.html>.

GPS Trailhead

Coordinates

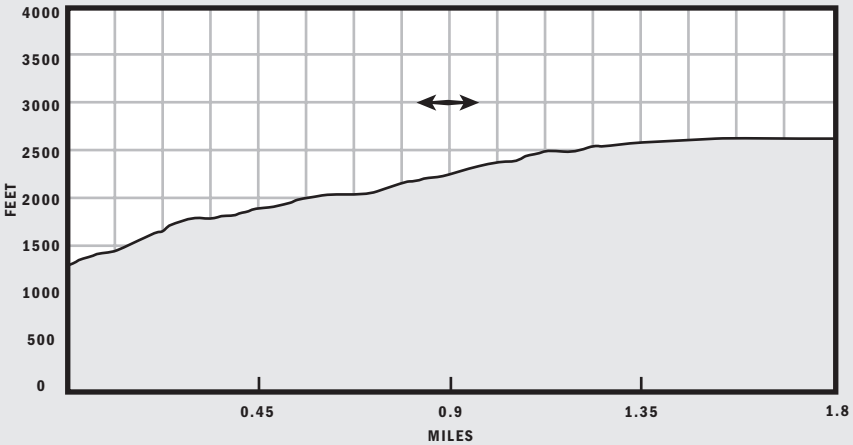
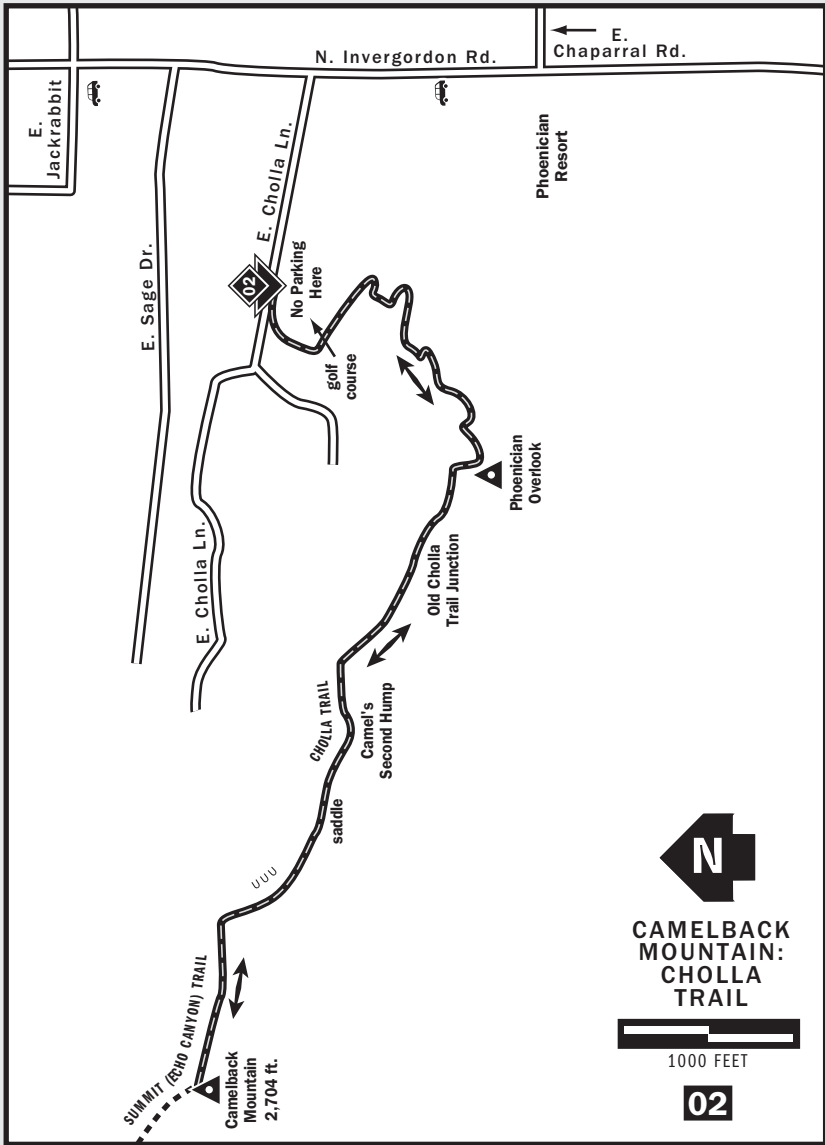
UTM Zone 12S

Easting 0411979

Northing 3708425

Latitude N33°30.813'

Longitude W111°56.907'





A hiker descends at sunset from Camelback Mountain along the Cholla Trail.

meanders up the spine of the sleeping camel and gives those not endowed with legs of steel a pleasant route to experience the wonders of this mountain. Fans of city views will also appreciate Cholla because it delivers ample wide-open vistas.

The Cholla Trail is not without its own challenges though, the first of which is to find desirable parking. In the late 1990s, residents near the original Cholla Trailhead petitioned the city to reroute the Cholla Trail because of noise and vandalism. As a result, you can no longer park near the trailhead on Cholla Lane, for which the trail was named. Instead, you must park in designated spots along the western side of Invergordon Road or along the southern side of Jack-rabbit Road. The first half mile of your hike, therefore, is spent reaching the trailhead by walking along Invergordon Road and turning west up Cholla Lane. Stay on the southern side of Cholla Lane where a gravel trail ascends gently. Take this opportunity to warm up your leg muscles and to gawk at the opulent mansions along the street.

About 0.5 miles from your car and at the end of a white fence along the Phoenician Resort golf course, an obvious plaque marks the official trailhead for the Cholla Trail. Your journey up Camelback Mountain begins here. The first section of trail rounds the edge of the golf course. Watch out for low-flying golf balls! As you climb, the trail bends back toward the southeast and then levels out. From this flat stretch, you can survey the scenery. To your left lies a palm-lined putting green flanked by white sand traps. Look up toward the horizon,



A parachuter takes off on a sunset ride from the Cholla Trail on Camelback Mountain.

and you'll see the McDowell Mountains to the northeast. Straight ahead in the distance, the unmistakable shape of Four Peaks graces the horizon.

At the end of the straightaway, the Cholla Trail ascends via switchbacks. Now skirting the eastern flank of the mountain, work your way up to the ridge along the sleeping camel's spine. The trail becomes a bit more difficult to negotiate as smooth gravel and neat steps give way to rougher terrain. At 0.25 miles and 0.5 miles from the trailhead (0.75 miles and 1 mile from your car), wide overlooks provide open views of the East Valley and the Phoenician Resort.

The trail alternates between climbing switchbacks and gentle straights for a while as you ascend the hill, passing creosote bushes, palo verde trees, various cacti, and ocotillo plants. The trail bends northwest and takes you up along the northern side of the camel's lower hump. At about 0.7 miles from the trailhead, you'll come to a small metal railing along the side of the trail and a sign that reads Area Closed. This is where the original Cholla Trail meets the current one. If you look carefully, you can just see the faint remnants of the old trail snaking downhill toward an empty cul-de-sac, the original parking area for the Cholla Trail.

Continue climbing uphill until you reach a prominent saddle point at 1 mile from the trailhead. Take a breather here and enjoy the views to either side. You need the extra strength because the remainder of the Cholla Trail presents more of a challenge than what you have encountered so far. The trail takes you steeply up the ridge over boulders and slippery gravel-covered slopes. In some

spots, such as the small rock face at 1.1 mile from the trailhead, you may have to scramble up using your hands. Rest assured though: this trail is not a technical route. Just be careful. If you become unsure of the trail's direction, look for blue paint dots to guide you.

Continue to climb until you reach the summit ridge where you can clearly see the top. Hike the top of this ridge toward the summit. At about 1.25 miles from the trailhead, you'll climb through a notch in a large boulder. After this point, you'll see the rocky crest of the ridge jutting up directly in front of you like a shark's dorsal fin. You can follow the main trail as it drops down to skirt the ridge to its left, or if you feel a bit adventurous, tackle the ridge straight on. Look for a lone tree directly in front of the rocky ridge crest, and use a conveniently extended branch to hoist yourself up and to the right. This seemingly unlikely turn is actually a split in the trail. If you follow it to the right side of the ridge crest, you'll have 10 feet of exposed traverse to start your adrenaline flowing. The two routes meet up again about 100 feet farther along the trail, and the rest of the climb is obvious.

The 2,704-foot summit of Camelback Mountain is one of my favorite places in Phoenix. From this central vista point, you can see for miles in all directions. As your lungs recover from the climb, take a moment to explore the wide summit. Beautifully landscaped resorts, golf courses, and mansions dot the base of Camelback. A ring of mountains surrounds the sprawling metropolis of the fifth-largest city in the United States. If you are not afraid of heights, go to the northeastern side of the summit and peer over the sheer cliff there. You might find some brave souls rappelling down or parasailing off the cliff. If you are lucky, a beautiful desert sunset will reward your travails, and there's no better place in Phoenix to watch it than from right here.

Return the same way you came for a 3.8-mile round-trip hike. Alternatively, you may choose to shorten your hike by 0.8 miles and descend down the more scenic Summit (Echo Canyon) Trail. This option requires that you have a ride waiting in Echo Canyon Park. Biking or jogging around the mountain are other enjoyable possibilities.

NEARBY ACTIVITIES

Many upscale resorts and spas such as the Phoenician and Camelback Inn surround Camelback Mountain. The Indian Bend Wash Greenbelt (page 85), a system of parks, golf courses, bike paths, and lakes, lies 4 miles to the east along Hayden Road. Piestewa Peak (pages 48 and 52), another popular urban hiking destination, sits 4 miles away to the northwest. The smaller Mummy Mountain is located directly north of Camelback Mountain.